In societies where racial tensions haunt the actions of day to day life, individuals and groups are excluded and driven apart. These are some of the issues explored in the chosen extract from Spike Lee’s 1989, *Do the Right Thing*. Set on the hottest day of the year, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood of New York in the United States. This film uncovers how rising hate and intolerance in an interracial community bursts out into violence. The extract will be analyzed in terms of its historical, geographical, social and political context as well as the use of cinematography, mise-en-scene and editing and to convey meaning.

Preceding the production of *Do the Right Thing* in 1989, were countless instances of police brutality against minorities, some of which involving murder of unarmed black civilians. One of these was the 1986 Howard Beach incident, where “white youths attacked three men, one of whom, Michael Griffith, was killed by a passing car as he sought to escape his tormentors” (Kaufman, 1989). Over the foregoing years interracial social pressures had been building, where Griffith’s death tipped the situation over the edge and “inflamed simmering tensions between blacks and whites in New York City” (Roberts, 2017). These historical events and ideas drove Spike Lee to presenting a case for both violence and non-violence in an interracial conflict.

The Bedford Stuyvesant neighbourhood of Brooklyn, New York, in which the film is set, is one known for its racial diversity. During the economic decline of the outer core, there was an “influx of blacks, notably to Bedford Stuyvesant… now New York’s largest ghetto […], where the continuing departure of white people was increasing the proportion of minorities in the boroughs” (Manbeck & Singer, 2003). This geographical setting where once the African-American population were outsiders coming into a white neighbourhood forms the basis for the controversial yet ambiguous story Lee has to tell.

The film was released in the summer of 1989, the same summer which marked the mayoral elections in New York City. Through his portrayal of the interracial tensions within the neighbourhood Lee criticizes Ed Koch, the mayor at
the time for the way in which he “divided the city with his rhetoric.” (Jacobson, 1989). Spike Lee attempted to move his audience, bringing racial politics up to date by presenting the problems (Haas, Christensen, & Haas, 2014). Politics played a large role in the establishment of this division of social groups and ethnic communities in New York. Through his role in this, Koch was criticized for his limited actions against the social division, and Lee addresses this in the film. Calling Koch a “a polarizer of races in the city.”, Lee remarks that he doesn't "know if the film will defeat Ed Koch, but I hope so" (Wickman, 2013). These elements of setting and context are explored through the characters, relationships and actions to reveal the enduring tension which overshadowed an interracial society.

The chosen sequence marks one of the most significant scenes in the film. A passive conversation between Mookie and Pino escalates into a break of the fourth wall filled with heated soliloquies of racist slurs and insults. In this scene Mookie and Pino argue over race, confronting each other with their underlying prejudice. Once the discussion moves towards escalation, the tensions are released through a racial slur montage. The montage opens up with Mookie expressing his hate towards Italians, then Pino attacking blacks, then Stevie, a Latino, insulting asians, then Officer Long, a white cop criticizing Latinos and finally Sonny, a korean, attacking Jews before Mister Señor Love Daddy breaks up the argument.

From the beginning of the sequence forward, Lee builds the interracial tension through Ernest Dickerson’s cinematography. Initially, Mookie and Pino are framed in the same medium shot, where both are seen facing each other. As disagreement arises, Dickerson decides to shift his framing to single medium close up shots of each individual character. Through the camera proxemics, Lee is able to drive a distance between the figures, uncovering the rising tension between the two (Figure 1).
In his framing, Dickerson drives each character to either the left or right third, pushing them as far apart from each other as possible. Subsequently, he composes a negative space between the two to emphasize their differences. By separating the two characters in two single shots rather than a two shot, Lee criticizes the means in which Ed Koch did so in 1980s New York. Where he drove a distance between social groups and catalyzed the build of tension in the city.

As the tension between the two characters peak and the sequence shifts to a montage of racial slurs, Lee’s cinematography reveals and exposes each character’s prejudice. As the camera makes a forward tracking shot through the utilization of a dolly, Lee is figuratively putting the audience into their headspace by literally pushing in on the character. By doing so, Lee provokes the audience to “recognize similar opinions they might consciously or unconsciously hold” (Gnanasekaran, 2015). Lee repeats this pattern with each character expressing their opinion until Mister Señor Love Daddy breaks up the dispute (Figure 2).

By breaking the fourth wall in this sequence, Lee addresses the audience directly. Through the dolly in, and centered framing of the character as the dominant image, he brings the audience closer to the thoughts of individual. The cinematography provokes the viewer to recognize themselves and their opinions in the characters. This allows Lee to directly confront the society at the time with their underlying racism and contribution to the build of interracial social pressures.
On the contrary, not all characters follow this same pattern of cinematography, and this is where the mise-en-scene comes in to play. Throughout the racial slur sequence all characters who express their hate towards other racial groups remain static. Using “oblique staging, where the figure faces the camera square on” (Yale University, 2002) in the break of the fourth wall, Lee makes sure the characters stand still. With this frontality and staging Lee attempts to draw parallels with the way in which characters are unwilling to change their views. The characters of Mookie, Vito, Stevie, Officer Long and Sonny stand still as they have a set opinion which will not be altered. On the other hand, Mister Señor Love Daddy is the only character where the camera remains static as he moves into frame instead. Lee presents Mister Señor Love Daddy as the only character who is able to alter their opinion, instead of moving into his thoughts, he moves into the audience’s.

Through Wynn Thomas and Steve Rosse’s manipulation of lighting and art direction as the production’s production designer and set decorator (IMDb, n.d), Lee sets a tense tone to emphasize the social pressures building throughout the day. In the film, Lee stresses the heat and intensity of the day in the mise-en-scene by presenting a “warm range of shades – yellows, reds, ambers and warm tones” (WJEC, 2016). By eliminating all cool colours including blues and greens from set and lighting, Lee accentuates how tensions are rising which can not be calmed down. This colour palette and theory is consistent throughout the whole film, but in particular significant to the chosen extract. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Characters presented in their environment with a primarily warm colour palette (Lae, 1969)
Throughout the racial slur sequence, the characters are enclosed by warm colours in environments which make them feel safe. There is one exception to this, which is Officer Long, who contrarily is dressed in blue, and standing in front of his vehicle of the same colour. Lee makes this choice to signify how those dressed in blue are those who traditionally attempt to restore peace amongst the community. With his “colour expressionism”, Lee applies a “palette that hints at tensions to come” (McKibbin, n.d), where ironically those who are surrounded with calm and cool colours fail to restore harmony. In addition, each character appears to deliver their soliloquy of racist insults in an environment in which they are comfortable. This choice in set and setting reflects how each character holds a set opinion, which they are comfortable to express. In this, Lee explores the lingering racial tension which haunted the 1980s, where groups and individuals held strong prejudice over the social groups they encountered.

Throughout the extract, Barry Alexander Brown’s editing is used to build up tension. Lee and Brown recede to traditional continuity and parallel editing in the majority of the scenes. In turn, Brown creatively manipulates this style of editing to convey the disagreement and intolerance between Mookie and Pino. In the beginning of the extract, the use of abrupt shot/counter shots establishes a sense of ignorance, where the single shots of each character are cut to the next when they are in the middle of one of their sentences. Ultimately, this mimics the manner in which the two characters are not listening to or ignoring each other and unwilling to accept each other’s opinions (Figure 4).

In the sequence which follows, Brown breaks the previously established “continuity system with shot/reverse shots” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016). Brown does this by introducing montage editing, utilizing the “juxtaposition of different, racist viewpoints [...] to show the undercurrent of anger bubbling under New York’s surface fueled by ethnic difference” (WJEC, 2016). In the racial slur sequence, the use of
montage editing to connect each 're-establishing shot', where the camera repeatedly dollies in on one character and then cuts to the next, builds a sense of familiarity and likeness amongst the figures. (Figure 3) Lee and Brown’s choice to use a “match on action […] where one movement the camera makes mimics the movement that proceeds it” (Winter, 2016), the characters are seen as similar, while ironically expressing drastically different opinions. By juxtaposing these opinions in such similar shots, Lee uncovers how even the most interconnected communities held discriminatory opinions.

All in all, Spike Lee’s *Do the right Thing* explores the underlying interracial tensions existent in all nations. Through effective use of cinematography, manipulation of mise-en-scene and editing, Lee provides an exploration of the historical social pressures, diverse communities and political issues living at the time. The way in which Lee reveals these key topics is not only relevant to the film text as a whole, but also to his other work including *She’s Gotta Have It* (1989) and *Malcolm X* (1992), where Lee provides an exploration of interracial relations and response to political issues. In this film, Lee, like no other, conveys the true prejudice which terrorizes our society.
Works Cited


WJEC. “A Level Film Studies - Focus Film Factsheet - Do the Right Thing.” Eduqas - Part of wjec, 2016.