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FOREVER YOUNG ON THE BIG AND SMALL SCREENS

SPIKE LEE IS 61 YEARS OLD. This is worth pointing out because there is no other living American filmmaker who seems so forever young. When Lee was a young man, *Do the Right Thing* (1989) premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, and he seemed to be at the forefront of a rebirth of American independent cinema. That year's Cannes also included screenings of Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* (1989) and Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*, (1989), and "America's New Wave" was emblazoned on the cover of the July-August issue of *Film Comment*. Of those three films, only *Do the Right Thing* left with no prizes; jury president Wim Wenders said that he didn't find Mookie (the film's main character, played by Lee) to be a compelling hero. This was the defining critical controversy of my own cinephilic youth; I entered the University of Oregon in the fall of 1989, and no film loomed larger over the whole of my time there than *Do the Right Thing*. So I cannot help but marvel that Lee's newest "joint," *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), left this year's Cannes with the Grand Prix, a sort of second-place award. (The top award is the Palme d'Or, which is what the very Wendersian debut *sex, lies and videotape* won in 1989.) The old man is young again, and the French fiasco seems redeemed as a new generation of troublemakers emerges across the screens of multiplexes.

One unignorable aspect of the old-but-new, generational-tension quality of *BlacKkKlansman* is its young star, John David Washington, who is the eldest son of Denzel Washington—the actor who starred in some of Lee's best early work (*Mo' Better Blues* [1990], *Malcolm X* [1992], and *He Got Game* [1998]) in addition to anchoring the better of his odd genre exercises (*Inside Man* [2006]). Washington plays Ron Stallworth, the first black man to be hired by the Colorado Springs Police Department, who ended up infiltrating the KKK with his white colleague (played by Adam Driver). Anyone

who has read Stallworth's memoir *Black Klansman* (2014), which gave rise to the film, will know that he comes across as a straight-shooter, endearingly "square" in a way that feels practically Canadian. Washington plays him that way to a certain extent, but his Stallworth has much more of a political edge. He is impatient as hell with the white establishment that is holding him back, and you believe him when he tells his love interest Patrice (head of the Colorado College Black Student Union, played by Laura Harrier) that he's for the liberation of his people. But he's impatient with her and her big-talking college friends too, and Washington plays him as coolly rational as it's possible to be when he rolls his eyes at her plans for a demonstration, saying they can all lay down in the middle of Nevada Avenue and it won't do a bit of good.

Incidentally, I actually grew up in Colorado Springs during the 1970s, when the film takes place. The locations look nothing like the actual city (it was shot in upstate New York), although the occasional cutaways to rock formations are indeed the Garden of the Gods—a local attraction and popular hiking spot—and the details in the dialogue are spot-on. This also includes the street names and the film's reference to the local gay bar Hide 'N Seek, which I remember very well from my youth. This was the major meeting place for sexual minority types from all over the Front Range, and it became "ground zero" when the Christian right started to take over the city in the 1980s. Meetings to oppose the virulently homophobic state ballot amendment passed in 1992 were invariably held there, and it was also the place that the KKK *actually* planned to attack.

What Washington is playing out (like his old man before him) is a central tension in African-American political life, which he expresses through body language, inflections of his voice, and a sensibility that is sometimes cool in a young hipster kind of way and other times cool in a cop-under-pressure kind of way. It's also the *problématique* that runs through all of Lee's work—even the misbegotten genre exercises. What will "uplift the race" (the tagline from *School Daze* [1988]): conservative or radical politics? And are these two alternatives maybe in fact the same? In a May 2008 article for *The Atlantic* that is now excruciatingly painful to read because it is a profile of Bill Cosby, Ta-Nehisi Coates posited this as a generations-long conflict: Cosby and Michael Eric Dyson today, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois yesterday. Coates also described what he saw as a uniquely black form of conservatism:

When political strategists argue that the Republican Party is missing a huge chance to court the black community, they are thinking of this mostly male bloc—the old guy in the barbershop, the grizzled Pop Warner coach, the retired Vietnam vet, the drunk uncle at the family reunion. He votes Democratic, not out of any love for abortion rights or progressive taxation, but because he feels—in fact, he knows—that the modern-day GOP draws on the support of people who hate him.

The real Stallworth, at least as he presents himself in his memoir, is pretty clearly this kind of guy—a small-city cop who's always skeptically teasing idealistic young people—but the cinematic version embodies the split between the progressive conservative and the take-it-to-the-streets reformer. Lee has been fully and completely stuck in this split throughout his career, and he expressed it most explicitly in *Do the Right Thing*, where he kept coming back to a photograph of Malcolm X shaking hands with Martin Luther King Jr.

Given Washington's performance, the meaning of Harry Belafonte Jr.'s role in the film is especially important. He plays a fictional activist brought to Colorado Springs by the Black Student Union, who holds court telling the (real) story of the lynching of Jesse Washington. Belafonte is a bonafide radical, but he was also widely beloved as a popular musician—in other words, he is the essence of a cross-over figure. Lee is clearly drawing on his own status as a cultural icon, but an icon of what? Radicalism or cross-over appeal? The answer, of course, is both.

Belafonte is only in one sequence, but it's *long* and cross-cut with the KKK initiation celebration, where the new members are watching D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). As anybody who has taken a film history class knows, this insanely and irredeemably racist film inspired the revival of the KKK in the early twentieth century. And, as anyone who has taken a film history class also knows, it marked a turning point in film form, as it featured a degree of visual and narrative complexity that was previously unknown. That's surely the way it would have been taught to Lee as a student at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in the early 1980s. He even said as much in an interview with *Le Monde*, in which he described how a professor discussed Nazis when she showed *Triumph of the Will* (1935) but “never talked about the social or historical dimension” of *The*

Birth of a Nation. What such lessons tend to emphasize is that Griffith was far more ambitious in terms of simultaneity than any previous director, as the film's climax, in which the heroic KKK rushes to the rescue, moves between several completely independent spaces without confusing the viewer. Lee, returning to his roots as Hollywood's most ambitious formalist, is delivering a stinging ironic response to this key moment in the evolution of film aesthetics, exposing this unstaunchably bleeding wound at the heart of the medium. Simultaneity, take that!

That sense of watching a master formalist at work is a big part of the joy of *BlackKlansman*. Unlike so many contemporary filmmakers who style themselves as political but seem weirdly indifferent to the specifics of their chosen form (Ken Loach, I'm looking at you!), Lee is all in as far as his medium goes—committed to what it and only it can do and completely in command of its history. For such a young firebrand, he sure has the wisdom of the ages.

Another American filmmaker who seems forever young is Jim Henson. He was relatively young when he died (53 years old), but he was most famous for giving the world *Sesame Street* (1969-) and *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981), which are both populated by felt-bound creatures who basically helped to raise people of my generation. The latter made him a fortune and is now owned by Disney, while the former is safely ensconced in the New York-based non-profit organization Children's Television Workshop. But both are inseparable from Henson's roots as an experimental filmmaker: they are fragmented or elliptical in their organization (rather than telling a single, linear story), they rely entirely on visuals (the Muppet movies mostly stink because they aren't as *visually* interesting as the shows or marked by *Sesame Street's* heterogeneous mix of animation, studio-bound live action, and lyrical, in-the-field documentary work), and they are possessed of a playful spirit that often crosses gleefully into anarchy (this is more true of *The Muppet Show*, but it also applies to *Sesame Street*, as Ernie and Grover will attest).

Those roots are now on display at Fandor.com, one of the best small-and-scrappy streaming services out there. Their retrospective of his short films can be found here: www.fandor.com/filmmakers/director-jim-henson. It features nine films, and all but one are less than 10 minutes long. The longest of these pieces, the 50-minute telefilm *The Cube* (1969), which was

made for the *NBC Experiment in Television* series (1967-1971), is also the least of them, as it's existential and ponderous in a way that makes Henson and his collaborator Jerry Juhl (who would go on to write a lot of the Muppet material) seem like young guys who have read a little too much Sartre and Beckett. But there are three abstract animations set to music by the great jazz drummer Chico Hamilton, which are quite nice in a joy-of-colour-and-movement kind of way and bear the strong influence of Canadian animator Norman McLaren (whose collaboration with Oscar Peterson, *Begone Dull Care* [1949], is a classic of experimental animation). Henson received an Oscar nomination for *Time Piece* (1965), which is a montage-driven bit of anti-modernity weirdness that is also pretty strongly influenced by the films of Canadian avant-garde director Arthur Lipsett (especially *Very Nice, Very Nice* [1961] and *21-87* [1965]).

The real gems of the retrospective are two landscape studies. *Ripples* (1967) is one minute long and was made for Montreal's super-cinephilic and multiscreen Expo 67. It has more or less the same analysis of modern life as *Time Piece*, but it is much denser and tighter. *Run, Run* (1965) shows some of the chaotic, kinetic energy that would later animate the Muppet world, but it is also a sort of kinder, gentler version of the childhood films of Stan Brakhage. He shot it in collaboration with Frank Oz (also known as Miss Piggy, Fozzy Bear, and Yoda), and I found it wondrously touching. It was, like all of this material (including the less successful stuff), a reminder that Henson was also a great formalist working at the heart of popular entertainment.