

“Members Only: Why Spike Lee’s *BlacKkKlansman* is a Modern Masterpiece”

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Originally published in *The Daily Banter*, 8/13/18

When Spike Lee released *Do the Right Thing* nearly 30 years ago, he shook the white critical world to its core with his unsparing portrait of racism in a Brooklyn neighborhood. Before then, films about racial issues usually had a message of brotherhood attached to them. Lee pulled no such punches, refusing to indulge the lie of a “post-racial America.” He applied bold techniques to make his message clear, like having characters directly address the camera, or inserting running motifs like the quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X that close the film. But white society still labeled him as “angry,” believing he had made a film that would inspire riots wherever it played.

For three decades now, Lee has continued making films which reflect this worldview, with bold, provocative storytelling meant not just to force viewers to rethink their preconceptions, but also to wrestle with his place in America. Now that a whole generation of black directors have followed in his footsteps and become some of the most prominent directors in film today, audiences have come back around to Lee, ready to embrace both his style and his substance. And with *BlacKkKlansman*, his latest fire-and-brimstone sermon, he has delivered a masterpiece.

Based on “some fo’ real, fo’ real shit,” *BlacKkKlansman* tells the story of Ron Stalworth (John David Washington, Denzel’s son) the first black police officer in Colorado Springs. While killing time at the office, he prank-calls the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan pretending to be white. This leads to him teaming up with detective Flip Zimmerman to infiltrate the Klan, with Stalworth talking to them on the phone, and Zimmerman pretending to be Stalworth with the Klan themselves. In the meantime, Stalworth also finds himself involved with black student leader Patrice Dumas, the female president of the local black student union whose left-wing politics leave her with a hatred of all cops, whom she calls “pigs.”

On this level, *BlacKkKlansman* is a terrific buddy-cop action comedy pitting the street smarts of a black man and the experience of a white man against the criminals, but *BlacKkKlansman* offers more than just laughs and suspense. The film uses the KKK operation to probe questions of identity that all marginalized people face. Flip Zimmerman (played by Adam Driver), must come to terms with his own heritage as a Jew, especially as he faces the blatant anti-Semitism of the Klan members he interrogates. Having distanced himself from his heritage, Zimmerman must come to terms with what it means to be perceived as other, even though as a white man, he seems to have every advantage.

Stalworth, playing both a white man in one relationship and a civilian in another, cannot reconcile his blackness with his chosen profession. From the moment he meets Patrice, played by Laura Harrier, it’s clear not only that he has feelings for her but that he envies the way she embraces her blackness. Her hatred for the police and other oppressive systems dovetail with her belief that no system can change from within – a belief which makes Stalworth wonder if he’s chosen the right path. As with *Do the Right Thing*, Lee presents all sides of the argument to

reveal the hidden contradictions each character must battle with. Nobody is completely right, and nobody is completely wrong – that is, unless you're a Klansman.

The racist thugs who make up the KKK have misinterpreted the American Dream as American Entitlement. The Christian radio broadcasts they listen to reaffirm their beliefs that *they* are the victims of discrimination, not African-Americans. You could see them as tragic figures, victims of their inability to self-reflect. But at the same time, they are also hilarious to watch. Their ineptitude at getting *anything* right, down to their self-inflicted demise at the film's end, reminds us that most racists aren't very smart. Watching Stalworth and Zimmerman stoop to their level to keep the con going is hilarious, and the laughs they get at their expense would do Mel Brooks proud.

The rich characters and excellent performances from Washington, Driver, Harrier, and Topher Grace as Grand Wizard David Duke, would be enough to carry *BlackKkKlansman* alone, but Lee's alchemy transforms it from a genre picture steeped in identity politics to a battle with history, both as a filmmaker and as a citizen. Taking on cinema's twin Confederate monuments – *Gone with the Wind* and D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* – Lee reminds us that art has the power to shape people's politics and reinforce their beliefs. Both films warped our view of the Confederacy as a "Lost Cause," and the Southerners who fought for it as noble soldiers.

The film's opening shot is *Gone with the Wind*'s famous pullback of the dead and dying Confederates, cutting into a faux newsreel narrated by Alec Baldwin and accompanied by clips from Griffith's magnum opus. *The Birth of a Nation* led directly to the revival of the second KKK in the 1910s, and this comes through most profoundly in a scene where Zimmerman, having been inducted into the Klan, watches it with Duke and his acolytes, who cheer at the film's climax when the Klan kills the black bad guys. Intercut with a monologue from Harry Belafonte describing the violence the film unleashed after its release, we witness a dialectic reminding us that, like America itself, narrative cinema began with the subjugation of black bodies.

All this leads to the *coup de cinema* at the end, when we are tragically reminded that no victory is ever final. As Stalworth witnesses a KKK cross burning from afar, Lee cuts to the footage of the Unite the Right rally from Charlottesville, which took place one year ago last weekend. In rapid succession, we see the footage of David Duke commending the marchers, Trump's infamous declaration that there were fine people "on both sides," and most powerfully of all, the death of protestor Heather Heyer.

Not since Steven Spielberg dissolved to the real-life survivors at the end of *Schindler's List* has a film used real-life footage so effectively, reminding you that this has all happened before, and can all happen again. Subtle? Hardly. But in the hands of a master sermonizer, who needs subtlety?