

“In and Out of Character”

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ABSTRACT

In the preface to *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, Dan Flory writes of the “rat’s nest of beliefs” that underpin our viewing and experience of any film – and especially those films that engage with the history and politics of race. This is an apt image for a domain which is indeed enormously complex, messy, and not a little uncomfortable to confront. In this paper I focus on three questions, of increasing generality, posed by *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*. The first and most particular of these questions: is Flory right to say that Sal (in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, 1989) a racist? My second question kicks the debate up one level and asks: how does the figure of the ‘sympathetic racist’ – exemplified by Sal and by Rocco in Lee’s *Clockers* (1995), and on Flory’s account, a central device in these films – work rhetorically? Finally, I turn to the first of the three terms in the title of Flory’s book, by asking: can we regard these films as engaging in a kind of philosophy?

In the preface to *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* (hereafter, *PBF*) Dan Flory writes of the 'rat's nest of beliefs' (xi) that underpin our viewing and experience of any film – and especially those films that engage with the history and politics of race. This is an apt image for a domain which is indeed enormously complex, messy, and not a little uncomfortable to confront. It is to the great credit of Dan that his work takes on this difficult task, and does so with care, subtlety and persistence. By drawing together what might initially appear to be an odd triad of phenomena – the three items picked out by the book's title – Dan makes an important contribution not only to our understanding of the social and racial dynamics of cinema, but also to debates in the philosophy of cognition and emotion. His work shows how ideas from cognitive theory, far from being blind to ideological, cultural and political questions, can fruitfully inform work on race. If we have learned that human cognition is not merely rational, but emotional and embodied, Dan's work reminds us that it is, in addition, cultural and political.

In this paper I want to focus on three questions, of increasing generality, posed by *PBF*. The first and most particular of these questions: is Sal (in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*) a racist? My second question kicks the debate up one level and asks: how does the figure of the 'sympathetic racist' – exemplified by Sal and by Rocco in Lee's *Clockers*, and on Dan's account, a central device in these films – work rhetorically? Finally, I turn to the first of the three terms in the title of Dan's book, by asking: can we regard these films as engaging in a kind of philosophy? And I may as well state at the outset that, while the second question – on the rhetorical nature of the sympathetic racist – does not admit of a simple summary answer, my answer to the first and third questions can readily be declared in advance: yes! – Sal is a racist; and yes! – these films can be regarded as philosophical in spirit. But you'll need to stick around if you want to see how I reach these conclusions.

Is Sal a racist?

A reminder of the bare outline of the story told by *Do the Right Thing*. Sal owns and runs, with his two sons, a pizzeria located in the predominantly black

neighbourhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Over the course of a hot summer's day, tensions arise in and around Sal's pizzeria, generated mostly by clashes over social practices and questions of economic and community ownership. Sal believes he has an absolute right to set the social norms within his pizzeria; many of his black customers feel he fails to recognize their contribution to his livelihood, and their right to express their social customs in a quasi-public space located within their neighbourhood. Things come to a head when Sal destroys the Radio Raheem's boom box; in the ensuing melee, the police employ disproportionate force and strangle Raheem. Outraged, the crowd of black onlookers riots; Sal's pizzeria is destroyed. The following morning, Sal stubbornly refuses to accept any responsibility for Raheem's death or the riot.

Sal's character became a lightning rod for debate about what behaviour(s) can be said to constitute racism. Critics argued about whether Sal is aptly described as a racist, and writer/director Lee and actor Danny Aiello disagreed as well: while Lee held that, according to his conception of the character, Sal was at root a racist, Aiello stated that he did not regard Sal as a racist, and did not play him as such. Instead, Aiello argued, Sal is a fundamentally decent – and comparatively unprejudiced – guy who makes some bad decisions on a given day, choices that (along with various other factors) lead to horrible consequences. The key to this view is the idea that, on those occasions when Sal commits racist acts – by, for example, unleashing a string of racial epithets at Radio Raheem – he is acting *out of character*. We are said to be mistaken if we seek to generalize from the individual act to the stable dispositions and attitudes of the character. (Perhaps it is important to stress here that, even if we take this view, we neither exonerate the racist actions nor somehow 'cleanse' them of their immoral character.)

The case of Sal was taken up by Berys Gaut in a somewhat different context. Gaut drew upon the dispute between Lee and Aiello in order to make the case for a collaborative view of film authorship, which grants considerable space to multiple (and, as in this case) conflicting authorial projects. Gaut's point is that the collaborative nature of filmmaking may lead to conflicts between directors and the other creative agents contributing to a film, *and moreover that these conflicts may enhance rather than diminish the artistic value of a film*. Gaut thus celebrates the way Aiello's performance apparently cuts against the grain of Lee's script and

direction, playing Sal as an essentially sympathetic, non-racist figure. It is important to underline that Gaut is at one remove from the debate on how we should interpret Sal; what is really key for his purposes is that Sal is a complex and ambiguous figure, and that complexity is attributable in part to the different conceptions of Lee and Aiello. Dan, in turn, picked up on Gaut's comments on *Do the Right Thing* and returned them to their original context – that is, to the debate over whether and in what sense Sal can be described as racist. And on Dan's account, for reasons that we will discuss below, Sal can justly be characterized as racist.

Although Gaut takes Aiello's part in this dispute, he does not need to do so in order for his case to work (indeed, one might even say that the issue is irrelevant to Gaut's argument). He could grant that Sal is a racist, but that Aiello's performance brings a depth and nuance to the character unanticipated by Lee; *complex* and *racist* are not, after all, mutually exclusive attributes.¹ Moreover, Gaut does not seem to recognize that Aiello *could be wrong* about the character that he played so effectively. The world is full of racists and sexists who cannot see how their behaviour is prejudiced in these ways; I see no reason to think that the same cannot be true for the way an actor conceives of a character he plays.

Let us dig a little deeper into the metaphysics of character, and specifically the idea that it is possible for someone to act 'out of character.' There are a range of views one might take on this question. One traditional view is that acts and traits are indissolubly tied; one who murders is a murderer (that is, not merely one who has murdered, but one who has manifested a disposition to murder); one who philanders is a philanderer. Call this the *minimal* view: a single act of a given kind bestows the relevant trait (disposition) on the agent.² At the other end of the spectrum, we have contemporary arguments stressing what Popper called the 'logic of situations' – which focuses on the situational, as distinct from the personal, determinants of action. According to this body of thought, we are prone to underplay the significance of situation, and overestimate the significance of individual traits and dispositions –

¹ Gaut does refer in one passage to 'the nuanced exploration of racism in *Do the Right Thing*,' suggesting that there may not be such a great distance between Gaut and Flory on the matter. Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, 158.

² Seymour Chatman: 'One who commits murder or usury is (at least) murderous or usurious. No explicit statement need be made; the trait holds by the mere performance of the action.' *Story and Discourse*, 109; Chatman is explicating Aristotle's view in this paragraph.

the so-called 'fundamental attribution error' (FAE). While this view is a product of contemporary psychology, it finds an echo in some dramatic narratives. Let me mention two cases which seem to embody the 'situationist' intuition that acts and dispositions are *neither* as indissolubly nor as intimately tied together as the minimal view contends.

In the film *Eden Lake*, a couple is terrorized by a gang of youths while away for the weekend in a remote forest park. Captured by the gang, the man, Steve, is subjected to extraordinarily sadistic abuse, events which are witnessed by his girlfriend Jenny (who has eluded the gang). In a crucial scene, one of the younger members of the gang seeks to escape them and help the woman; within the confines of the scene, he poses no threat to her, but in the grip of feelings of terror and the desire for vengeance, the woman immediately stabs and kills the boy. Two facts are important here: first, the woman, a nursery teacher, has been characterized as patient, caring, and tolerant; and second, she exhibits sincere remorse immediately after she stabs the boy. Tipping our hat to the minimal view, we might acknowledge that the action has revealed the *capacity* of the woman to murder. But it is equally true that she is depicted as murdering the boy because she has been thrust into an extraordinary situation – in which any of us might have acted in the same way, irrespective of our particular character or upbringing. As the director of this film has said, the film depicts situations in which the best (most moral) character in the film is driven to perform one of its worst actions. At a minimum, we might want to say – using the terminology from *Engaging Characters* drawn upon by Dan – that 'vengefulness' has been established as a highly *peripheral* rather than *central* trait of the character. The capacity is present, but it is not present as an active disposition, except in the most extreme circumstances.

My second example, Lee's *Clockers*, takes us back to *PBF*, where this film is a case study equal in importance to *Do the Right Thing*. *Clockers* juxtaposes three central characters. Strike is a young black drug-pusher ('clocker') overseeing business in a particular corner of the project where he lives; Victor is his older brother, who pursues an ordinary, non-criminal existence; Rocco Klein is a white cop investigating the murder of Darryl Adams, another clocker. Early on in the film, Victor confesses to the murder, but Rocco is convinced that Victor cannot have committed the murder, and suspects that the real killer is Strike. *Why* is Rocco so convinced

that Victor cannot have murdered Darryl? Victor works two jobs – as the manager of a fast-food restaurant by night, a security guard by day – in order to lift his family out of poverty. He is described by all those who know him as of extraordinary moral character: patient, kind, compassionate. And let us not forget that he is a God-fearing, church-going man (Rocco is played by Harvey Keitel and the film was co-produced by Martin Scorsese!). So the idea that Victor murdered Darryl – in a moment of exhausted, semi-drunken, desperation – just doesn't *add up* for Rocco. That is, he can't make such an action consistent with Victor's character; and on the other hand, he all too readily sees how such an action fits with what he perceives to be Strike's character. In short: he cannot see the possibility that someone may act 'out of character;' that circumstances may drive a person to do something we would not ordinarily think them capable of; that a good person may do a (very) bad thing. In convincing himself that Strike is guilty rather than Victor, Rocco is subject to the fundamental attribution error.

So what lessons can we draw from this excursion into the theory of character? First, that there is an irony lurking in the relevance of the fundamental attribution error to the two films by Lee. If Lee highlights this kind of error as part of the dramatic structure of *Clockers*, then we can hardly rule out applying the same logic to *Do the Right Thing*, even if the effect of that is to 'exonerate' Sal of the charge of racism. Put bluntly: if Victor can murder 'out of character,' then Sal can just as well commit racist acts 'out of character.' But I hasten to add that this is not my ultimate conclusion, for there is an important contrast between Victor and Sal that Dan brings to light in his book. Flory's most compelling argument in support of interpreting Sal as a racist is the *pattern* of evidence for this disposition distributed across the film. Sal's explosion of racial abuse late in the film is prefigured by several other (less salient but still meaningful) manifestations of prejudice. These gestures emerge among many others which are positive, so we may be apt to underestimate their significance. But in light of what happens in the last act of the film, these earlier, seemingly minor actions consolidate the idea that there is a vein of racism running through Sal (no matter what Aiello thinks about him). He possesses not merely the capacity to act in a racist manner, but the disposition to do so.

The combination of racist attitudes with other, morally-laudable traits in both Sal and Rocco goes to the heart of another important issue discussed by Dan in *PBF*,

and a reason that he values these films so highly – that is, the way that they represent the *varied forms of racism*. There are many ways in which racism may manifest itself in institutions and individuals; racists may come in varied forms, shapes, sizes and strengths. Racism is not confined to the hate-filled, more minor white characters who form part of the backdrop in *Right Thing* and *Clockers*, like the cops in *Clockers* who can jokingly compare the project in which the story is set with a self-cleaning oven, even in the immediate aftermath of a killing and in the presence of a crowd of black onlookers. Racism is also closer to home, living among 'us' decent, fair-minded folk. And that, according to Dan, is the genius at the heart of the figure of the *sympathetic racist* around which these films, to a considerable extent, revolve.

The sympathetic racist

So how does the figure of the sympathetic racist work rhetorically? Dan's argument is that the two films under discussion here invite us to *sympathize* with the central white characters (Sal and Rocco), while they elicit a *critical empathy* for the major black characters (Mookie, Raheem and Strike). Flory invokes the contrast between sympathy and empathy in what has become a standard way, where sympathy describes an 'acentral' imaginative stance, in contrast to the 'centrally' imaginative character of empathy. In brief, sympathy involves *feeling for*, empathy *feeling with*, a character. The empathy that *Clockers* creates for Strike is politically significant because it encourages us – and not least among us, white viewers – to penetrate beyond stereotypical assumptions concerning the lifestyle and attitudes of black gang members. The sympathy that *Clockers* creates for Rocco is politically significant because it allows us – once again, especially the white 'us' – to see him as a fundamentally decent person who is nevertheless a racist, at least of a certain sort. The white viewer is led into a kind of productive paradox: Rocco is one of us, insofar as he is white and apparently fair-minded; yet the film reveals him as a racist; so our assumptions about his fair-mindedness were faulty, and insofar as Rocco is one of us, perhaps the rest of us share his racist attitudes as well. The (white) viewer is led to a kind 'double consciousness,' in which he sees himself – to pluck the apt phrase from Du Bois – 'through the eyes of others,' and specifically through the lens

of black experience.³ The white spectator gets to see the world more clearly by feeling both critical empathy with Strike, and a compromised sympathy for Rocco.

I speak of 'compromised sympathy' here in order to flag up one way in which my view of the interplay between sympathy and empathy in *Clockers* differs from Dan's view. I doubt that quite such a firm and simple line can be drawn between 'black empathy' and 'white sympathy' in the film. As Margaret Vaage has noted, sympathy and empathy usually travel in tandem. Although it is probably not strictly necessary for empathy, some degree of sympathy certainly disposes us towards empathy, and the two films by Lee create more than enough sympathy for their white protagonists for empathy to take root. Indeed, Flory notes the 'astonishingly' compassionate stance of the films towards Sal and Rocco. I don't think that this empathy with the white figures derails the strategy of inducing 'double consciousness' in the white viewer. What is crucial to the figure of the sympathetic racist is not that our empathy is held completely in check, but rather our mixed evaluation of him. During the course of the film, the sensitive viewer sees that Rocco is a mixture of good and bad, forming a critical, partial allegiance with him. The *gradual* emergence of his racist sentiments adds to the effectiveness of the structure, as we are allowed to form a broadly positive impression of Rocco before we witness his most aggressively racist acts.⁴ Similarly, the 'critical' dimension of the empathy that we have for Strike arises because we judge that some of his actions just are bad – primarily those connected with his coaching of the young boy Tyrone – no matter how much we may feel for him. If there is an asymmetry in *Clockers*, whereby we are invited to engage in a closer, more empathic relationship with Strike than with Rocco, that has as much to do with the fact that the action is weighted towards Strike as anything else. The action of the film begins and ends with Strike; his guilt or innocence is the question hanging over the narrative; for these reasons, the film may be said to narrate 'his' story.

³ The phrase is cited by Flory on 187, though in relation to black experience, rather than the 'projection' onto white experience that he argues for more generally in *PBF*.

⁴ The same is true, of course, of Sal. Here my analysis of *Clockers* again diverges from Flory's to some degree. Flory sees Rocco as a character established early on as a racist, who redemptively comes to reflect on his mistakes, in contrast to Sal. I agree with much of this, but would argue that, as with Sal, Rocco's racist beliefs are only indirectly and fleetingly discernable until his tirade against Strike, well into the second half of the film.

None of this gainsays the larger thrust of Dan's thesis concerning the force and significance of these films. Following Dan's lead, I'd suggest that the two films articulate a sophisticated, neo-Brechtian aesthetic. The 'double consciousness' generated in the white viewer is a kind of alienation effect; and as we have seen, the empathy created with the central black characters is always tempered by a critical edge. Dan also notes the graduated characterological structure of both films, embodied in an array of good, bad, and ambiguous characters on both sides of the racial divide. The films thereby refuse 'racial Manichaeism,' implying that while black Americans have suffered centuries of oppression and injustice, a racialized society harms the racially privileged as well.

Clockers features still other devices that work in a Brechtian way, including the startlingly high-contrast cinematography used in the interrogation scenes, and a motif of 'media insert shots' dwelling on the violent cultural representations (video games, rap videos) that are part of the fabric of everyday life for the young black inhabitants of the projects. These devices work to break up, without completely rupturing, the realistic texture of the films. Happily, the films do not have that 'programmatically' quality that sometimes infects Brechtian projects. As Dan points out, the central characters – black and white – are not mere ciphers, but 'individualities' who we cannot completely fathom (78). This is one reason why a character like Sal can generate such debate. In drawing upon this traditional resource of realistic fiction, Lee guarantees the emotional punch of the films. His distinctive achievement, then, is to reinvent a Brechtian aesthetic within the mainstream of American cinema, to make 'alienation' work alongside sympathy and empathy rather than merely undermining them.⁵

Film as moral philosophy

This brings us to the last of the three main questions I promised to address in this paper. Granting the subversive impact that Dan claims for the films of Spike Lee and other 'black *noir*' filmmakers – what makes these films count as works of

⁵ Such a dialectic between alienation and empathy was Brecht's own aim, at least as he expressed it in his more modulated formulations. But it is a goal more often honoured in the breach than the observance within the Brechtian tradition.

philosophy (or something near enough), rather than 'merely' excellent works of art? As Cora Diamond and Martha Nussbaum have long argued with respect to literature,⁶ and Dan argues with respect to film, fictional narratives surely are capable of making a vital contribution to moral philosophy. Imaginative, emotionally-informed reasoning is part of the process of high-level reflection that we call philosophy.⁷ Indeed it is an irreplaceable component of such philosophy, for in the memorable words of Diamond, when it comes to moral debate and deliberation, there are times when we need 'anything but argument' – when what we need instead are the vivid, imaginative, moving and thought-provoking works of a narrative artist like Spike Lee. If I were in a churlish mood, I might insist that it is really at the moment of critical interpretation and appreciation that the truly philosophical implications of these films are realized and become available. But this is surely to undervalue the *conceptual* work implicit in the narrative, visual and sonic design of these films, the complexity of which Dan has so forcefully revealed. In any case, as I have now finished this paper, I am in an exceptionally good mood. I thus have neither good nor bad reasons for denying the argument that the best of the black *noir* films should be treated as genuine contributions to the philosophical conversation on race.

⁶ In a very recent opinion piece, Nussbaum mentions film in the same breath as literature: 'Nations such as China and Singapore, which previously ignored the humanities, are now aggressively promoting them, because they have concluded that the cultivation of the imagination through the study of literature, film, and the other arts is essential to fostering creativity and innovation.' 'Cultivating the Imagination,' *New York Times* 17 October 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/10/17/do-colleges-need-french-departments/cultivating-the-imagination>.

⁷ I do not think this claim carries over straightforwardly to other domains of philosophy; I restrict my argument here to moral philosophy, the focus of Dan's claims regarding the philosophical character of the black *noir* films.