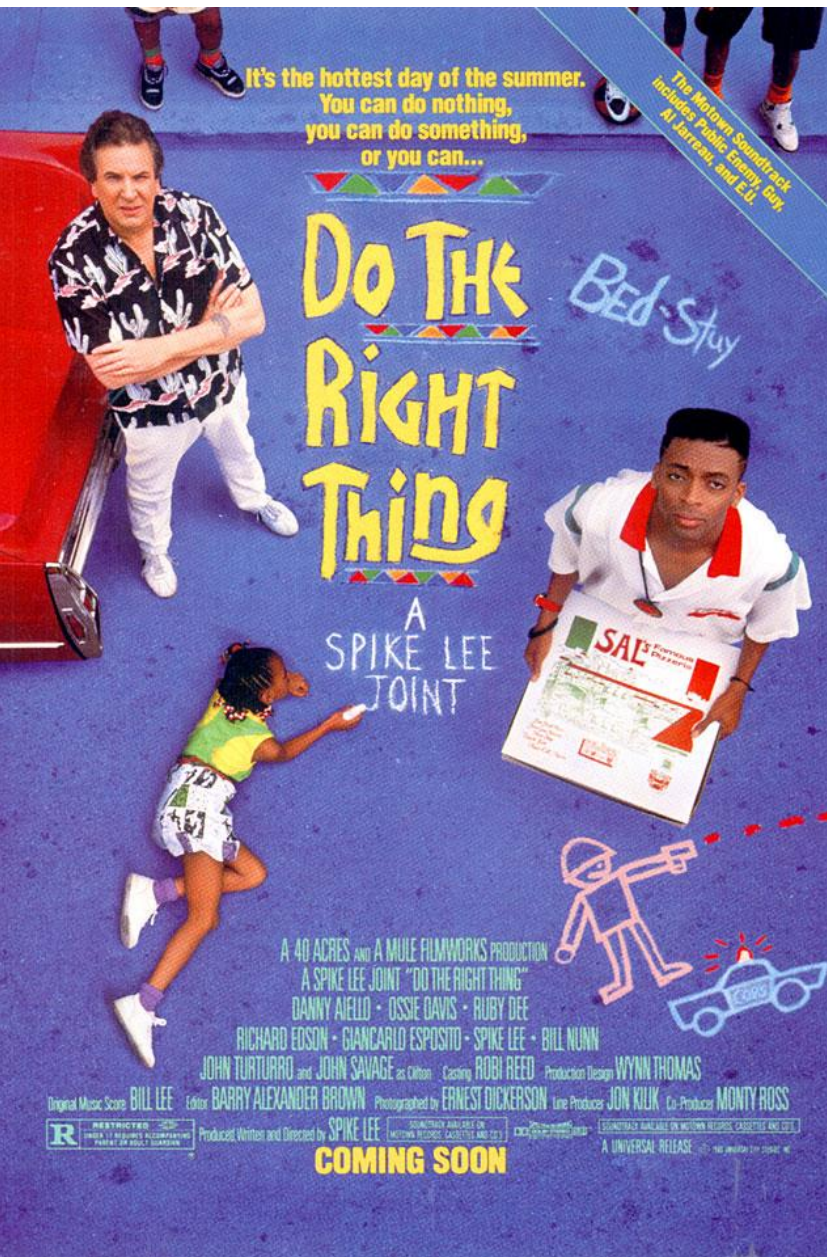


Montage in Spike Lee's Films

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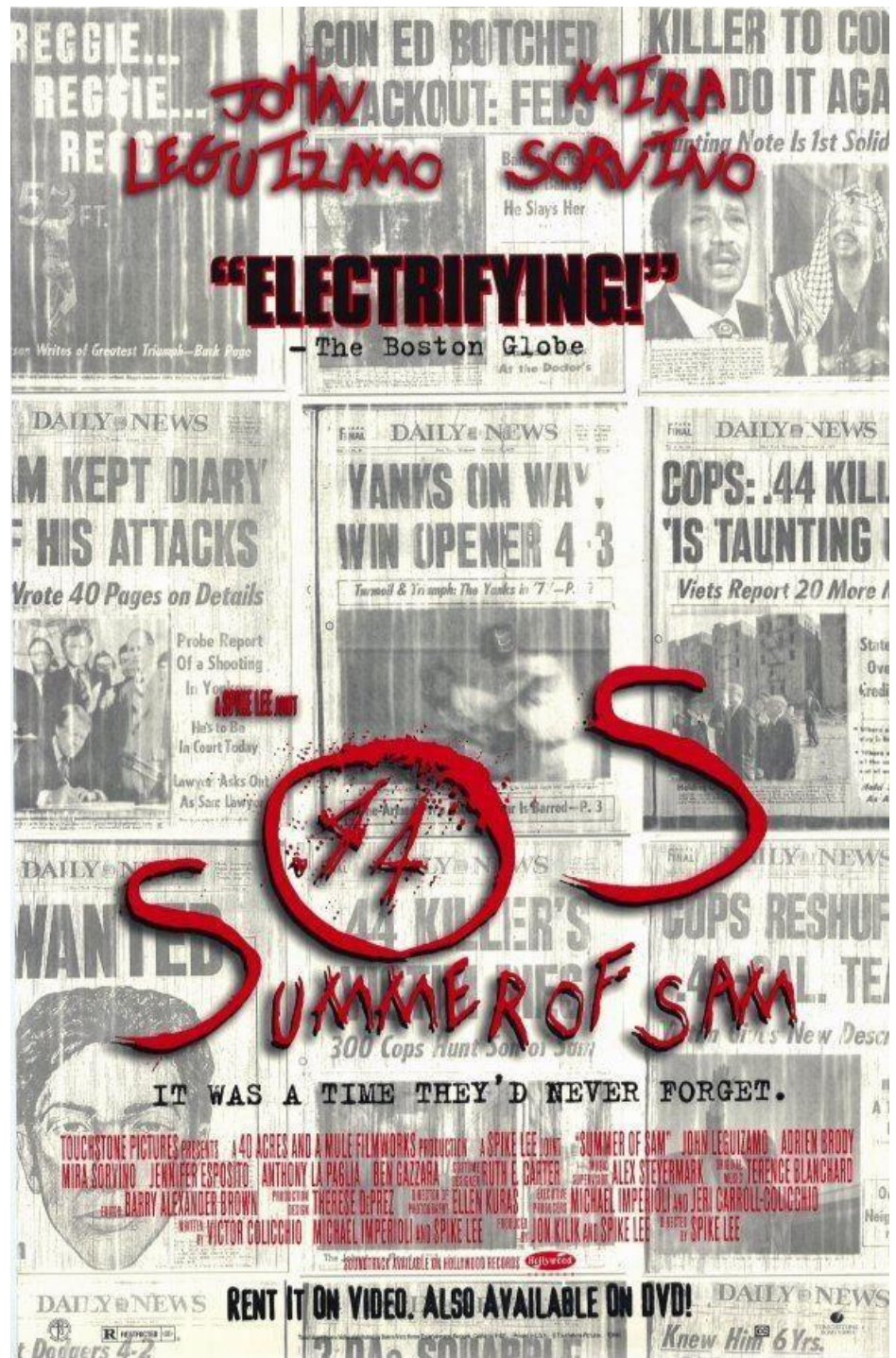
Montage is a rapid editing technique that shows many images that are connected through cutting, used to present an idea or set of interconnected ideas. Since the 1920's when the idea of 'soviet montage theory' emerged as an approach to understanding and creating cinema relying heavily on editing, montage has become an undeniably important tool in film making, especially in films with political or social messages. To outline the importance of montage to the narrative message of such films I have chosen to study the works of one of the greatest social commentators and directors of the twenty-first century, Spike Lee.



In Spike Lee's controversial 1989 film **'Do the Right Thing'**, montage sequences are used perfectly to comment on the racial issues within the community that the story is set in. In the very clever 'racial slur montage' we see five different races of people – black, Italian, Porto-Rican, white American and Chinese – all ranting racist slurs about each other into the camera. The mis en scene surrounding each character in the montage is a stereotypical surrounding for that character (i.e the black man in the street, the Italian in the restaurant, the Porto-Rican on the stoop, the white American in front of a police car). Each shot in the sequence is also shot from a wide angle at first, sweeping in on the characters faces as they speak. This montage sequence aids the narrative of the story hugely, as it is in many ways one of the boiling points in this film about racial angst and anxiety building over the course of an intensely hot day in Summer. The montage is stopped by Samuel L. Jackson's character, the local DJ, shouting 'YO! Hold up!' and proceeding to talk about how the characters need to 'cool that

shit out', a brilliant way to diffuse the intense anger that has been building during the course of the montage. The cutting of the shots in the montage is clear and precise, with each character being placed directly in the centre of the shot with the sweeping camera movement consistent from one shot to the next. Lee uses montage in this case to comment on the ability of all people to be racist, and the absurdity of every one of the racist slurs we hear, as well as to build tension and further the narrative of the story.

In Lee's 1999 drama **'Summer of Sam'** based on the Son of Sam serial killings in 1976, there is a shocking and brilliant montage sequence to the soundtrack of The Who's 'Teenage Wasteland'. The track that is chosen to play over the montage is so apt for the film's message, as it is not really a film about the murderer but what the murders were doing to the community, turning people who already had to suffer in their lives against each other, the film really is documenting a teenage wasteland in the heated summer of 1976. The sequence begins with Adrien Brody's 'punk' character Richie plugging in his guitar to play the song, we then cut to a shot of the serial killer shooting two young people in a car. The montage cuts back and forth from the killings and reports about the Son of Sam to Richie playing his guitar, dancing at a male strip club for money and alludes to him prostituting himself. We then see a character shooting heroin into his veins, cut with images of a baseball game and Richie buying a new guitar, frequently cutting back to images of him



dancing in the strip club and music-video type shots of him playing his guitar to the song. The montage ends with shots in very quick succession of Richie smashing his guitar, ripping up the doll in the strip club, dancing passionately at a punk club juxtaposed with images of neighborhood thugs beating up a gay man and then each other, all the time the shots are moving faster coinciding with the music, building the tension to breaking point. This is a shocking sequence of images that mirror the sentiment of the song playing over them, the frustration that young people felt, especially Richie's character who has to go through such horrible ordeals in order to follow his dreams. Without this montage sequence so much of the story would be left unclear to us, as absolutely vital information about Richie's character is shown to us in this striking montage sequence.

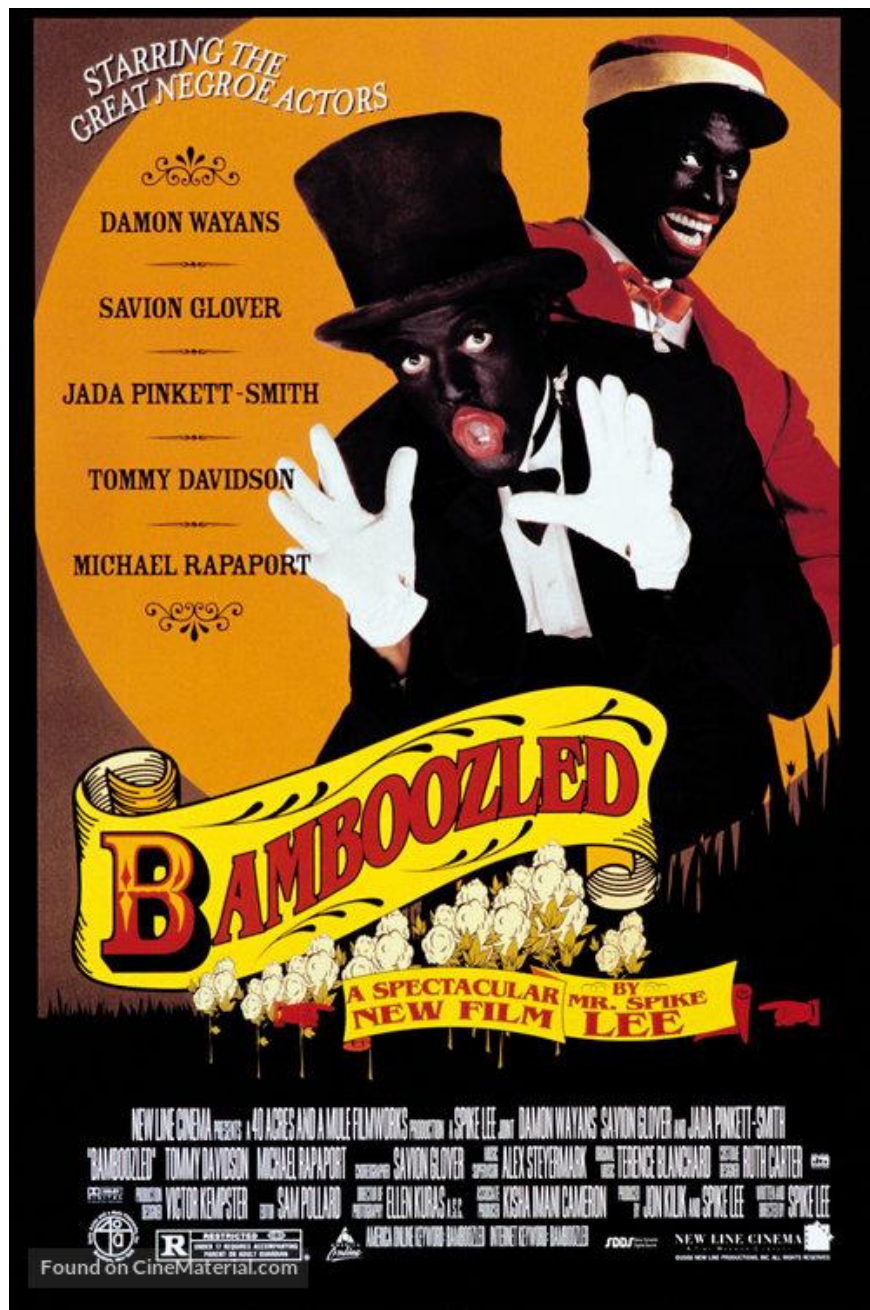


Another powerful montage sequence is in one of Lee's most controversial films, **Malcolm X**, made in 1992. It takes place in the opening credits of the film and is a simple montage cutting between footage of the Rodney King beating, with the image of the American flag slowly burning into an 'X'. This montage is so effective and fitting for the start of this film as one of Malcolm X's speeches is read over these images, talking about inequality and the damage and destructing that white people have brought to his race, and as the American flag burns so too does the anger in the viewers' heart at the atrocious act (the beating of an innocent man) that we are witnessing.

There is another poignant montage in this film, that takes place when Malcolm X is in his car on the way to give a speech where he knows he will be assassinated. The sequence is set against another well picked soundtrack, the beautiful revolution song 'A Change is Gonna Come' by Sam

Cooke. The montage is composed of shots of Malcolm X driving his car, looking almost serene in the knowledge of what is about to happen, and shots of his family in another car, as well as the men who are going to shoot him in another vehicle. Shots of volunteers helping to set up the hall in which the speech will be given are also inter-cut in the montage. This sequence is so upsetting as it portrays a family and community about to be stricken with unimaginable grief. This montage is crucial to the narrative of the film and the humanist message within it that many people overlook when discussing this particular 'Spike Lee Joint'.

The final montage sequence I will discuss is in my opinion one of the most striking of all Lee's montages, and one taken from my favorite film **'Bamboozled'** made in 2000. The montage consists of clips from cartoons, films and newsreels that demonstrate and outline the horrific and



upsetting way in which black people have been depicted on screen throughout history. This montage sequence is paramount to the film because it is real footage of shows that were for the most part massive hits in America and it really sums up the message of disgust at the film and television industry that the film has portrayed so perfectly up to this point, and reminds us that this is not a story of pure fiction, it is a comment on reality and history. This montage makes the story that we are following in the film seem all the more upsetting as it is set against the success of the '21st Century Minstrel Show'. Yet again must be used beautifully to compliment this sequence with an original melancholic score from Terence Blanchard humming remorsefully over the clips. So much is said in this simple montage of archived clips, yet again Lee uses montage to elaborate on a very clear social message and engage the viewer emotionally.

I cannot conclude this essay without mentioning Einstein's montage theory, as I feel it perfectly sums up

the effect that Lee's montages have in his films-

'Eisenstein believed that film montage could create ideas or have an impact beyond the individual images. Two or more images edited together create a "tertium quid" (third thing) that makes the whole greater than the sum of its individual parts'

In my opinion Spike Lee utilises montage so perfectly in his films that they really do become a 'third thing', something special and poignant that would be lacking from not only his films, but the entire industry of third cinema (cinema by the people, for the people) if not for him and these wonderful sequences.

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