

Cops are the heroes in Spike Lee's film

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2019

a review of

"BlacKkKlansman"

Director: Spike Lee

135 min.

"The cops and Klan go hand in hand!"

—frequent chant at anti-cop demonstrations

Spike Lee's latest film "BlackKkKlansman," the story of an African American police officer's infiltration of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1970s, has received generally excellent reviews in mainstream publications and from anti-racist activists.

It contains numerous well crafted chilling scenes illustrating the consequences of white supremacy, connecting them with the resurgence of the fascist right and the present occupant of the White House.

However, Lee's film doesn't accept the chant above. In his telling of a black undercover police officer's account, it's Klan bad; cops good.

The story is taken from the book, *BlacKkKlansman: A Memoir*, by Ron Stallworth, the first black officer on the Colorado Springs police force who goes undercover in the local Ku Klux Klan chapter. Stallworth (John David Washington) obviously can't meet with the racists in person, so he talks to them by phone, while his white partner, Flip Zimmerman (Adam Driver) meets the klavern in person.

In the film, Stallworth is supported in his pioneering role on the force except by one racist cop who early on knocks a sheaf of papers from Stallworth's hands. Does it need a spoiler alert if I tell you the bad cop gets his comeuppance?

In the film's most riveting scene, Harry Belafonte, still vibrant and engaged at 91, relates the horrifying story of the 1916 torture and lynching of teen-aged Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas to a group of young black college activists. The students are key to the plot since they are another of Stallworth's infiltration targets.

Since the Klan members and their plans are presented accurately as the evil they have been historically and currently, Lee and moviegoers don't seem to have a problem that Stallworth's main assignment is the infiltration of a black radical campus organization, those who in that period would have been our comrades.

In one electric scene, the kind of which Lee is a master, Stallworth, on assignment complete with a large Afro, attends a spellbinding speech by Kwame Ture, formerly Stokely Carmichael, a radical black nationalist.

Even the cop is swept into the crowd's excitement created by Ture's eloquence describing the repression of black Americans, but only for a minute as he has a romantic eye more on one of the students.

Stallworth plays the "power to the people thing" well enough to begin an intimate relationship with one of the activists and sponsors of the Ture speech, Patrice (Laura Harrier). Lee obviously named her after the Congolese anti-colonialist, Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated by the CIA in the early 1960s.

This deception and betrayal of trust by Lee's main character only has minor consequences in the film. When Stallworth confesses his role to his lover, Patrice seems only a little irked, although critical.

Tellingly, Stallworth asks his betrayed girlfriend, "Don't you think you can change things from the inside;" perhaps echoing Lee's ambivalence about presenting a snitch as hero. She correctly answers, "No!", but this doesn't put a crimp in their relationship.

In the end (spoiler alert), a Klan plot to kill the militant black activists is thwarted by Stallworth who arrives to save the day, rescuing the students in the nick of time. This can only be read as, for all their militant bluster, they ultimately need the intervention of the cops they despise for the repressive force they wield, often in conjunction with the KKK as the slogan goes.

Although Lee sets his film in the early 1970s when black revolutionaries were still scaring the likes of the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover, Stallworth's actual infiltration work occurred in 1977, several years after black radical groups of the earlier era had been mostly suppressed through government and police campaigns of prosecution and murder of activists.

No prosecutions of Klansmen resulted from Stallworth's undercover work. The KKK bomb plot was solely a dramatic plot contrivance and never occurred. The real black cop was part of the deadly FBI Counter Intelligence Program (Cointelpro) which targeted remaining radical activists.

One problem, not the fault of the film or its director, is that it is playing mainly at local indie theaters and viewed by audiences already aware of the human toll of slavery, white terror, bigotry, and actions of the Klan.

The people who need to see Lee's basic message of the savage history of anti-black terror and discrimination are thronging instead to Mission Impossible 17, or whatever number that series with Tom Cruise has reached.

Audiences where the film is mostly exhibited know the basics of racism and that white terror today is much more likely to come from police than the Klan. They could easily accept a ramped up radical message of how racism is a major undergirding of American capitalism, and not just stemming from inter-ethnic hostility.

Perhaps this is the film's greatest failing. The history of anti-black terror and suppression of rights needs to be emphasized, but the film positions the core of racism in the prejudices of bad white people with bad attitudes about black people. This certainly is a component part of the enforcement of white supremacy, but locating the political economy of racism in the attitudes of a shrinking sector of the white population that very few people can identify with allows even a general audience to walk out of a theater thinking how they have nothing to do with the system of racism.

However, it wasn't the Klan that foreclosed on 100,000 Detroit black homeowners or shut off water to 40,000 mostly African-American houses in that city. Isn't the KKK that profits from and administers what constitutes the system of racialized capitalism.

From their origin as slave patrols, police have been the instrument of oppression and repression of those at the bottom of the slave republic's hierarchy. However, in Lee's film, the cops are in the forefront of anti-racism. Forty years after the story's setting, does this appear to be the case? C'mon, Spike Lee, you know history and contemporary events better than this.

Remember the cop who knocked papers out of Stallworth's hands? After the Kluxers are disposed of, Stallworth's white cop buddies work hand in hand (not with the Klan) to expose the bad cop as a racist who will face disciplinary action. The police Blue Wall of Silence is suspended in Lee's feel good ending.

And, Patrice? She's still hanging out with the informer at the film's conclusion.

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