

Spike Lee: *Clockers* (1995)

Dr. Theresa Thompson
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Key Terms

- Bakhtin's "chronotope": a "unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented" (Bakhtin 425).
 - Often a particular chronotope is linked to a certain genre or sub-genre, and helps to define it.
 - Chronotopes function as "materialized history," where temporal relationships are made literal by the objects, spaces, or persons with which they intersect (Bakhtin 247).
 - In *Clockers*, trains become chronotopes for the Freedom Train, the Underground Railroad, Black migrations North, etc.
 - Masood: "In *Clockers*' narrative, the train forms [a] spatio-temporal unity, characteristic of the chronotope, that fuses the history of twentieth-century African American migration, the growth of an identifiable black city space, and the ghettoization of the black city together into one sign."
- Foucault's "heterotopia": a "countersite" in which all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.
 - The foundation of Foucault's heterotopia is its dual roles as actually lived space (prisons, asylums, cemeteries) and "other" spaces which are "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" (Soja 24).
 - Heterotopias "are constituted in every society, but take quite varied forms and change over time, as 'history unfolds' in its inherent spatiality" (Soja 17)

Clockers

- Richard Price: considered a great master of capturing nuances of street life.
 - Price's novel alternates point of view between Strike, a small-time drug dealer, and Rocco Klein, a New Jersey homicide detective. Strike has few interests beyond making money and dealing drugs.
 - Originally Scorsese intended to direct the film with DeNiro as Rocco; both dropped *Clockers* to film *Casino*.
 - Price's screenplay for Scorsese focused on Rocco character.
 - Lee rewrote the screenplay, with three significant changes.
 - Setting: not New Jersey, but the "Nelson Mandela Houses" of Brooklyn
 - Character focus becomes Strike, not Rocco.
 - Strike's fascination with trains.
- *Clockers* is not exactly "gangsta chic" or a "hood film."
 - "*Clockers* is the anti-thesis" of 'hood films, "but not many people see that." (Lee interview)
 - Lee intended *Clockers* to be more than a film in the "black gangster, hip-hop shoot-'em-up ... drug genre" (qtd. in Schaefer 47).
 - Masood: *Clockers*, "like the hood films it references, focuses on the sense of entrapment and lack of agency that the project's prison-like spaces engender in its characters...." **However**, "the hood gradually diminishes in importance from black-directed films released after *Clockers* (or, alternatively, it returns as a trope or trace...)"

Paula J. Masood. "Which Way to the Promised Land?: Spike Lee's *Clockers* and the Legacy of the African American City - filmmaker Spike Lee." *African American Review* (Summer 2001)

"*Clockers* draws on elements of the hood chronotope—urban setting and contemporary time frame (aided by soundtrack, costuming, and extratextual references)—but revises them by setting up a dialogue between the hood's present and its past."

"In relocating his version of events to Brooklyn and by utilizing the train in a metonymical manner, Lee constructs a version of the contemporary African American city that concurrently acknowledges its history of migrations while avoiding the nihilism of many contemporary hood films set in similar locations. In the process he expands the boundaries of current African American cinema and provides at least one of his protagonists with agency, no small feat."

Setting Change

Lee "locates *Clockers* in a particular urban history which acknowledges the effects of migration and ghettoization."

Brooklyn "is the final destination of the majority of New York's subway lines that run southeast. Brooklyn is where you get off, unless you want to head all the way back through Manhattan to Queens—though characters in *Clockers*, except for Victor..., never head in that direction. [6]"

"Brooklyn became a metaphorical terminal point as well, as what was once the hope of moving from the poverty of the rural South, or the urban decay of Harlem, became the stagnation of the projects and economic displacement. In this sense, the ultimate irony of all this mobility is that its end result is entrapment."

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Character Focus Change.

Lee focuses on Strike who is "not only charismatic but... plagued by enough of a conscience that he's literally eaten up... by ulcers over the stress of his daily activities. Also, in an interesting expansion and explication of street morality, Strike becomes even more sympathetic when he has trouble carrying out orders to murder another dealer."

"Generational miscommunication and disappointment reside at the core of many of the hood films' tensions, with agency and neighborhood control often ceded to a younger generation and elders characterized as ineffectual. *Clockers* inverts this relationship, not necessarily as a critique of Strike so much as to reinsert the influence of elders back into contemporary African American popular culture."

"What lies beyond the heterotopia of the Mandela Houses is an urban frontier not freely accessible to the characters imprisoned within the projects' visible and historic barricades. Most of the characters show little inclination or desire to leave their immediate surroundings, at least not if they don't have to."

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Creation of Spike's Train Hobby

"...the presence of the train in *Clockers* inserts the tropes of migration, mobility, and settlement into the narrative in order to place history, especially African American history, back into a dialogue with contemporary African American filmmaking."

"... a chronotopic motif serves as an "aura" of another genre (375)—a reminder of another space and time. In *Clockers* the train, a reminder of another place and time, is the central chronotopic motif dialoguing with the hood."

"...the train references the related tropes of mobility and entrapment, two of the most recurrent themes in African American cultural production in the twentieth century and in African American films from this time period, and a central theme of hood films."

"Strike doesn't experience real movement until the end of the film, though it is at least foreshadowed [in] earlier scenes. The paradox of this situation is frustratedly articulated by Andre to Strike: 'There's more than just these projects out there, you know. Don't you want to go someplace you've never been before? ... you love trains but you've only ridden the subway.' Here, the stasis of the projects is clearly juxtaposed against the movement of subways and trains."

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"Rather than leaving town on a Greyhound bus from the Port Authority bus terminal, as he does in the novel, the cinematic Strike flees on a train from Penn Station. The change is made more powerful by the way Lee shot the final scene: filtered with golden light and soft-focus lenses, a marked difference from the gritty cinematography constituting most of the film. The combination of Strike's hobby and *Clockers'* conclusion enables Lee to further historicize contemporary cinematic representations of the black city."