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*BlacKkKlansman: Language is Power*

As the first African American director to become a household name in Hollywood, critically acclaimed U.S. filmmaker Spike Lee has never been one to shy away from bold character personas, unique camera angles, and groundbreaking content, and his iconic film *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) is no exception. A passionate supporter of black art and emancipation, Lee's films often comment on the state of 'white America' past and present, telling stories of black Americans that were previously little heard in Hollywood films and cultivating a public persona that is known well beyond the film world for his outspoken attitudes surrounding racial politics. With a star-studded cast and a comedic approach to such complex material, the underlying message in *BlacKkKlansman* conveys to the audience the truth behind Ron Stallworth's extraordinary story and tackles controversial topics such as racism, white supremacy, the politics of policework and radical activism.

Set in the 1970s in Colorado Springs and based off the 2014 memoir *Black Klansmen* by Ron Stallworth, *BlacKkKlansman* follows the journey of the first African-American detective (John David Washington) in the city's police department as he sets out to infiltrate and expose the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. He poses as a white racist on the phone using his real name while his secretively Jewish partner Flip Zimmerman (Adam Driver) poses for him in real life in order to become part of the organization. Stallworth's two-man persona and undercover

police work allow the pair to successfully infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan, going so far as rising up in the chapter by rubbing elbows with Grand Wizard David Duke (Topher Grace) and discovering information on several underground military connections within the KKK.

The movie's ending brings both Flip and Ron face-to-face with Duke, as well as showing a failed terrorist attack against a leader of the Black Power Movement, before connecting the events of the plot to the current white supremacist movement and the presidency of Donald Trump. These parallels to our current political and societal events, as controversial and unsettling as they may be, strengthen the message the filmmaker is trying to convey and sparks conversation and thought in viewers who were able to draw their own interpretations and takeaways from the provocation. Even with just a brief summary of the movie, it is clear that Lee's tendency as a director to create works that ruffle some public feathers was very much apparent in the making of *BlacKkKlansmen*. While the plot of the movie itself serves as a form of political activism, elements of filmmaking Spike Lee exhibits in the film unique to his work help audiences to delve further into the inequality and racism deeply embedded in American society.

Lee expertly opens the film with footage from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) of a field of white soldiers and civilians lying in the streets of Atlanta, Georgia in the wake of the Civil War. This cameo presents a historical look at white supremacy and long-lasting Confederate idealism in Lee's hometown down south. A confederate flag is then proudly displayed in the background as the movie transitions to the delivery of a hate-filled black and white PSA by Dr. Kennebrew Beaugard (Alec Baldwin) denouncing minorities. "They say we may have lost the battle, but we will win the war" he states confidently, addressing the nation following the admittance of nine black students to an all-white Arkansas high school, and the rattling decision favoring the

integration of schools in *Brown v. Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas* “forced upon us by the Jewish-controlled puppets”. He cites an international Jewish conspiracy as the cause of this attack on the white superior race and threatens that this act of collusion has served as the “final nail in a black coffin towards America becoming a mongrel nation”. He reminisces on the days when white people understood the black race’s place in society, back when they were depicted in films as uncivil, violent, and a threat to women and children. D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), infamously known as the most racist film of all time, plays on a projector behind Beaugard before the scene abruptly transitions into the central plot. The looming message depicted in this opening scene carries over through the rest of the movie and serves as a symbol of society’s common view of minorities. The film itself also appears again later in the film when Klan leader David Duke plays the overtly racist silent movie for the Colorado Springs chapter during an induction ceremony. Beaugard’s stumbling speech and lack of coherency is Lee’s message to viewers that the man is not speaking from the heart, but instead catering his words towards other white supremacists watching and manipulating others. This introduction sets the stage for yet another groundbreaking representation of Spike Lee’s interpretation of discrimination and racism in American society.

During an early scene in *BlacKkKlansman* the activist Stokely Carmichael, who had adopted the African name Kwame Ture, delivers a speech to black college students at a Colorado College Black Student Union event. He tells them they are charged with defining beauty for black people and encourages them to celebrate their features. “Our lips are thick,” he says, “our noses broad. Our hair is nappy. We are black and we are beautiful.” Throughout this scene, the camera switches from a wide-angle shot of Ture to cutaways of the crowd. These cutaways then become more personal as close-up angles were used to emphasize the lips, the noses, and the hair

of audience members he is describing. Subtle lighting is used in the background of the scene to convey the somber introduction of the white supremacist movement and the call to action to audience members about the need to fight back. As Ture's speech continues to build and the cutaways become close-ups of audience members, the rest of the crowd seemingly fades away into a montage of faces, with two or three filling the frame. Using this special effect, Lee demonstrates the need for individuals to rise together as one and fight for the beliefs of their people.

At this rally event, Stallworth also meets his love interest in the movie, a local civil rights activist and president of the Colorado College Black Student Union, Patrice. Although his identity as a cop remains a secret in their relationship for most of the film leading up to this moment, Ron ultimately confronts her about the dangers of the rally she is orchestrating as backlash to the white supremacist movement in the area. When his access to the knowledge of the dangers of the event are questioned, he is ultimately forced to reveal what he really does for a living and struggles not to elaborate on the findings of his investigation into the KKK. Lee uses this plot twist to convey the controversial issue of the politics involved in policework, as well as the hatred and distrust in the "pigs" by the young, black population in the area. In the scene, Stallworth powerfully emotes his feelings for the cause with the line "don't think just because I don't wear black beret or a black leather jacket, black Ray Bans, screaming "kill white-y" that I don't care about my people". As Patrice leaves Ron to rejoin the group of her fellow activists chanting and holding signs at a rally, the scene cuts to another where Zimmerman scolds Stallworth for "crossing the line" by getting involved romantically and possibly risking the success of the entire investigation through revealing his confidential identity and information to Patrice. This sudden transition between scenes reminds the audience that while other events are

occurring throughout the movie such as Ron and Patrice's wavering relationship and the underlying theme of distrust in the police and black activism, the main focus of the plot is the infiltration and investigation of the Colorado Springs chapter of the KKK.

The star-studded cast of the film may not seem surprising due to the reputation and popularity of Spike Lee's work, however some casting decisions were obviously made for more powerful, underlying reasons. The lead role of Ron Stallworth is played by John David Washington, son of one of Lee's notoriously favorite actors to employ, Denzel Washington. Denzel starred as the lead role in Lee's 1992 film *Malcolm X*, a tribute to the controversial black activist and leader of the struggle for black liberation. Washington and Lee's strong bond is one famous in Hollywood, and the actor even presented Lee with an honorary Oscar in 2015 and helped him win an NAACP Hall of Fame Award in 2013. Working with Washington's son, John David, also proved to be successful for the director as *BlacKkKlansman* went on to become a 2019 Oscar best picture nominee. Actor Adam Driver's real-life persona also played a distinct role in Lee's casting as one of the most famous Jewish actors in Hollywood. In interviews following the filming of the movie, Driver brings his experiences from his northern Indiana hometown's hate group history to light after saying Ku Klux Klan rallies were frequent during his childhood and that some of his neighbors were Klan members. This personal connection to the cause allowed Driver to connect with his role as the undercover Jewish cop, and added his own unique side as a member of another minority that the KKK denounces throughout the movie.

Nearly every Spike Lee movie contains out-of-the-box thinking to create aspects of filmmaking that pushed other famous directors to coin the term "Spikeisms". These acts of visual distortion through unique camera angles and eccentric scene portrayals give Lee his signature

“wow factor” in his work. One visual signature that appears in many of the director’s films is what has become known as the double dolly shot. The effect makes characters seem as if they are floating down a street rather than walking and it is achieved by putting both the camera and the actor on dollies, or wheeled platforms on a track. In interviews, Lee emphasizes that he only uses this special effect if it fits the scene, despite it being labeled as a “staple” in many of his works. He saves this effect, however, for the end of the movie just before the credits when Patrice and Ron hear a knock at the door following the reveal of Stallworth’s true identity to the Klan after being inducted as a member. The two characters grab their guns and point them towards the door, floating down the hallway in a way similar to Denzel Washington in another famous work of Lee’s, *Malcolm X* (1992), as he glides through the street at medium shot towards the site he is knowingly going to be assassinated. The camera glides through the window and opens to a burning cross against a black background before panning to a circle of Klansmen circling the scene. This is a powerful image that Lee wants to, quite literally, burn into the minds of viewers as a final call to resist the white supremacy movement in the United States.

Lee connects the final message of the film to another real-life scenario, ending his work with footage from the violent Unite the Right march in Charlottesville following the burning cross scene on Stallworth’s property. The closing news footage devastatingly conveys how far we truly have not yet come, as Virginia citizens march through darks streets surrounding the campus at the University of Virginia chanting “Jews will not replace us”. The rally occurred amidst controversy generated by the removal of Confederate monuments by local governments throughout the country. The removal of these historical statues was a response to the Charleston church shooting in 2015, in which a self-proclaimed white supremacist shot and killed nine black members, including the minister, a state senator, and wounded 30 others.

Real news footage then continues, displaying how days after the violent protest President Donald Trump made a statement saying that there was "blame on both sides,". When asked by the Hollywood Reporter why he chose to include this controversial footage of the president in his work, the prolific filmmaker opened up by stating that he was enjoying his vacation in Martha's Vineyard watching CNN when he saw this news as a "homegrown, American apple pie act of terrorism." When approached by another reporter, Lee stated that he chose to feature clips of Trump touting those controversial remarks in the movie because, as he told THR, "He said those things. And people need to be reminded that the current president of the United States says things like that."

The final scenes of the movie bounce between live footage of the real David Duke, former Grand Wizard and national director of the Ku Klux Klan, addressing a crowd following President Trump's remarks, more footage of the violent protests and police brutality endured during the event, and a fading of an upside down American flag transitioning into its black and white form, a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement. A picture also slowly fades in and out during the closing scenes, displaying a sign that reads "no place for hate" and a memorial for Heather Heyer, one of the peaceful protesters who fell victim to the brutal violence that ultimately consumed the rally.

A bold and brilliant paradox, *BlacKkKlansman* upholds Spike Lee's reputation for stirring controversy and thought within his viewers through intellectual action, the dramatization of the political ideas and the cultural context on which the plot line depends. The somber takeaway of the film is that throughout this often laugh-out-loud comedy, there is an underlying reminder that the war against the far right has not been won. As incompetent and ridiculous as the Klan and David Duke are portrayed in *BlacKkKlansman*, the ideas they stand for are those

that still influence society and, more specifically, the American government. The unique aspects of Spike Lee's legendary filmmaking techniques brought the real Ron Stallworth's story to life, empowering activists and American citizens at the same time. Lee has never been one to stay quiet in a crowd, and the message *BlacKkKlansman* delivers is one that advocates for speaking out against the wrongdoers, despite the power they may have, and standing up for what you believe in. The ultimate takeaway from the film? As Lee would say, it is the following: Rest In Power.

