

Spike Lee's *Inside Man*: Asking for so little

By David Walsh
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Inside Man, directed by Spike Lee, written by Russell Gewirtz

Inside Man is a run-of-the-mill heist film, something that merely fills up time, directed by Spike Lee.

Four robbers, dressed in painters' outfits, invade a bank and hold the assorted customers and employees hostage. Detective Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington) is brought in as hostage negotiator. The robbers, who make unlikely demands, seem in no hurry. Frazier and his fellow policemen ponder the significance of the criminals' actions.

Meanwhile, the news of the robbery deeply disturbs the chief executive of the bank, Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer). He, in turn, employs a high-powered troubleshooter, Madeline White (Jodie Foster), to make certain that certain incriminating documents, kept in a safe-deposit box, remain out of the public eye. Frazier and White both negotiate with the chief criminal (Clive Owen), but his motives and plans remain obscure. In the end, revenge and, I suppose, a kind of political agenda emerge as the motives for the operation.

The film holds the spectator's attention. We are curious creatures. We want to know the solution to the puzzle, which is not entirely disappointing. But *Inside Man* adds up, in the end, to almost nothing.

Audiences and critics alike, as we have noted more than once, ask for so little at the moment. Complexity in drama has largely disappeared, genuine comic timing is absent, the "look and feel" of a film rarely possess texture and depth...and for large numbers of people the memory of such qualities has grown faint, if it exists at all. Coarseness, bombast and mechanical proficiency have substituted themselves for artistry and the population is encouraged not to notice the difference.

A clever twist, a semi-coherent denouement, a stylish flourish (whether empty or not), such meager gestures

are not unlikely to go unrewarded today. And so it is with *Inside Man*, according to the critics: "Well-crafted" and "fast-paced," "lively and inventive," "a rich satisfying thriller," even an "expertly constructed mini-masterpiece."

Lee's film wants to have it several ways, simultaneously. The opening sequences, of the robbers' arrival and entry into the bank, as well as the police organizing themselves around the building, suggest the contemporary "action film": precise, militaristic, brutal. Loud and pompous music accompanies the images. The chief criminal presides over the bank interior like a conqueror; he peruses the vault's content, millions in bank notes, apparently pleased with what he sees. Since we are not witnesses to the Great Bank Robbery, as it turns out, what's the point of all this? It's simply a giant red herring, the first of many.

The attempt to give the film a social conscience is unconvincing. That an American banker made his fortune by trading with the Nazis and betraying a Jewish friend does not shed much light on anything. In any event, it is passed off rather quickly. Making the potential victim of such a crime a thoroughgoing villain is a mere device. It has more to do, one suspects, with finding a means of depicting a "justifiable" crime than anything else, thus satisfying contemporary official moral standards. Again, everything today has to be extreme, over the top, sensationalized. (If not the Nazi connection, why couldn't the safe deposit box have contained the secret of Jesus' life?)

It would not be a Spike Lee film without unseemly detours. Certain critics disdain the police-thriller portion of the work, but approve wholeheartedly of Lee's urban "edginess"—i.e., the combination of ethnic stereotyping, nasty sexual leering and general misanthropy. Jewish, Italian, for that matter, poor black, caricatures abound. Lee cannot help himself.

This is how he and the privileged social layer he speaks for (and to) see the world, as a series of hostile tribes, ready to spring at each other's throats. No wonder the forces of law and order are treated, all things taken into account, so sympathetically. The general effect is simply unpleasant, and even such an appealing performer as Denzel Washington does not escape unscathed.

The few references to a post-September 11 world—a freed Sikh hostage beaten up as an “Arab” by police—hardly tip the balance in the film's favor. These are fleeting and easily forgotten. And, as always with Lee, accomplished without a great deal of sympathy or compassion.

One could easily contrast this film with Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), based on the true story of an attempted bank robbery in Brooklyn in August 1972. In Lumet's film, Al Pacino as Sonny Wortzik stages the crime to pay for his boy friend's sex-change operation. The bungled robbery turns into a hostage drama, played out on television. Crowds surge at the police barricades, in general sympathy with Sonny. Hostility to the police and to authority dominates. Pacino exudes an extraordinary warmth and craziness. The film is not simply told from the point of view of the authorities; the anti-establishment radicalism of the time comes through. *Dog Day Afternoon* is memorable chiefly for that reason, Lumet's ability, at least in this work, to translate popular moods and sentiments and something truthful about the early 1970s in New York—without straining—into art.

The present film works in another vein. Lee is not the principal culprit, he simply responds to another, more selfish mood. The film is not about life in New York in 2005, it is about imitating other action and crime films. Apart from the later almost documentary-like portions of *Malcolm X* (1992) and *4 Little Girls* (1997), a documentary about the racist Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing in 1963, Lee, an inveterate vulgarizer, has little to show for himself. One hopes that his documentary on Hurricane Katrina (*When The Levees Broke*), to be aired on HBO in August, will represent a larger contribution.

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