

**Bringing the Power of Film to Business Ethics Research and Teaching**  
**(Short title: Business Ethics in Film)**

Panel symposium proposal for the 2006 Academy of Management Annual Meeting  
Submitted to Social Issues in Management Division & Organizational Behavior Division

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## **Bringing the Power of Film to Business Ethics Research and Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

This proposed multimedia, interactive symposium session brings together editorial board members of *Ethics in Film*, along with the journal's Managing Editor, to explore with attendees theoretical and practical issues relating to the use of film for business ethics inquiry. *Ethics in Film* is a new electronic journal, launched in 2005, dedicated to bringing the power of film to the teaching of all areas of ethical inquiry. The journal publishes articles that use any form of motion picture excerpt as the teaching method and address any ethical genre. The proposed 2-hour session would focus particularly on the use of film in teaching *and* researching business and management ethics. Each panelist will each make a very brief presentation to set out key issues for discussion. After the opening remarks, the remainder of the session will be devoted to presentation of two film clips which, along with the key issues for discussion, will be the basis for a discussion between panelists and attendees. Like *Ethics in Film*, the session would seek to tap into the scholarly and entertainment value of film to bring together knowledge, action, and the public concern for Academy members.

### **SIM Keywords**

Ethical implications of technology, Individual ethical behavior, Influence of businesses on political processes

### **OB Keywords**

Ethics, Teaching OB, Technology

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### **Overview**

This proposed multimedia, interactive symposium session brings together editorial board members of *Ethics in Film*, along with the journal's Managing Editor, to explore with attendees theoretical and practical issues relating to the use of film for business ethics inquiry. *Ethics in Film* is a new electronic journal, launched in 2005, dedicated to bringing the power of film to the teaching of all areas of ethical inquiry. The journal publishes articles that use any form of motion picture excerpt as the teaching method and address any ethical genre. The proposed 2-hour session would focus particularly on the use of film in teaching *and* researching business and management ethics. Like *Ethics in Film*, the session would seek to tap into the scholarly and entertainment value of film to bring together knowledge, action, and the public concern for Academy members. The session will be of particular interest to SIM Division members with research and teaching interest in business ethics as well as OB Division members interested in observing issues dealing with ethics and organizational behavior issues as depicted in film.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle explains his contention that poetry, in particular tragic drama, has potentially more to teach us about ethics than experience itself: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude...Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end" (1450b). This characterization of poetry has been extended to such other poetic forms as narrative literature and film. Martha Nussbaum argues in *Love's*

*Knowledge* that literature is an essential complement to moral theorizing because it exhibits four key features of the Aristotelian ethical view: “noncommensurability of the valuable things,” “the priority of [particular] perceptions,” “ethical value of the emotions,” and “ethical value of uncontrolled happenings.” In an anthology on the role of film and literature in stimulating *The Moral Imagination*, Oliver Williams (1997) echoes the Aristotelian commitment to a role for art and aesthetics in “reflecting on what is constitutive of the good [ethical] life,” while Stanley Cavell (2004) brings together his eclectic career in moral philosophy, the arts, and humanities to teach moral lessons through film in *Cities of Words*. By showing us, in Aristotle’s words, “things such as might happen” (*Poetics* 1451b), film offers the viewer a concrete representation of experience that contains relevant moral features that may be absent from experience itself. For example, audience members may have access to a character’s moral intentions, which in ordinary experience are accessible only by inference. Further, as in literature (Booth, 1983), audience members are able to evaluate filmed experience from the vantage point of relative omniscience, which includes knowledge of the moral consequences of a decision.

Because film, like tragic drama and narrative literature, often takes on overtly moral topics, film is an increasingly valuable resource for ethical inquiry in the Aristotelian tradition (Wartenberg and Curran, 2005). Moreover, the film industry, as a big business, seems ironically to produce a disproportionate number of plotlines that are morally critical of big business. Many films present a version of “the grand mythology of American individualism and the protean conflict theologian Reinhold Niebuhr memorably captured in one of his titles, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*,” in which business stars as the social villain (McCann, 1997). In recent decades, in fictional and documentary films, business is more often portrayed in film in a morally negative than a positive

light (Medved, 1997). Whether analyzed as artistic representations of important stories or as cultural representations of cultural attitudes, business films provide a valuable trove of material for business ethics research.

For similar reasons, films are an increasingly attractive teaching resource. A typical feature length film is about two hours long, meaning that it is possible to show a film in its entirety in some class sessions while not unreasonable to assign a film in lieu of a reading assignment.

*Ethics in Film* publishes critical analyses of film clips with enough background and context to present a portion of a film as a unified whole, like a short story. One advantage of using a good film in a case-oriented business school teaching environment is that written case studies do not often rise to the level of good literature, rarely having the valuable endurance, particular immediacy, emotional impact, and providential insight that good literature or film can provide. Business school educators have been using film as a teaching resource since the 1970's in part because it offers a more concrete sense of being there than other teaching media can offer (Champoux, 1999).

### **Symposium Format and Content**

This proposed multimedia, interactive symposium session brings together editorial board members of *Ethics in Film*, along with the journal's Managing Editor, as a panel to explore with attendees theoretical and practical issues relating to the use of film for business ethics inquiry. Each panelist will each make a very brief presentation to set out key issues for discussion (30-45 minutes in total for five presentations). After the opening remarks, the remainder of the session will be devoted to presentation of two film clips which, along with the key issues for discussion,

will be the basis for a discussion between panelists and attendees (30-45 minutes for each clip).  
(Total time: 2 hours).

The brief presentation topics are as follows:

- Virginia Gerde on Business Ethics in Film:
  - As a big business, film has a lot to say about the ethics of big business.
  - What are some of the best films that address business ethics issues? Why do films tend more often nowadays to depict business and businesspersons in a negative moral light? Has that always been the case?
- Michael Goldsby on Film as a Business:
  - As new technologies develop and digital media evolves, new firms and market opportunities are developing in the film business. New voices and social critiques are being heard that may not have had access to an audience in previous generations.
  - What are the impacts on society that new film companies and producers having? What impacts on international issues are films having via the film business (films are one of the U.S. chief export products)? What are the possible ethical dilemmas that filmmakers face when they operate in a for-profit, competitive environment? Will the focus on social issues by independents cause big studios to address those topics by having to respond to market pressures?
- Marc Orlitzky on Resources on Ethics in Film:
  - Prof. Orlitzky will provide an overview (including a handout) of Internet and other resources useful for teaching with film in Business & Society and

Organizational Behavior courses and will illustrate this pedagogical approach with one concrete example, which will include sample questions, answers, and student testimonials. Two important objectives that could be pursued with teaching of ethics in film might be greater media literacy and Gareth Morgan's "imaginization."

- How are new technologies facilitating the use of film as a research trove and teaching tool? What are some of the best resources? How can researchers and teachers learn about potential legal and ethical issues regarding the use of these materials (for example, copyright restrictions)?
- Christopher Michaelson on Film and Other Arts:
  - The best films combine the power of other artistic genres, from narrative literature to drama to music. But film has artistic limitations as well, from a two-dimensional rectangular screen to popular audiences' attention spans (Chatman, 1980).
  - What can film offer for ethical analysis that narrative literature cannot? What can't film offer that other arts can? Should researchers and teachers discriminate among aesthetically "good" and "bad" films, and if so, how?
- Cynthia Scheopner on *Ethics in Film*:
  - *Ethics in Film* is the first scholarly journal of its kind and was launched to tap into the knowledge and experience of scholars who already had discovered the value of film to scholarly inquiry about ethics. It was launched as an online journal in part because the multimedia nature of the journal is facilitated by the search and video streaming capabilities of online technologies.

- How did *Ethics in Film* come about? How does one submit an article? What constructive ideas do panelists and audience members have for making this new journal a high quality and useful resource to business management and ethics scholars?

A sample *Ethics in Film* article is provided in Appendix 1 to this proposal as a sample. The film clips to be used in the session will be determined prior to the session and will take into account reviewers' feedback. (Please note that the panelists have permission of *Ethics in Film* to use previously submitted or published material or to develop new articles for the purpose of the session.)

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**Appendix 1 – Sample *Ethics in Film* Article**

<b>Film Title:</b>	<i>Do The Right Thing</i>
<b>Director:</b>	Spike Lee
<b>Year:</b>	1989
<b>Issue Number:</b>	2005:003
<b>Date Published:</b>	August, 2005
<b>Author:</b>	Christopher Michaelson, Stern School of Business, New York University, cmichael@stern.nyu.edu
<b>Principal Players:</b>	Sal (owner of Sal's Pizzeria)-Danny Aiello; Buggin Out (Sal's customer)-Giancarlo Esposito; Mookie (Sal's deliveryman)-Spike Lee; Vito (Sal's son behind the counter)-Richard Edson; Pino (Sal's son in front of the counter)-John Turturro; Da Mayor (elderly man on the steps)-Ossie Davis
<b>Genre:</b>	Drama
<b>Exact Segment:</b>	Part of Track 3, "A Slice of Trouble"
<b>Exact Segment Length:</b>	4:37
<b>Exact Segment Start:</b>	Beginning of Track 3, "A Slice of Trouble" (0:00 of the track; 18:26 into the DVD)
<b>Exact Segment End:</b>	End of conversation between Da Mayor and Mookie. Da Mayor: "Always, do the right thing." Mookie: "That's it?" Da Mayor: "That's it." Mookie: "I've got it; I'm gone." (4:37 into the track; 23:03 into the DVD)
<b>Synopsis:</b>	A seemingly minor disagreement over a slice of pizza escalates into a dispute involving economic power and racial justice. The segment and the film challenge the very possibility of the title phrase, "Do the right thing."
<b>Keywords:</b>	rights, freedom, stockholder theory, stakeholder theory, power relations, racial justice, personal identity

**Setting the Stage:**

Sal's, an Italian-American-owned pizzeria, and its predominantly African-American customers have coexisted for years, mutually dependent and mutually suspicious, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York City. The neighborhood's nicknames, "Bed-Stuy," and sometimes, "The Stuy," reflect sentiments its residents and detractors have had about this neighborhood, rich with historic brownstones, many poorly kept and witness to acute racial conflict when the action in this film takes place. A sizzling summer day is an excuse for children to flood a street with a fire hydrant, for workers to stop home to cool off, and for police to vent their frustrations on residents. Tempers and temperatures are hot, but after Buggin Out and Sal argue relatively harmlessly in the segment described below, historical tensions and circumstantial stress produce a climactic conflagration and plaintive wail for "the right thing."

**Description of Events in Segment:**

The camera follows a hot slice of pizza as it is taken from the oven by Sal and placed on the counter in front of Buggin Out. Neither immediately says a word, each seeming deliberately to antagonize the other. Buggin Out objects to the price of extra cheese, while Sal reminds him that they have been through this routine many times before. Although they may dislike one another, it is also clear that they are mutually dependent; Buggin Out eats at Sal's three times a day and spends "much money" there. When Sal eventually orders his deliveryman, Mookie, to escort his friend from the pizzeria, Sal risks losing not one but many customers as Buggin Out pronounces, "Boycott Sal's!"

Before his exit, Buggin Out's anger escalates when he takes his slice to a booth adjoining Sal's "Wall of Fame" – a few rows of photographs of famous Italian-Americans – Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Frank Sinatra, and others. "Mook!" he demands. "How come you got no brothers up on the wall?" Mookie, in a Brooklyn Dodgers Jackie Robinson jersey responds, "Man, ask Sal, all right?" evidently not eager to intervene between his friend and his employer. Sal rejoins: "You want brothers on the wall? Get your own place; you can do what you wanna do... This is *my* pizzeria." Buggin Out counters: "Yeah, that might be fine Sal, but, uh, you *own* this... rarely do I see any American-Italians eating here. All I see is black folk." Punctuating his argument by throwing a crumpled napkin on the floor, he concludes, "So since we spend *much* money here, we do have some say."

Vito tries to calm his father down, but Sal emerges from behind the counter with a baseball bat, which he then allows Pino to take from him. Sal tells Mookie to get his friend out, while Buggin Out names some famous black heroes he would like to see on the wall tomorrow – Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, and Michael Jordan. As he is rushed out the door still clutching his slice, he tells the other customers eating there – all black, though seemingly unpersuaded – to boycott Sal's. On the sidewalk in front of Sal's, Buggin Out argues that since he paid for his slice, he has a right to speak up. Mookie asks Buggin Out to be sensitive to the fact that Mookie relies on Sal for his paycheck. Mookie thinks he has gotten Buggin Out to agree not to return for a week – "A week?!?" Buggin Out repeats incredulously, a sign of his dependence on Sal's – when tempers, presumably, will have calmed. Leaving, Buggin Out calls out to his friend, "Mook. Stay black."

Back inside, Sal and his sons press Mookie to get Buggin Out to "behave." "You talk some brother talk to him," Pino condescends. Mookie says, "Look, people are free to do whatever they wanted to do," to which Sal retorts, "Free? There's no free here. Look, I'm the boss... You want freedom? There. That's free. You take an order and you take it out." Back to business, Mookie takes the order. Sauntering past along the sidewalk, Mookie is called back by Da Mayor, an old man in a wrinkled suit and sagging hat who might be an authority figure or who might simply be a drunk. Da Mayor offers unsolicited advice: "Always, do the right thing." Mookie asks, skeptically: "That's it?" Da Mayor, definitively: "That's it." Mookie, assertively: "I've got it; I'm gone."

**Ethical Concepts  
and Issues  
Illustrated:**

On the surface, racial justice may seem to be the focal issue of the film. But economic transactions and the power relations they imply are also causes and effects of racial injustice and, more generally, of human conflict. Sal believes that his ownership of the pizzeria gives him the right to do what he pleases with it, while Buggin Out believes that customers, who support Sal's with their patronage, have some say. Mookie seems to agree with Buggin Out in principle but needs his paycheck from Sal – who later in the film says Mookie is “like a son” to him. In the eyes of equity stakeholders, ownership and lineage bestow absolute decision-making authority, so Sal's real sons will take over the pizzeria someday. Patronage and loyalty merely permit contingent rights, so customers will be allowed to spend money in exchange for their patronage, and Mookie will have a job at Sal's provided he remains loyal.

In this black neighborhood, economic power is wielded by an Italian pizzeria owner, a Korean grocer, and mainly white policemen, but social influence belongs to a local radio disc jockey, neighborhood elders (Da Mayor and Mother Sister), and collective sentiment. In fact, maintaining economic power depends on support from the social order, and the social order relies on economic and political institutions beyond its direct control. As a study in racial justice, this segment challenges Mookie to examine his personal identity as a black man challenged by another to “fight the power.” The position of power at issue in the segment belongs to a white man whose ambivalence about race – he exhibits care and charity in the community, but is prone to use racial epithets when provoked – is reflected in his sons, one aggressively racist (Pino) and the other passively conciliatory (Vito). As a study in business decision-making, the segment is analogous to the discord between stockholder theory (and its doctrine of shareholder or owner primacy) and stakeholder theory (and its doctrine of balance among stakeholders). It is evident enough that Sal's will benefit from fair treatment of its customers and employees, but does Sal have an economic obligation to his business to do so and/or a moral obligation to others?

More broadly, the segment and the film give us reasons to explore the wisdom of the title phrase, “Do the right thing.” Da Mayor, dismissed by some neighbors as a useless drunk, gives Mookie this apparently sage advice. The film can be understood to both affirm it and criticize its impracticality. Even if we intend to do the right thing, we may not know (or be capable of knowing) what it is (or whether it is). The “two views” presented immediately prior to the closing credits – Martin Luther King, Jr. declaring violence an “impractical and immoral” way to achieve racial justice, and Malcolm X characterizing violence as a necessary means to “self-defense” – reinforce this conceptual impasse and fail to reveal whether “the right thing” has occurred. At the center of this tension, Mookie – a black man who has retained the fragile respect of his racial counterparts but has also been granted status by the white economic power establishment – struggles with doing “the right thing.” Rather than presenting choices – between Buggin Out and Sal; Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X; and right and wrong – our experience of the segment and the film may raise: 1) Questions about who we are and how identity influences behavior; 2) Doubts about whether right choices are possible.

<p><b>Additional Comments:</b></p>	<p>Suggestion re: two views: To promote a discussion of principles and consequences, means and ends, and the escalating implications of the segment described above, it can be useful to distribute a handout and/or to play the Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X quotations with which Lee (the director) concludes the film (at the beginning of Track 16 (“Two Views/ End Credits”), 0:00 of the track (1:51:56 into the DVD) to 1:41 of the track (1:53:37 into the DVD).</p> <p>Warning re: profanity: The segment is replete with realistic profanity, sometimes in ordinary conversations and other times resulting from conflict.</p> <p>Note re: Bedford-Stuyvesant: The Stuyvesant name is famous in New York, belonging to the last governor of New Amsterdam, the precursor to New York City, purchased by (white) Dutch settlers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from Native Americans. Bed-Stuy was once a racially diverse, architecturally prominent neighborhood, which by the time of the film was home to predominantly black victims of urban neglect. Since then, along with much of New York City, the neighborhood has experienced some economic revival.</p>
<p><b>Questions for Discussion:</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who is right (or can you say who is right)? Sal or Buggin Out?</li> <li>2. How do historical tensions exacerbate, clarify, or otherwise influence present-day conflicts?</li> <li>3. What should Sal do about the “Wall of Fame” if his primary objective is to increase the profits of Sal’s Pizzeria? How does this recommendation compare to Sal’s moral obligations, if any, to his customers and employees?</li> <li>4. To what extent should one’s moral decisions be influenced by personal identification with and loyalty to one’s racial and/or ethnic group? With whom should Mookie side?</li> <li>5. What are the power relations in the segment, and what are the sources (economic, social, political, etc.) of power?</li> <li>6. When “the right thing” is in doubt, what is the right thing to do?</li> </ol>
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