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## A Discourse-Centered Approach to Sound and Meaning in Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq*

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*Joel Sherzer's landmark 1987 paper, "A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture," focused linguistic and anthropological attention on playful and artistic uses of language, both as a way of better understanding discourse, and as a way of better understanding how societies distribute and negotiate power. This paper applies Sherzer's focus to an analysis of Spike Lee's deployment of poetic language in his 2015 film Chi-Raq. Few American filmmakers craft dialogue more artfully, or deploy dialogue more saliently than Lee, whose filmic technique and political rhetoric force viewers to focus on speech and its consequences. This paper looks at the distribution of versified and ordinary dialogue speech in Chi-Raq in order to argue that interpreting the indexical meanings of linguistic variation in Lee's film generates a nuanced interpretation of the film's complex but powerful rhetoric. [poetics, film dialogue, signifying, AAVE, visual language]*

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Joel Sherzer's groundbreaking essay, "A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture," intervenes in the long-standing intellectual debate about the language-culture relationship by suggesting that scholars examine domains, such as "poetry, magic, politics, religion, respect, insult, and bargaining," where language is deployed creatively and persuasively, because it is there that the language-culture relationship "comes into sharpest focus" (Sherzer 1987:306). Sherzer argued for a focus on moments of playful and artistic speech, in which "the potentials and resources provided by grammar, as well as cultural meanings and symbols, are exploited to the fullest" (Sherzer 1987:296). His point was that the playful manipulation of variation (different ways of saying the same thing), and the parallelistic structuring of discourse into aesthetically, as well as informationally meaningful, texts create, while calling attention to, the uncanny links between ideas that literary critic Stephen Booth (1998) has argued create puzzles the mind loves to explore. The result, Sherzer (1987:302) says, is "most serious and deep verbal play."

I would like to argue here that Sherzer's approach lends itself to the analysis of cinema, where scholars have long debated a parallel issue, namely the relationship between the influence of cultural ideas on films, and the influence of cinematic imagery on culture—a dynamic Ryan and Kellner (1988:12) have called "discursive transcoding." Narrative film is interesting sociolinguistically in part due to an inherent double articulation, a doubling of voice created by the interplay between the filmic rhetoric (roughly, the film's message; cf. Browne 1999), on the one hand, and

the diegetic scenes (roughly, the film's plot) used to convey it, on the other. Playful variation and aesthetic structuring are relevant to both voices and constitute a powerful node of interpretation, especially for films where these are highly exploited.

The films of Spike Lee are ideal for such a project, since they are deeply playful and parallelistic at both levels. At the level of film rhetoric, Lee's work stands out for provocatively addressing politically explosive issues, such as racial violence (*Do the Right Thing* 1989), racial stereotyping (*Bamboozled* 2000), interracial romance (*Jungle Fever* 1991), gang and gun violence (*Chi-Raq* 2015), while refusing easy answers to or moral certainty about any of these. At the level of diegesis, Lee relishes artful dialogue and the play of linguistic styles. As Ellen Scott (2009:243) has observed, Lee often uses accent and vocabulary to "[locate] his characters geographically, culturally, and generationally," while nonetheless thematizing the instability of identity in American culture.

Dean McWilliams (2001:248) has written that Lee's films are "centrally concerned with language and its role in our moral and political lives," and the 2015 film, *Chi-Raq*, is an excellent example.<sup>1</sup> Boldly adapting Aristophanes's Greek comedy *Lysistrata* to a very modern critique of gun culture and lethal violence among African American youth in Chicago, *Chi-Raq* is a complex film that defies easy summarization. While staying close to its model, the film also transforms the classical drama. Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* famously ends the disastrous Peloponnesian War by mobilizing the women of ancient Greece to join a sex strike, and while the cinematic *Lysistrata* repeats this formula, Lee also introduces a second protagonist, *Lysistrata*'s lover, the rapper known as *Chi-Raq*, who brings with him the crucial subplot of a young girl who is killed by a stray gunshot from gang violence, and the girl's mother's search for justice.

*Chi-Raq* draws our attention to language in many ways. Most salient is its ostentatious use of rhyming rap poetry for most of the character dialogue. Screenwriter Kevin Willmott provides some insight in a 2015 interview:

I was in the play "Lysistrata" in college and I realized how much it had an African American kind of cadence, it really sounded like black people . . . It really lent itself to spoken word, to rap and rhyme. I just thought don't take the verse away, embrace the verse and Spike got that. I don't think there's anybody else in the country that would have gotten it . . . but Spike got that and loved that from the very beginning. (O'Falt 2015)

A good example comes from the following monologue performed by Dolmedes, the film's pseudo-diegetic narrator:<sup>2</sup>

Baby, you've come  
face-to-face  
with the super bad  
Mr. **Dolmedes**.  
My black ass was on  
the first box of **Wheaties**.  
I was raised up  
in a pail of rusted **nails**,  
ran buck naked through  
golf ball-sized **hail**,  
was weaned on Thunderbird  
from my mama's **titty**.  
Kicked ass from coast to coast  
til both shoe toes were **shitty**.  
Chewed up electric lines  
and pissed out lightning **bolts**.  
Hit Godzilla so hard,  
it gave Mothra's daddy a **jolt**.  
Sank the Titanic  
with a frozen **turd**,

then won 10 Grammys  
 and didn't sing or rap  
 one goddamn motherfucking word.  
 Now, I told you about the Signifyin'  
 Monkey and rapped about Shine,  
 but this here tale of two cities  
 is one of a kind.  
 It all started with  
 a gorgeous Nubian sister.  
 Baby so fine,  
 she made George Zimmerman  
 and Darren Wilson  
 wanna kiss her.  
 As tough as Coffy  
 and sexy as Foxy Brown.  
 Hell, Beyonce Knowles  
 herself even had to bow down.  
 They call her Lysistrata,  
 a woman like no other.  
 This chocolate brown sister  
 was finer than a motherfucker.  
 She could put fear  
 in a pit bull,  
 made Bruce Lee flee,  
 knocked out Frazier and Ali,  
 then ran Money Mayweather  
 up a sycamore tree.  
 With a mind like Einstein  
 and a truly...  
 ...luscious behind,  
 that gal put  
 gap-goody hurting  
 on all mankind.

Dolmedes's elegantly poetic lines, structured as metered and rhymed verse, link the classical Greek tradition of Aristophanes with the modern Black language of South Side Chicago through playful and parallelistic references to African American identity. The monologue is performed with African American Vernacular phonology. The series of boastful toasts frame it as African American verbal art with their explicit reference to, and play on, Signifyin(g) Monkey and Shine folklore (Gates 1988). And Dolmedes asserts an African American stance on racial politics by juxtaposing cultural heroes, like Muhammed Ali, Foxy Brown, and Beyoncé Knowles, to bogeymen of recent racial conflict, George Zimmerman and Darren Wilson.<sup>3</sup>

Dolmedes thus establishes play that is "most serious and deep" in Sherzer's terms. The linguistic play (using verse for character dialogue in a narrative film; comparing Black Vernacular to Classical Greek) facilitates cultural play, as the film announces its allegorical intent. Indeed, the multiple presences of Signifyin(g)—as the verbal play Dolmedes produces and as the folkloric tradition Dolmedes refers to—suggests a reading of *Chi-Raq* itself as Signifyin(g) on Lysistrata, on the Western literary canon, and perhaps mainstream American culture. As Henry Louis Gates (1988) argues, Signifyin(g) is not just a form of verbal play: it stands also for a black theory of language that is based on the doubling of the voice, the overlaying of evaluative commentary on informative report, and the constant revision of prior texts.

*Chi-Raq* the movie also Signifies on the conventions of narrative cinema by playing with notions of realism and authenticity. The film careens, for example, between sequences shot with gripping realism and those bathed in farce, and it blurs boundaries between reality and fiction through choices of character and cast. The character Father Mike Corridan, for example, a white activist priest ministering to a black Chicago congregation, is flamboyantly modeled on the real-life Chicago figure,

Father Michael Pflieger, a white activist priest who ministers to a black Chicago congregation. Lee uses the real Pflieger's real voice in the title sequence to foreshadow, and ironize, the fictional Corridan's subsequent fictional sermon (which plays a significant structural role in the film). Similarly, several of the film's characters are played by people who have real-life connections to the film's message: Several actual bereaved mothers play bereaved mothers, including actor Jennifer Hudson (cast as Irene), who herself "lost her mother, brother, and nephew in a shooting in 2008" (Melis 2015). Nonprofessional actor Eric Wilkins, himself a paraplegic and "real-life victim of gang violence" (Brody 2015), is cast as a paraplegic victim of gang violence with a central role in the film. This Signifyin(g) reaches its maximum complexity in the character Dolmedes (played by Samuel L. Jackson), since the character name refers to the Blaxploitation film, *Dolemite*, and its eponymous protagonist, played in 1975 by Rudy Ray Moore, who is himself famous for performing Signifying Monkey and Shine stories (Dargis 2015; Munby 2007).

Sherzer's focus on moments of play and artistry rewards most when we look at filmic speech (dialogue) in Lee's *Chi-Raq*. The film starts, as *New Yorker* film critic Richard Brody (2016) notes, with a playful focus on language: "In the beginning is the word—a song . . . about gun violence in Chicago that plays on the soundtrack, accompanied by a black screen on which [the] lyrics pop up, and a sermon on the same subject by Father Michael Pflieger." Lee calls attention to language by doubling it: we hear the lyrics as auditory words, and we also see them as visual words "plastered in blood red across a black screen" (Melis 2015). The film transcribes these lyrics for us as we hear them, cascading down the screen in groups of four (Figure 1), indexing Aristophanes's stanzas. This pointed juxtaposition of spoken and written language calls attention to the posited homology of (Greek) metered verse and Black-styled rhythms, rhymes, words, and sounds drawn from hip-hop rap music and African American folkloric traditions.

Striking about the visual words—in a film that adapts the classic Greek literary tradition—is their play on conventions of writing. The titles employ eye-dialect (Preston 1982; Minnick 2006), a convention of writing that uses departures from normative spellings, not so much to represent how a word is actually uttered, as to call attention to the utterance's status as nonstandard, as the line "Please PRAY 4 My City" shows. Similarly, the sung-and-written line "Cuz Dis Chi-Raq and My City Lost" uses orthographic "d" to stand for nonstandardness in general, a connection repeated playfully, and almost obsessively, throughout the film's visual words, as in Figure 2.

Lee also plays with, the presence of versified language. While characters speak in verse in general, Lee harnesses this signifier (aesthetic vs. ordinary speech) to a signification (its meaning within the film's rhetoric). Lee establishes a hierarchy of poeticality (cf. Lefkowitz 2000) among his characters. All characters speak in verse at times, but the speech of Dolmedes (Samuel L. Jackson's pseudo-narrator) is most frequently and insistently poetic, while that of Father Michael Corridan is most insistently plain. Several characters also shift between versified and ordinary speech.

Father Mike Corridan's eulogy for Patti (the young girl killed by a gang bullet) forms the film's pivotal sequence, but his speech is unmetred. The sermon, a genre powerfully associated with poetic flourish in African American religious communities, is—in a film where speech is verse—delivered without meter or rhyme.<sup>4</sup> Instead of verse, Lee has Corridan express direct political commentary, linking the tragic death of a young girl to larger contexts of capitalist greed, discriminatory housing policies, and white racism. Corridan's sermon stands out for its plainness—plain in being direct, explicit, truthful, nonsignifying.

As if to highlight the ordinariness of speech, Lee's camera suddenly moves poetically. In a striking departure from normative cinematic editing, Lee filmically repeats three of Corridan's lines toward the end of the sermon:

- "You cannot murder our children,"
- "We will not allow this self-inflicted genocide to continue," and
- "This is a disgrace."



Figure 1. Visual Representation of Stanzas in Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015).

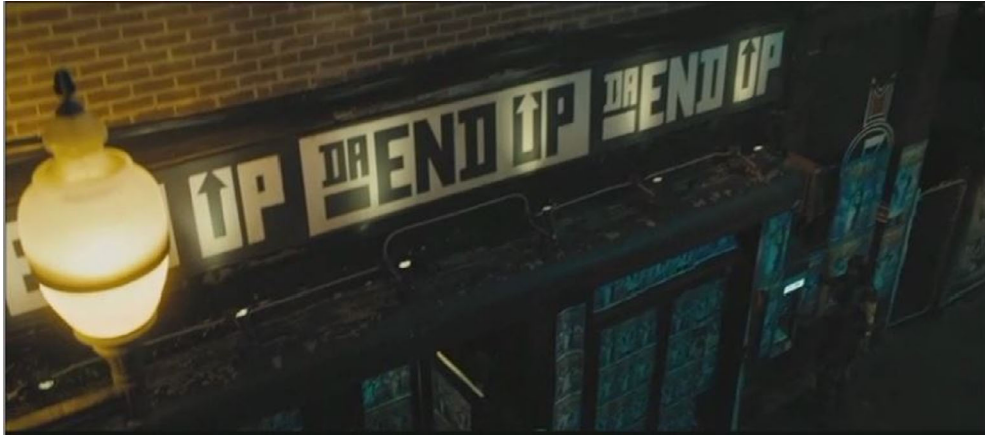


Figure 2. Eye-Dialect in Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015).



Figure 3. a, b. "You cannot murder our children."

One can discern that it's the camera (and not the diegetic speaker) authorizing this repetition because of the uncanny resemblance between the two dramatically different versions of the same line. The identical audio is played over identical arm motions and body orientations—but these are shown from dramatically different camera positions, as Figures 3–5 show. The effect is to juxtapose the artful camera to the artless preacher, as he delivers what the film constructs as trenchantly true discourse.

The puzzle created by this cinematic revision calls attention to other places in the film where artful discourse is juxtaposed to artless, revealing a pattern of plain, non-versified speech corresponding to a speaker's authentic voice. Moments when speakers appear to dispense with their public personas and their political slogans to reveal true feelings, or poignant memories, are related in this film in a plainspoken form of AAVE-inflected speech very different from the lyric of song or the verse of poetry.

A powerful example comes at the film's end. In the final scene, the entire community of characters, men and women, stand united against gang leader (and apparent source of the gunshot that killed Patti) Chi-Raq, exhorting him to abandon gang violence. Chi-Raq stands obstinate in refusal, then moves to leave, only to be blocked by a group of bereaved mothers carrying pictures of their murdered children. One of them, Miss Helen, steps forward, confronts Chi-Raq, and tells this story:<sup>5</sup>

This is my Pam.  
 She is 10 years old.  
 ...  
 One summer day  
 back when we lived in the Cabrini-Green Projects,  
 Pam was outside,  
 jumpin Double Dutch,  
 when they started shooting.  
 She was shot through her left eye,

by a stray bullet.  
 This was over 20 years ago.  
 And children dying,  
 from stray bullets  
 wasn't a common occurrence like it is today.  
 Days later, a young man came to my apartment, and he begged ... my forgiveness.  
 Then he confessed to the police.  
 Back then,  
 it was a violation of the gang code,  
 to murder children.  
 He knew—  
 He knew,  
 if he didn't confess to me and the police, that the gangs,  
 would end his life.  
 That man was your father.  
 Jamel.

Miss Helen is a prominent character in the film, one who has spoken in metered and rhymed verse throughout, making this departure quite salient. Her narrative is eloquent, but it does not rhyme, nor does it follow a marked meter. Similarly, *Chi-Raq's* immediate response to Miss Helen's narrative—the film's climactic denouement, in which he confesses to killing Patti—is delivered in plain-spoken style without rhyme or meter.<sup>6</sup>

While much of the critical attention given to Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* has focused on its theme of the women's sex strike, the film itself credits the power of authentic words, the unadorned words of everyday vernacular speech, with redemptive power. It is not the salacious sex strike that brings *Chi-Raq* to confess his error and to abandon gang life, nor is it Father Corridan's true discourse; it is rather the hearing of Miss Helen's words. This filmic rhetoric is powerfully conveyed through the film's meaningful indexing of artistic and ordinary forms of speech to different thematic ideas, and the film's play among these forms of speech, establishing uncanny points of connection that open up the space in Lee's cinematic universe for the conscious reflection on identity, positionality, and ethical ideas.

Joel Sherzer's discourse-centered approach to the language/culture/society nexus, with its nuanced attention to the significance of language that plays with linguistic and cultural forms while performing them in aesthetically motivated structures of parallelism, helps us understand not only the way that people use language to negotiate identities in face-to-face interaction, but also the power of media, such as film, to both represent and construct reality as members of society perceive and mold it.

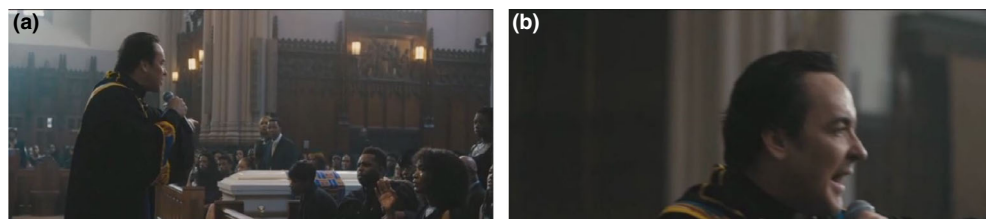


Figure 4. a, b. "We will not allow this self-inflicted genocide to continue."



Figure 5. a, b. "This is a disgrace."

## Notes

1. McWilliams is referring specifically to Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*.
2. Transcripts of dialogue from the film are modifications (by the author's transcription) of the online script published for this film at [https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie\\_script.php?movie=chi-raq](https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=chi-raq). In this transcription rhyming words are highlighted to emphasize the poetic structuring.
3. Darren Wilson is the white policeman who shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and George Zimmerman is the Florida vigilante who escaped prosecution after killing Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black man, in 2012.
4. It is interesting to note that in many other films, including, for example, *Red Hook Summer* (2012), Lee gives black preachers elocutionary elegance.
5. This transcription departs from the published online script by identifying lines with the prosodic structure of how the words were actually performed by the actor.
6. Interestingly, this short nonversified utterance is then juxtaposed to Chi-Raq's subsequent (and final) words: Handcuffed by the police and striding directly toward the camera, Chi-Raq returns to rhymed lines in speaking to his fellow gang members, exhorting them to "bring the truth."

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