

Textual Analysis Film: *Do The Right Thing* (1989)

Director: Spike Lee

Sequence Running Time: 00:50:55 - 00:55:55

Word Count: 1745

In this paper I will analyze an extract from Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989) that reflects the political, geographical, social, and economical situations through Lee's stylistic use of cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, and sound to communicate the dynamics of the characters in the cultural melting pot that is Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn in New York City. This extract manifests Lee's artistic visions that are prevalent in the film and are contemplative of Lee's personal experience of growing up in Brooklyn. "This evenhandedness that is at the center of Spike Lee's work" (Ebert) is evident through Lee's techniques and the equal attention given to the residents of this neighborhood to present a social realism cinema. Released almost thirty years ago, Lee's film continues to empower the need for social change today with the Black Lives Matter movement and was even called "'culturally significant' by the U.S. Library of Congress" (History).

Do The Right Thing takes place during the late 1980s in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn and unravels the "bigotry and violence" (Lee) in the neighborhood of a single summer day, specifically one of the hottest of the season. Being extremely socially conscious, *Do The Right Thing* illustrates the dangers of racism against African Americans and was motivated by injustices of the time--especially in New York--such as the death of Yusef Hawkins and the Howard Beach racial incident. Lee uses the narrative and character dynamics of the film to "recall the colonial aspects of a ghetto existence and the external constructions of blackness that circumscribe community and individual potential" (Hanson). *Do The Right Thing* juggles influences of Martin Luther King's belief in nonviolence and Malcolm X's support of nonviolence so long as it is effective, and leaves the viewer with the freedom to assess their beliefs respectively. The importance of the film is its unwavering portrayal of the complexity of strained racial tensions and its relevance today with movements like "Black Lives Matter". The segment chosen shows Radio Raheem with his symbol rings of "love" and "hate", the altercation between Raheem and Sal in the pizzeria, and Mookie going home for a quick shower. This segment is important as it encompasses Lee's film direction and portrays the racism he focuses on communicating.

Lee makes a social commentary on the state of the world in the beginning of the sequence where Radio Raheem, the victim of police brutality, shows off his four-finger rings that state in thick, gold letters "love" and "hate". Raheem's rings pay homage to Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* (1955), which are worn by Reverend Harry Powell. Here Lee possibly alludes that "Raheem becomes a kind of street preacher, sharing a biblical story with Mookie" (Powell).



Figure 1: POV shot of Radio Raheem with his gold rings.



Figure 2: POV shot with a dutch angle of Radio Raheem.

Raheem's rings are reflective of his observations of the racism, but also love present in the world.

This POV shot transitions into a dutch angle as Raheem recites his speech with passionate punches about the battle between love and hate in the world. Lee uses the dutch angle to communicate unrest and danger, as well as to foreshadow the “hate” demonstrated against African Americans when Raheem is killed by police. The scattering of dutch angles throughout the film illustrate “confrontational climaxes” and the “film’s bold non-conformity to realism” (Bellmore) proven by the dutch angle which transforms into a pan out of the POV perspective



Figure 3: Transition from POV shot to 90° pan rotation into a medium shot of Radio Raheem and Mookie.

into a medium shot helps to cool the burning unrest of the hot day. By returning to a medium

shot, Raheem's power deficiency is reminded as his speech is unable to change his status as a minority. The costume design choices of Raheem's rings are reflective of the hatred with racism, but also are a "part of a network of consumer goods which displace individual expression and re-present via shorthand material markers" (Johnson). Raheem, representative of African American youth, is subject to a materialistic stereotype through the rings in an attempt to gain social power while living with the economical inequalities of minorities and "exemplifies the notion that people are driven by the dollar in capitalistic America" (Lipman). The golden rings, a statement outfit piece, glisten in the saturated, warm color balance shots from the heat of the sun and capture the social unrest triggered by the heat that Lee constantly brings attention to.

Lee uses the interracial interactions between Sal, an Italian American, and Raheem, an African American, to show the racial disparity of African Americans in their own neighborhood. Lee's films including *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Malcolm X* (1992) can be characterized by his use of black music that "connote black production, artistry, and history" (Johnson). The diegetic appearance of the song "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy on Raheem's boombox is used to declare black power and as Tricia Rose describes, rap's "'confining rhythmic patterns and its aggressive presentation potentially assaults,' and the 'end of the song brings relief'" to the "white middle-class listener, who may feel threatened by rap's lyric and percussive demands" (Johnson). This is evident when Raheem enters Sal's Famous Pizzeria with "Fight the Power" disrupting the symbolic quiet of pizzeria.

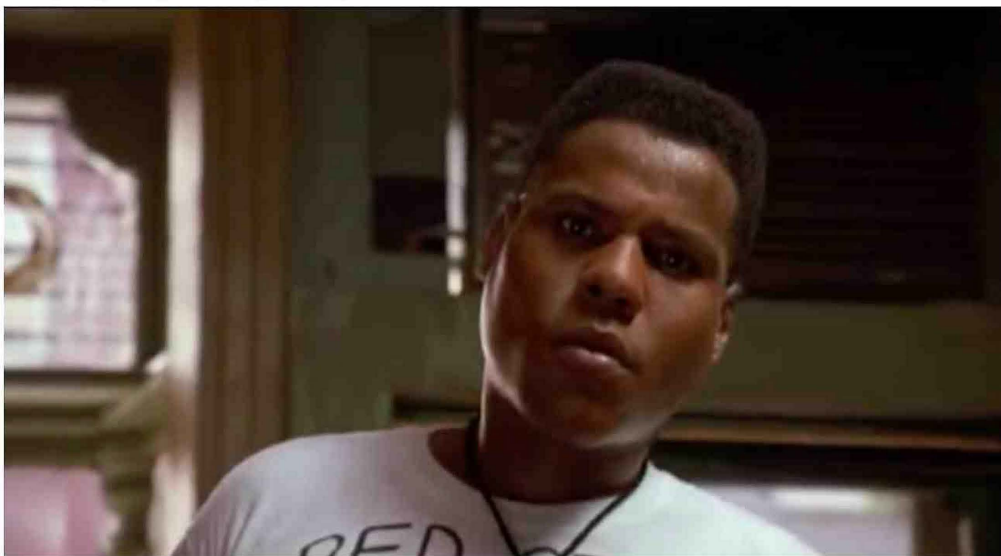


Figure 4: Low-angle shot of Radio Raheem in Sal's Famous Pizzeria.

The low-angle shot of Radio Raheem with the overpowering noise of his boombox demonstrates the power he gains through rap music. Raheem disrupts the authority of a white-owned pizzeria and the power of the boombox is shown through the high-angle shot of Sal.



Figure 5: Dutch angle, high-angle shot of Sal in his pizzeria yelling at Raheem.

Sal's distress is displayed through the canted framing as he yells for Raheem to turn off the boombox while Raheem keeps asking to be served a slice of pizza. The close up shots in the film are typically reserved for the heated exchange of words and tension between the characters and their racial clash. Just prior to the segment, Lee uses close up shots to focus on the racial slurs shouted by all the races, and forces the audience to face the offensive interactions.



Figure 6: Close up shots of the different races in the film while they shout racial slurs directed to each other but talk to the camera.

Figure 7: Close up shots from the five minute segment.



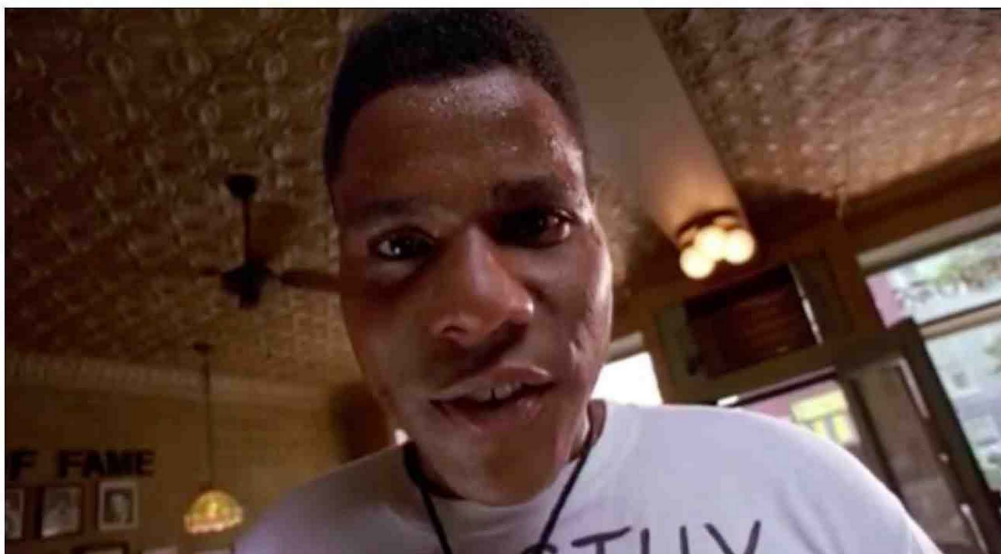


Figure 8: Canted position, low-angle close up shot of Raheem in the pizzeria.

Raheem's obtrusive presence is "offered as an intentional unapologetic swipe at racial stereotyping of the minstrel tradition and its vestige forms from the 1960s and 1970s" and Lee "challenges the power of past dominant voices to assign or deny value" (Hanson). The lighting in the close up shot of Raheem forces attention to his black features and the perspiration on his forehead is Lee's reminder of the heightened tensions as a result of the physically encumbering weather. Eventually, Raheem voluntarily turns off his boombox and this action is significant in showing how the black community is forced to suppress cultural expression in order to be served food, a necessary component of survival. In this way Lee criticizes the power the white stores hold over the black community by denying them food in their own neighborhood. The riot at the end of the film is Lee's agreement with Malcolm X's complaint "about the passivity of Black Americans" (Hanson) as demonstrated by Raheem's compliance. As Harold Looney, Jr. notes "rap music serves as a medium for young black males to talk back to the establishment" (Hanson). Radio Raheem's assertion and demonstration of cultural dominance through his boombox expresses Martin Luther King's nonviolent approach to equality despite the youth being faced with violent racism during the 1980s. While Sal keeps tight control over his pizzeria, he still looks fondly of the black community that has been raised on his pizza, and Danny Aiello, Sal, presents an interesting conflict with the director's intention by making Sal's character more than a simple racist, Lee's intention. Berys Gaut calls this conflict an "'artistically fruitful disagreement' that contributes to 'the film's richness and complexity'" (Flory).

The film uses majority high key lighting to further the heat, but also uses high-contrast lighting sparingly to heighten the effect of relief from the tensions of the day. The wide panning shot of Mookie on his way home is full of people and cars. The cluttering of the setting of the street shows high energy and loitering people on the hot day. Rather than having the cars driving down the street, Lee has the cars parked all along the street to show the stagnant, and laziness the heat causes. The bright costume design and set design reflect the warm toned color palette of the public spaces in the film: the street, Sal's pizzeria, and the Korean grocery store.

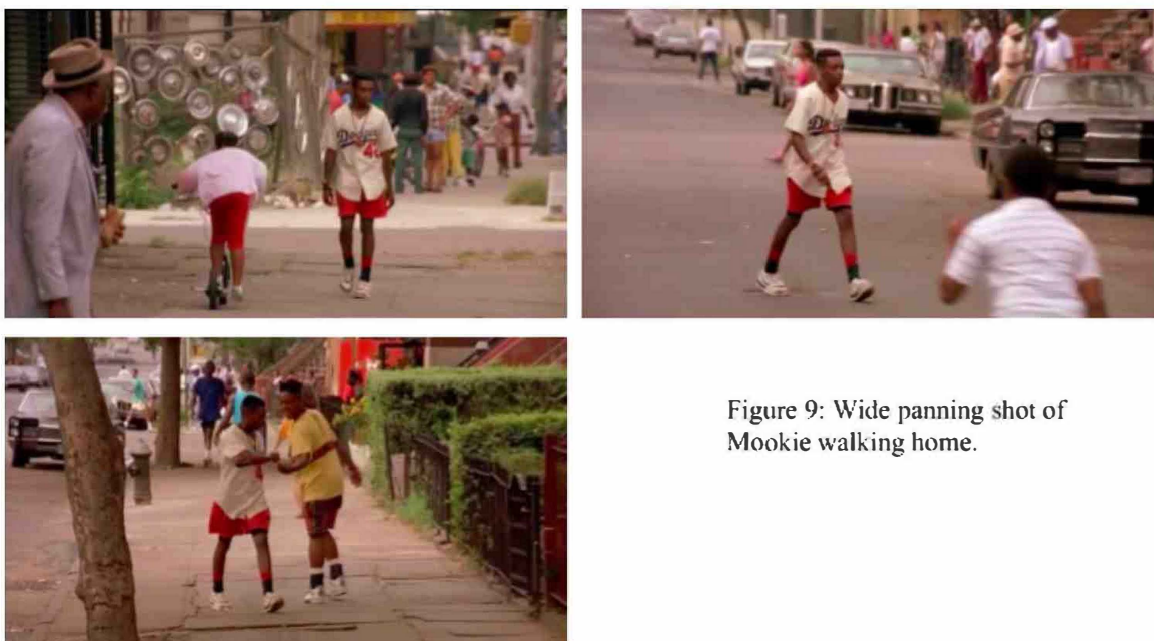


Figure 9: Wide panning shot of Mookie walking home.

The heat remains an important symbol and reminder in the film for the heightened sensitivity to physical discomforts, but to the intense racial injustice. Even on the hottest day, Mookie works in Sal's hot pizzeria to fulfill his obsession with getting paid throughout the film. Mookie's infatuation with earning money can be a result of black males who "were historically less able to find work than even black women, who were often employed as domestics, because black men were regarded as more threatening" (Hanson). To contrast the stereotype of the aggressive black male, Mookie remains one of the most passive characters in the film until the final riot scene where he acts on the injustices in the community. Once again, the black community, a minority, is constrained by an injustice capitalist country in a race to earn money

to survive, and in Mookie's case, paternal obligations. In form of protest, Mookie decides to go home to take a cold shower during working hours.



Figure 10: High-contrast, tightly framed shot of Mookie taking a shower during working hours.

The high-contrast lighting in Figure 10 shows the peacefulness of privacy and the cold water. The shaded shower shot allows a break from the hectic public spaces.



Figure 11: Opened fire hydrant on the street.

Like the fire hydrant earlier in the film, Lee's usage of the showerhead is used to soothe tensions intensified by the hot day. By taking a shower during working hours, Mookie refuses to be swallowed by the blistering heat and demands of his white boss, Sal. Lee's stylistic choices for this shot demonstrate how Mookie's rebellion at this point is limited within the walls of the tightly framed shower scene and his ill speaking of Sal is only left for the shower drain to swallow.

Lee's stylistic intentions provide a platform to communicate the complexity of racial tensions in the U.S. The film unraveling in the time span of one day brings dramatic attention to the number of racial injustices occurring daily for these minority groups and Lee speaks of the outrageous frequency of these events. Through the obtrusive film techniques Lee hones in on the social issues of Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn that is symbolic of all of America. Spike Lee unapologetically uses stereotypes and high-energy scenes to birth a story that goes beyond his original intentions and gives a multi-faceted demonstration of conflicts present thirty years after the release of the film.

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