

**Standing the Test of the Sign of the Times:  
An Analysis of Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing**

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## Action Analysis:

### Chain of External and Internal Events:

E-Sal, his sons, and Mookie **arrive** at the pizzeria.  
 I-An establishment of *hierarchy* of *business*.  
 E-Buggin' Out and Sal **argue** about the Wall of Fame.  
 I-Buggin' Out try to question authority.  
 E-Sal **kicks** Buggin' Out out of the pizzeria.  
 I-Sal upholds his *business*.  
 E-Buggin' Out **starts a boycott** of Sal's Famous Pizzeria.  
 I-Buggin' Out *challenges authority*.  
 E-Mookie **delivers** a pizza.  
 I-Mookie *passively makes money*.  
 E-Mookie **encounters** Da Mayor.  
 I-Da Mayor is a symbol of *decayed integrity*.  
 E-Hot, Hotter, and Hottest Montage.  
 I-The *tensions* continue to rise with the heat.  
 E-The people of the neighborhood **play** in the street.  
 I-Sign of a *healthy* neighborhood.  
 E-The people **encounter** the police.

I-The police alter the *healthy* mood.  
 E-The police **stop** the people playing.  
 I-The police change the *healthy* mood.  
 E-Mookie and Vito **deliver** a pizza to Mister Señor Love Daddy.  
 I-Mookie is *unmotivated* at his job so Vito tags along.  
 E-Mookie **dedicates** a song to Tina.  
 I-Mookie does *care* for his girl.  
 E-Radio Raheem **encounters** the Puerto Ricans.  
 I-Radio Raheem *expresses* his dominance.  
 E-Radio Raheem **bests** the Puerto Ricans with his boombox.  
 I-Radio Raheem is *successful*.  
 E-Buggin' Out **encounters** Clifton.  
 I-Buggin' Out is *challenged by authority*.  
 E-Buggin' Out **does not fight** Clifton.  
 I-Buggin' Out maintains *integrity*.  
 E-Da Mayor **encounters** Eddie.  
 I-A sign of a *broken* man.

E-Da Mayor **encounters** the teenagers.  
 I-Another sign of a *broken* man.  
 E-Da Mayor **argues** with the teenagers.  
 I-A sign of a *misunderstood* man.  
 E-Mookie **talks** to Tina on the phone.  
 I-Mookie *cares* for his girl.  
 E-Mookie and Pino **argue**.  
 I-Mookie *cares* for his community.  
 E-Racial Slur montage.  
 I-Sign of a *broken* dynamic within a community.  
 E-Mookie asks Sal to **pay** him.  
 I-Mookie just wants to *make money*.  
 E-Mookie **encounters** Radio Raheem.  
 I-A sign of a *healthy* dynamic.  
 E-Radio Raheem monologue.  
 I-Radio Raheem *expresses himself*.  
 E-Radio Raheem **encounters** Sal.  
 I-A challenge of Sal's *business*.  
 E-Radio Raheem and Sal **argue** about the boombox.  
 I-A challenge of Radio Raheem's *expression*.

E-Mookie encounters and **bickers** with Jade.

I-Mookie *cares* for his sister.

E-Pino **talks** to Sal about his complaints.

I-Pino is outwardly *racist*, Sal *hides* it.

E-Sal **encounters** and flirts with Jade.

I-Sal expresses *authority*.

E-Radio Raheem's boombox **runs out** of battery.

I-Radio Raheem loses a *sense of himself*.

E-Radio Raheem **encounters** and **bickers** with the Korean family.

I-A sign of a *disconnected* society.

E-Da Mayor **encounters** Mother Sister.

I-An example of a *broken* man *trying to heal*.

E-Da Mayor **saves** Eddie's life.

I-A further example of a man *trying to heal*.

E-Jade and Mookie **leave** the pizzeria and **argue** about Sal.

I-Mookie *cares* about his sister.

E-Mother Sister **thanks** Da Mayor for saving Eddie.

I-A broken man begins to *heal*.

E-Mookie **delivers** a pizza to Tina.

I-Mookie is *unmotivated* about his job again.

E-Mookie and Tina **argue** and quickly **make up**.

I-Mookie does *care* for Tina.

E-Vito and Pino **argue** about Mookie.

I-A question of a *disjointed* community and where priorities lie.

E-Hot City Night Montage.

I-A seemingly *cooling off* a community.

E-Radio Raheem **joins** Buggin' Out's boycott.

I-Radio Raheem stands up for his *identity*.

E-Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out **encounter** Sal and argue.

I-Standing up for the community's *integrity*.

E-Sal **smashes** Radio Raheem's boombox.

I-Sal stands up for his *business*.

E-Radio Raheem **attacks** Sal.

I-Radio Raheem stands up for his *self-expression*.

E-Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out **fight** Sal and his sons.

I-A culmination of two *opposing* forces in the *community*.

E-The police **arrive** at the pizzeria.

I-An *outside* force *disrupting* the community further.

E-The police **kill** Radio Raheem.

I-A total loss of *identity*.

E-Mookie **throws** a trash can through a pizzeria window.

I-Mookie *cares* about his community and *stops* being *passive*.

E-The people of the neighborhood **riot** and **loot** the pizzeria.

I-A neighborhood that's *angry* wants *revenge*.

E-The police **arrive** at the pizzeria again.

I-Another *disruption* of the community.

E-The police **try to stop** the mob.

I-This *outside force* can't *repair* a problem they caused.

E-Mookie **encounters** Sal the next morning.

I-A resolution of *opposing forces*.

E-Sal **pays** Mookie.

I-Mookie *makes his money*.

Reviewing the Facts:

- Sal, Mookie, and Buggin' Out seem to drive the plot more than the other characters. They all exist in this community, however, and the community and its dynamics seem to influence the actions of all the characters. The given circumstance of the heat of the day also negatively influences the characters emotions.

Seed & Super-Objective:

## Mookie:

- Seed: passive & unmotivated; unconditional love for his community
- Super-Objective: make money; take care of his people

## Sal:

- Seed: racism beneath the surface
- Super-Objective: run a business and make money in this run-down neighborhood

## Buggin' Out:

- Seed: pride in his heritage; expressive
- Super-Objective: heal the lack of integrity of his neighborhood, challenge authority

## Radio Raheem:

- Seed: prideful, Black
- Super-Objective: success and expressing himself

## Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant Neighborhood

- Seed: lack of integrity and social health, so to speak
- Super-Objective: improving the quality of the damaged neighborhood

Three Major Climaxes:

1. Sal smashes Radio Raheem's boombox.
2. The police kill Radio Raheem.
3. Mookie throws a trash can through the window of Sal's Famous Pizzeria.

Theme:

- A dissent that uncovers the deep-seated issues of a gentrified, struggling, multi-cultural community.

Through-Action & Counter Through-Action:

- Without a definitive protagonist and many different relationships, one could consider the integrity of the neighborhood itself the protagonist and the heat (which represents the racial climate of New York City) the antagonist. With this established, the heat gets hotter as the day goes on, which keeps the people of the neighborhood from trying to resolve their hatred for one another.

Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* takes a glimpse at a community on the brink of chaos. The screenplay only needs a singular day to explore a rise and a catastrophic fall of a Brooklyn neighborhood. Lee has a uniquely personal connection to this story in a variety of ways. For one thing, he wrote the screenplay and simultaneously directed the movie and played its leading role as Mookie. He was a jack of all trades, so to speak. Lee had to develop his own writing in his role as the director of the film. While a director definitely needs to have a solid understanding of practically every aspect of the script and the story, there are a few key points that are specific to the director. The director must have a deep understanding of the story's context and how and why the story chooses to explore its given circumstances. These details then lead into the overall progression of the plot. A director needs to understand the most effective ways to convey the messages and themes of the story. The structure and progression of the story plays a big role in how the audience will receive and absorb the film. Finally, a director needs a good sense of the tempo and rhythm of each scene in the story. A good story uses different types of flow to convey a certain mood to an audience to enhance the action of a scene. Lee's unique connection to each facet of this story's creation allowed him to maintain a strong cohesiveness throughout the movie. He utilizes each character and each scene to point towards a bigger, more universal idea. *Do the Right Thing* is not just a story about one singular neighborhood having a "bad" day. It represents a recurring problem across hundreds of years that Americans from all ethnicities are presented with on a daily basis. A good director can make a complex story like this one easy to follow without simplifying or damaging the integrity of the story. The story's circumstances and context, its progression throughout the movie, and how each scene flows to convey emotion and meaning are each vital considerations a director must adhere to in order to effectively tell a story as complex and necessary as *Do the Right Thing*.

The key conflict in this screenplay comes from Sal's original decision to open a pizza place in a neighborhood that he does not live in because his own neighborhood has too many pizza places. This key piece of given circumstance comes relatively late in the screenplay. Pino tells his father that he is sick of dealing with the Black people in this neighborhood. He says, "my friends laugh at me all the time, laugh right in my face" (50). Pino outwardly expresses his racism and prejudice throughout the entire story. From the audience's perspective, Pino's character is pretty one-dimensional up until this point. The audience only knows that he is an angry antagonist, but here they realize that he is angry because he is embarrassed of his family's situation. The audience also knows that the people of this neighborhood grew up on Sal's pizza. As a director, these details are pivotal in emphasizing that this pizzeria is an integral part of everyone's view of the economy of this block, for better or for worse. Sal inconspicuously hides his prejudice's when he replies to Pino's complaints with, "I've never had no trouble with dese people" (51). On its surface, this phrase is harmless. A closer look reveals how Sal also considers himself an "other" in a very similar, but less apparent, way that Pino does. As the director, I would use this conversation and the given circumstances it reveals to show the different ways this Italian family deals with the fact that they are in the minority in this community.

Another example of this "other" mentality comes during the scene where Clifton, a White man, accidentally scuffs Buggin' Out's Jordan sneakers that he just bought. This already heated moment escalates when Clifton reveals that he owns a brownstone apartment on the block. A director chooses to use this given circumstance to amplify Buggin' Out's anger toward Clifton. He exclaims, "who told you to buy a brownstone on my block, in my neighborhood on my side of the street?" (31). Buggin' Out explains his frustrations with the widespread issue of gentrification in predominantly Black neighborhoods across America through this particular

interaction. As the director, I would choose to include this scene because even though it is not particularly necessary to the progression of the plot, its inclusion is necessary in broadening the issues of this block. It adds to Buggin' Out's character development and gives some more backbone to his frustrations within his community. It also shows that there are other examples of people of different ethnicities coming into this neighborhood and succeeding other than Sal's Famous Pizzeria and the Korean family's store. The issue of gentrification is growing. Buggin' Out just chooses not to carry out his frustration with this subject with Clifton in particular. He says, "If I wasn't a righteous Black man you'd be in serious trouble. SERIOUS" (32). Although Buggin' Out is potentially the most brash character in this story, he knows when he must pick his battles wisely. This scene may feel disjointed from the main plot to a viewer, but I would include this scene to also provide some foreshadowing for what Buggin' Out might do if he is pushed far enough. Lee uses scenes like this one to paint a bigger picture of the world he wants the audience to enter. As the director, it is important to include these "slices of life" to fulfill Lee's intentions.

The most prominent given circumstance that Lee relentlessly hammers into the head of the screenplay's readers is the temperature of this particular Brooklyn summer day. Radio DJ Mister Señor Love Daddy sets the stage with an introduction and the day's forecast: "(he screams) HOT!" (2). This exclamation is directly followed by Da Mayor's introduction and his first words of the story, "damn, it's hot" (2). Lee outwardly tells the audience this specific detail from the very beginning. A director can further emphasize this point by focusing on the sweat stained sheets of Da Mayor or having the very first shot of Señor Love Daddy's lips be glossy from sweat. This would visually add to the already repetitive mentioning of the extreme heat. Practically every initial interaction of this screenplay includes a line stating how hot this day will be. A good director should notice this and incorporate this detail in any way he can throughout

the movie. For example, this could come from the “HOT, HOTTER AND HOTTEST MONTAGE” where people put their faces in an icy sink of water or stick their faces in the refrigerator (21). Also, a director can choose music that coincides with the sentiment of the people, like what Lee does in the actual movie when he uses Steel Pulse’s “Can’t Stand It” throughout the montage. Overall, the repetitive mention of this given circumstance is not purely just a scene-setting mechanism. Spike Lee said himself, "I knew I wanted the film to take place in one day, which would be the hottest day in the summer. And I wanted to reflect the racial climate of New York City at that time. The day would get longer and hotter, and things would escalate until they exploded." This circumstance plays into the structure of this entire story. It helps visually and subconsciously move the story along in a way that gradually increases in intensity and uncomfortability.

Lee organized his script in a very unique way. He somehow both adheres to a typical linear structure as the story progresses throughout a singular day while also skipping between disconnected interactions between characters. Many of these interactions do not stick to the most prominent plotline that is Buggin’ Out’s conflict with Sal. Lee also interspersed his script with different monologues that interrupt the tempo of the normal plot. For example, Radio Raheem turns a conversation with Mookie into a story about his new brass knuckles that brandish the words LOVE on the right hand and HATE on the left. He gives a rendition of “the story of Life” and concludes with the line: “Left Hand Hate KO’ed by Love” (46). This short monologue or speech provides lots of imagery and poetry. Radio physically personifies his brass knuckles as well as the words LOVE and HATE to tell an entertaining story that reveals a key theme of the screenplay. It also gives Radio a chance to show some character and personality. As the director, I would do something similar to what Lee did in the actual movie. As Radio begins his story,

Radio turns to the camera so the audience shares the same point of view as Mookie. This makes the story feel much more engaging and intimate. Another more jarring example of this comes from a group of characters, each from a different ethnicity. Each character aggressively hurls racist slurs at another ethnicity. This intense shift in mood and tempo paired with Lee's direction that "each person looks directly INTO THE CAMERA" is meant to make the audience extremely uncomfortable (43). This sequence is meant to drive home the racial tension in the neighborhood. It also adds to the narrative structure by including the feelings of more minor characters. This further shows how this screenplay strays from the typical protagonist-driven method where the complete story revolves around one person. Lee uses scenes like this to simultaneously show the division between the people in the community and highlight their ironically similar sentiments. A storm is brewing in the neighborhood. All these people need is an excuse to release their pent-up anger.

The day becomes night in this Brooklyn and the worst is yet to come. Instead of one definitive climax, this culmination of heat and pressure explodes throughout three separate climactic moments. Buggin' Out gets Radio Raheem to join his loud, but thus far unsuccessful, boycott of Sal's Famous Pizzeria. The pair enters the pizzeria at closing time. Lee notes that we have not heard the rap song, the same one that Radio Raheem continuously plays on his boombox throughout the story, as loud as it is now. So much so that "you have to scream to be heard and that's what they do" (77). This addition to the description of this scene is pretty easy to translate to the screen. Lee does not specify which song Radio plays non-stop in the screenplay, but if I was the director, I would hope to pick a song as fitting as Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" that Lee chooses for the actual movie. Aside from the song choice, a piercingly loud song that forces the characters to yell for the entire conversation perfectly sets the scene for what

is inevitably going to ensue. It forces tensions to start off at a very high level and matches the anger of Buggin' Out and Sal's argument. The goal of the director in this moment is to make the audience so uncomfortable that they pray for a release or a break in tension. Unfortunately, the release that does come marks the beginning of a total digression into chaos. Sal destroys Radio Raheem's boombox with his Mickey Mantle baseball bat (78). This climax is a reversal because this is the first outward instance of Sal expressing his anger and racism. It is also a catastrophe as Lee notes that this is "Radio Raheem's prized possession - his box, the only thing he owned of value - his box, the one thing that gave him any sense of worth - his box" (78). In this scene direction, Lee writes in a way that cannot be directly translated to the screen. He instead writes what the audience should be feeling at this moment. A director must show this sense of loss by focusing on Radio Raheem and his emotions. A close-up shot could really capture that. Also, giving the characters, as well as the audience, some empty space that slows down the tempo allows them to process what Sal did and what his action represents. This concludes the first of the three major climaxes.

For the end of that long beat, the director must show that shift in Radio Raheem from shock to rage. Lee describes this shift in through this double entendre that potentially foreshadows the following sequence: "Now he doesn't give a fuck anymore. He's gonna make Sal pay with his life" (78). The double entendre comes with the use of he/him/his pronouns in that second sentence. The second "his" could be Sal, or it could be Radio Raheem himself, which would be foreshadowing. Regardless, the scene progresses into the second of the three big climactic moments. A big fight between Sal and his sons and Radio and Buggin' Out moves out into the street outside the pizzeria (79). The police eventually arrive after everyone in the neighborhood gathers around the scene, which increases the intensity. The scene plays out

similarly to the last; this time ending in the catastrophic and shocking death of Radio Raheem himself. Now, everyone is in disbelief. The mob of people rhythmically expresses the emotions of the crowd when they repeat “MURDER” and “IT’S NOT SAFE” (81). These repetitive murmurs begin the building anger that is bubbling within the crowd. It also shows that this isn’t new for them. Lee even specifically writes that “the mood/tone of the mob is getting ugly” (81). A director needs to show what the scene would look like in a case where these people all just witnessed an unjust and ruthless murder, especially since many members of the crowd are close friends of Radio Raheem. This could be achieved through large group shots as well as close-ups of shocked faces, all showing that the people need a release.

Mookie, who was earlier classified as an “impartial observer” realizes this (77). He decides to go against his passive characteristics and act. He “picks up a garbage can and dumps it out into the street” before he walks up to the pizzeria and throws it through the window (82). Lee adds the small detail of Mookie dumping out the trash to slow down the tempo of his action. The audience should notice Mookie in this moment. The director must tell the actor who plays Mookie, which in this case is Lee himself, that he must make very calculated and slow movements to emphasize that this is not an erratic decision. He must really show his recognition and his thought process before reaching the conclusion that this is the right thing to do in this situation. Also, Mookie eventually throwing the trash can through Sal’s Famous Pizzeria is specified to be in slow motion (82). Lee really wants to emphasize the climactic nature of this event before everything descends into the final catastrophe. A director can easily add this in post-production.

The next few pages of the screenplay describe the destructive mob unleashing their anger on Sal’s Famous Pizzeria. Lee says, “the dam has been unplugged, broke,” and “the rage of a

people has been unleashed, a fury” (82). The tempo matches the belligerent emotions of the characters. A director would use quick cuts and erratic camera movements to match the energy of the mob. The audience will have barely any time to process anything that is happening. All they can do is sit back while the derailed train continues to speed on.

At the very end of the riot scene, as flames continue to engulf Sal’s Famous Pizzeria, Lee specifically writes for the director to have the camera simply pan across the wreckage without any dialogue. He slows the tempo to focus on specific objects, such as Sal’s baseball bat and Radio Raheem’s boombox. When it focuses on the box, “all other sound drops out as the rap song gets louder and louder until it gets deafening, then we cut to black” (86-87). Even the conclusion to this hectic scene ends with a build-up like the two aforementioned climaxes. This sudden ending stuns the audience. The rhythm of the scene abruptly halts, leaving only a black screen to reflect on the events that just occurred.

Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* resolves without much resolution. Sal will get his insurance money and move out of the neighborhood (90). Mookie will go on with his life and continue to “make dat money. Get paid” (92). Most importantly, however, Radio Raheem is still dead and the block is “ready to deal once again with the heat of the hottest day of the year” (93). The ending circles back to its original main given circumstance to show the perpetual nature of this community. Lee also effectively presents other given circumstances that reflect reality, which makes the story even more relatable and resonating. From an artistic point of view, Lee utilizes a unique structure and rhythmic progression with great tempo and energy to match the emotions of the characters. Additionally, the lack of a central, influential protagonist allows the audience to get a broad view of each dynamic within this Brooklyn neighborhood. The story bounces back and forth between interactions to reveal recurring issues and to paint a full picture

of a complex society. The audience needs to see this world through multiple perspectives. Lee did a great job reflecting this sense from the paper to the screen as a director. For better or for worse, each character is an integral part of the community. This story isn't about just this one community, however. The constant mention of African Americans who lost their lives to police brutality takes this story beyond a specific neighborhood and further than just one summer day. Over 30 years later, America has yet to resolve their deepest issues. It is not just a coincidence that this story plays out in an eerily similar way to Eric Garner's death in 2014 and George Floyd's in 2020. These instances of brutality and death are the product of a country that continues to operate on the same broken system. Maybe Spike Lee knew all along that this story would be relevant for many decades down the road. The fact that the screenplay begins with its second title card broadly noting, "TIME: Present" does seem to suggest that dismal reality (1).