Roger does, and this generates suspense when she walks out . . . and returns with a pistol aimed at him.

The third subsegment takes place outdoors. Eve is about to get in the plane when a pistol shot distracts the spies’ attention long enough for her to grab the statue and race to the car Roger has stolen. This portion of the sequence confines us to Eve’s range of knowledge, accentuating it with shots from her optical POV. The pattern of surprise interrupting a period of suspense—here, Roger’s escape from the house interrupting Eve’s tense walk to the plane—will dominate the rest of the sequence.

The last portion of the sequence depicts the chase across the presidents’ faces on Mount Rushmore. Some crosscutting informs us of the spies’ progress in following the couple, but on the whole, the narration restricts us to what Eve and Thornhill know. As usual, some moments are heightened by optical POV shots, as when Eve watches Roger and Valerian roll down what seems to be a sheer drop. At the climax, Eve is dangling over the edge while Roger is clutching one of her hands and Leonard grinds his foot into Roger’s other hand. It is a classic, not to say clichéd, situation of suspense. Again, however, the narration reveals the limits of our knowledge. A rifle shot cracks out and Leonard falls to the ground. The Professor has arrived and captured Van Damm, and a marksman has shot Leonard. Once more, a restricted range of knowledge has enabled the narration to spring a surprise on the audience.

The same effect gets magnified at the very end. In a series of optical POV shots, Roger pulls Eve up from the brink. But this gesture is made continuous, in both sound and image, with that of him pulling her up to a train bunk. The narration ignores the details of their rescue in order to cut short the suspense of Eve’s plight. Such a self-conscious transition is not completely out of place in a film that has taken time for offhand jokes. (During the opening credits, Hitchcock himself is shown being shut out of a bus. As Roger strides into the Plaza Hotel, about to be plunged into his adventure, the Muzak is playing “It’s a Most Unusual Day.”) This concluding twist shows once again that Hitchcock’s moment-by-moment manipulation of our knowledge yields a constantly shifting play between the probable and the unexpected, between suspense and surprise.

Do The Right Thing


At first viewing, Spike Lee’s Do The Right Thing, with its many brief, disconnected scenes, restlessly wandering camera, and large number of characters without goals might not seem a classical narrative film. And, indeed, in some ways, it does depart from classical usage. Yet it has the redundantly clear action and strong forward impetus to the plot that we associate with classical filmmaking. It also fits into a familiar genre of American cinema—the social problem film. Moreover, closer analysis reveals that Lee has also drawn on many traits of classicism to give an underlying unity to this apparently loosely constructed plot.

Do The Right Thing takes place in the predominantly African-American Bedford–Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn during a heat wave. Sexual and racial tensions rise as Mookie, an irresponsible pizza delivery man, tries to get along with his Puerto Rican girlfriend, Tina, and with his Italian American boss, Sal. An elderly drunk, Da Mayor, sets out to ingratiate himself with his sharp-tongued neighbor, Mother Sister. An escalating quarrel between Sal and two customers, Buggin’ Out and Radio Raheem, leads to a fight in which Radio Raheem is killed by police. A riot ensues, and Sal’s pizzeria is burned.
Do The Right Thing has many more individual sequences than, say, His Girl Friday, with its neatly delineated 13 scenes (p. 385). Even lumping together some of the very briefest scenes, there are at least 42 segments. Laying out a detailed segmentation of Do The Right Thing might be useful for another analysis, but here we want to concentrate on how Lee weaves his many scenes into a whole.

One important means of unifying the film is its setting. The entire narrative is played out on one block in Bedford–Stuyvesant. Sal’s Famous Pizzeria and the Korean market opposite create a spatial anchor at one end of the block, and much of the action takes place there. Other scenes are played out in or in front of the brownstone buildings that line most of the rest of the street. Encounters among members of this neighborhood provide the causality for the narrative.

To match the limited setting, the action takes place in a restricted time frame—from one morning to the next. Structuring a film around a brief slice of the life of a group of characters is rare but not unknown in American filmmaking, as with Street Scene, Dead End, American Graffiti, Nashville, and Magnolia.

The radio DJ Mister Señor Love Daddy provides a running motif that also binds the film’s events together. He appears in close-up in the first shot of the opening scene, and this initial broadcast provides important information about the setting and the weather—a heat wave that intensifies the characters’ tensions and contributes to the final violent outbreak. As the DJ speaks, the camera tracks slowly out and cranes up to reveal the street, still empty in the early morning. At intervals throughout the film, Mister Señor Love Daddy also provides commentary on the action, as when he tells a group of characters spewing racist diatribes to “chill out.” The music he plays creates sound bridges between otherwise unconnected scenes, since the radios in different locations are often tuned to his station. The end of the film echoes the beginning, as the camera tracks with Mookie in the street and we hear the DJ’s voice giving a similar spiel to the one on the previous morning, then dedicating the final song to the dead Radio Raheem.

As the setting and the use of the neighborhood radio station suggest, Do The Right Thing centers more on the community as a whole than on a few central characters. On the one hand, there are older traditions that are worth preserving, represented by the elderly characters: the moral strength of the matriarch Mother Sister, the decency and courage of Da Mayor, the wit and common sense of the three chatting men—ML, Sweet Dick Willie, and Coconut Sid. On the other hand, the younger people need to create a new community spirit by overcoming sexual and racial conflict. The women are portrayed as trying to make the angry young African American men more responsible. Tina pressures Mookie to pay more attention to her and to their son: Jade lectures both her brother Mookie and the excitable Buggin’ Out, telling the latter he should direct his energies toward doing “something positive in the community.” The emphasis on community is underscored by the fact that most of the characters address one another by their nicknames.

One of the main conflicts in the film arises when Sal refuses to add some pictures of African American heroes to his “Hall of Fame” photo gallery of Italian Americans. Sal might have become a sort of elder statesman in the community, where he has run his pizzeria for 25 years. He seems to like the kids who eat his pizza, but he also views the restaurant as entirely his domain, emphatically declaring that he’s the boss. Thus he reveals his lack of real integration into the community and ends by goading the more hot-headed elements into attacking him.

In creating its community, Do The Right Thing includes an unusually large number of characters for a classical film. Again, however, a closer examination shows that only eight of them provide the main causal action: Mookie, Tina, Sal, Sal’s son Pino, Mother Sister, Da Mayor, Buggin’ Out, and Radio Raheem. The others, intriguing or amusing as they may be, are more peripheral, mainly reacting to the action set in motion by these characters’ conflicts and goals. (Some modern American screenwriting manuals recommend seven to eight important characters as
the maximum for a clearly comprehensible film, so Lee is not departing from tradition as much as it might seem.) Moreover, the main causal action falls into two related lines, as in traditional Hollywood films: One involves the community’s relations to Sal and his sons; the other deals with Mookie’s personal life. Mookie becomes the pivotal figure, linking the two lines of action.

*Do The Right Thing* also departs from classical narrative conventions in some ways. Consider the characters’ goals. Usually, the main characters of a film formulate clear-cut, long-range goals that bring them into conflict with one another. In *Do The Right Thing*, most of the eight main characters create goals only sporadically; the goals are sometimes introduced fairly late in the film, and some are vague.

Buggin’ Out, for example, demands that Sal put up pictures of some black heroes on the pizzeria wall. When Sal refuses and throws him out, Buggin’ Out shouts to the customers to boycott Sal’s. Yet a little while later, when he tries to persuade his neighbors to participate in the boycott, they all refuse, and his project seems to sputter out. Then, later in the film, Radio Raheem and the mentally retarded Smiley agree to join him. Their visit to the pizzeria to threaten Sal then precipitates the climactic action. Ironically, Buggin’ Out’s goal is briefly achieved when Smiley puts a photograph of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. on the wall of the burning pizzeria—but by that point, Buggin’ Out is on his way to jail.

Mookie’s goal is hinted at when we first see him. He is counting money, and he constantly emphasizes that he just wants to work and get paid. His repeated reference to the fact that he is due to be paid in the evening creates the film’s only appointment, helping to emphasize the compressed time scheme. Yet his purpose remains unclear. Does he simply want the money so that he can move out of his sister’s apartment, as she demands? Or does he also plan to help Tina care for their son?

Sal’s goal is similarly vague—to keep operating his pizzeria in the face of rising tensions. Da Mayor articulates one of the few really clear-cut goals in the film when he tells Mother Sister that someday she will be nice to him. After he persistently acts courteously and bravely, she does in fact relent and become his friend. Sal’s virulently racist son Pino has a goal—trying to convince his father that they should sell the pizzeria and get out of the black neighborhood. Perhaps he will get his desire at the end, although the narrative leaves open the question of whether Sal will rebuild.

In traditional classical films, clear-cut goals generate conflict, since the characters’ desires often clash. Lee neatly reverses this pattern by playing down goals but creating a community that is full of conflict from the very beginning of the film. Racial and sexual arguments break out frequently, and insults fly. Such conflict is tied to the fact that *Do The Right Thing* is a social problem film. Its didactic message gives it much of its overall unity. Everything that happens relates to a central question: With the community riven with such tensions, what can be done to heal it?

The characters’ goals and actions suggest some of the possible ways of reacting to the situation. Some of the characters desire simply to avoid or escape this tense atmosphere—Pino by leaving the neighborhood, Da Mayor by overcoming Mother Sister’s animosity. Mookie attempts to stay out of trouble by not siding with either Sal or his black friends in their escalating quarrel; only the death of Radio Raheem drives him to join in, and indeed initiate, the attack on Sal’s pizzeria.

Other characters attempt to solve their problems. One central goal is Tina’s desire to get Mookie to behave more responsibly and spend time with her and with their child. There is a suggestion at the end that she may be succeeding to some extent. Mookie gets his pay from Sal and says that he will get another job and that he’s going to see his son. The last shot shows him walking down the now-quiet street, hinting that he may really visit his son more regularly in the future.

The central question in the film, however, is not whether any one character will achieve his or her goals. It is whether the pervasive conflicts can be resolved.

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“It’s funny how the script is evolving into a film about race relations. This is America’s biggest problem, always has been (since we got off the boat), always will be. I’ve touched upon it in my earlier works, but I haven’t yet dealt with it head on as a primary subject.”

— Spike Lee, from the production journal of *Do The Right Thing*
peacefully or violently. As the DJ says on the morning after the riot, "Are we gonna live together—together are we gonna live?"

*Do The Right Thing* leaves unanswered questions at the end. Will Sal rebuild? Is Mookie really going back to see his son? Most important, though the conflict that flared up has died down, the tension is still present in the community, waiting to resurface. The old problem of how to tame it remains, and so the film does not achieve complete closure. Indeed, such an ending is typical of the social problem film. While the immediate conflict may be resolved, the underlying dilemma that caused it remains.

That is also why there is a deliberate ambiguity at the end. Just as we are left at the end of *Citizen Kane* to wonder whether the revelation of the meaning of "Rosebud" explains Kane’s character, in *Do The Right Thing* we are left to ponder what "the right thing" is. The film continues after the final story action, with two nondiegetic quotations from Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. The King passage advocates a nonviolent approach to the struggle for civil rights, while Malcolm X condones violence in self-defense.

*Do The Right Thing* refuses to suggest which leader is right—although the narrative action and use of the phrase “by any means necessary” at the end of the credits seem to weight the film’s position in favor of Malcolm X. Still, the juxtaposition of the two quotations, in combination with the open-ended narrative, also seems calculated to spur debate. Perhaps the implication is that each position is viable under certain circumstances. The line of action involving Sal’s pizzeria ends in violence; yet at the same time, Da Mayor is able to win Mother Sister’s friendship gently and patiently.

As in its narrative structure, the style of *Do The Right Thing* stretches the traditional techniques of classical filmmaking. It begins with a credits sequence during which Rosie Perez performs a vigorous and aggressive dance to the rap song “Fight the Power.” The editing here is strongly discontinuous, as she wears sometimes a red dress, sometimes a boxer’s outfit, and sometimes a jacket and pants. One moment she is on the street; then she suddenly appears in an alley. This brief sequence, which is not part of the narrative, employs the flashy style made familiar by MTV and by television commercials.

Nothing in the rest of *Do The Right Thing* is quite as discontinuous or extreme as the credits sequence, but Lee uses a loose version of the traditional continuity system. Veteran film editor Dede Allen has referred to “an extreme MTV cutting” in some modern Hollywood films. Lee himself has made both music videos and commercials. He draws on a broad range of techniques, handling some scenes in virtuosic long takes, others with shot/reverse shot, and still others with extensive camera movements. In two cases, he even cuts together two takes of the same action, so that the plot presents a single important story event twice: when Mookie first kisses Tina and when the garbage can hits Sal’s window. One result of this varied style is a suggestion of the vigor and variety of the community itself.

Despite the many quick changes of locale, Lee uses continuity devices to establish space clearly. As we saw in Chapter 6, he is adept at using shot/reverse shot without breaking the axis of action (6.81–6.86, from *She’s Gotta Have It*, p. 240). *Do The Right Thing* similarly contains many shot/reverse-shot conversations where the eyelines are consistent (11.19, 11.20). Yet Lee opts to handle other conversations without any editing. The lengthy conversation in which Pino asks Sal to sell the pizzeria is handled in one long take (11.21–11.23).

Cinematic technique frequently emphasizes the community as a whole. Indeed, one reason why the film has so many segments is that there are frequent cuts from one action to another. The narration is largely unrestricted, flitting from one group of characters to another, seldom lingering with any individual. Similarly, complex camera movements follow characters through the street, catching glimpses of other activities going on in the background. Other camera movements slide away
from one line of action to another. On the morning after the riot, Da Mayor wakes up in Mother Sister's apartment and the camera shifts to Mookie (11.24–11.26).

The dense sound track helps characterize the community. As Mookie walks past a row of houses, the sounds of radios turned to different stations fade up and down, hinting at the offscreen presence of the inhabitants. The music broadcast by the DJ plays a large role in drawing the many brief scenes together, with the same song carrying over various exchanges of dialogue. The different ethnic groups are characterized by the types of music they listen to.

Style also stresses the underlying problems in the community. Radio Raheem's threatening demeanor is emphasized in some scenes by his direct address into a wide-angle lens (11.27). Mookie's self-absorption and lack of interest in the neighborhood is suggested in a visual motif of high-angle views showing him stepping unheedingly on a cheerful chalk picture of a house that a little girl is drawing on the pavement (11.28). Sound contributes to the racial tensions, as in the scenes where Radio Raheem annoys people by playing his rap song at high volume.

Thus Do The Right Thing, despite its stretching of traditional Hollywood conventions, remains a good example of a contemporary approach to classical filmmaking. Its style reflects the looser techniques that became conventions of post-1960s cinema—an era when the impact of television and European art films inspired filmmakers to incorporate somewhat more variety into the Hollywood system. Even the plot's departures from tradition are somewhat motivated because Lee adopts the basic purpose of the social problem film—to make us think and to stir debate.