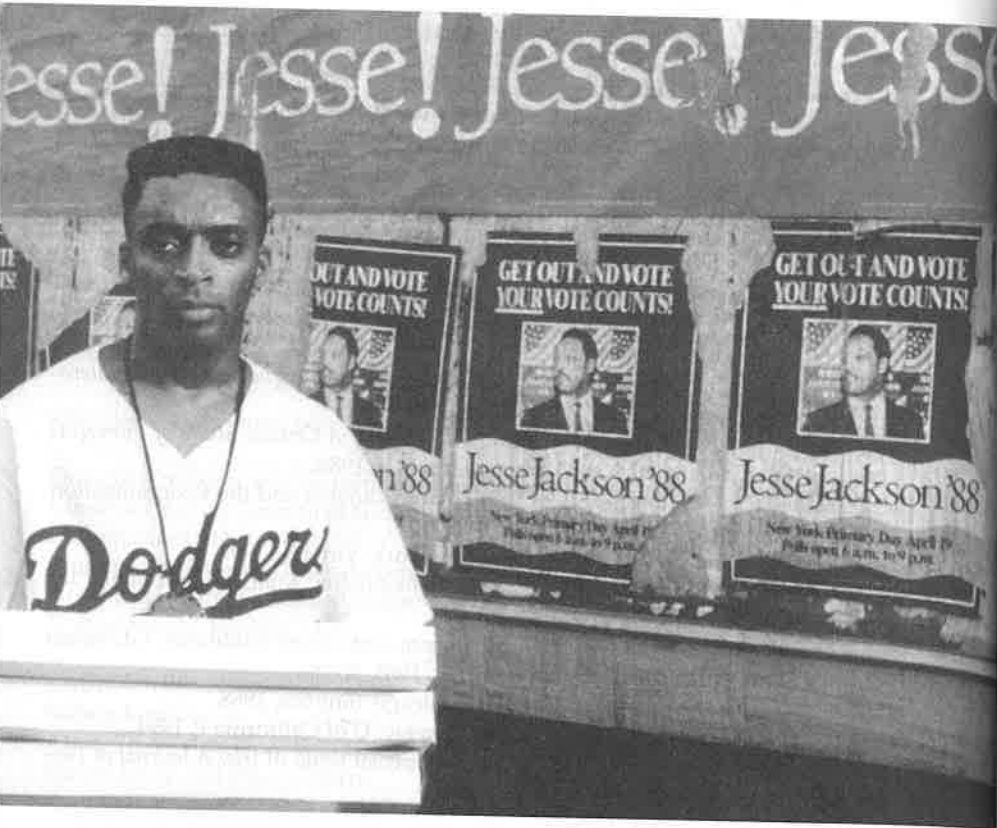


Do the Right Thing (1989)



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A Theater of Interruptions

Context

Authenticity and Audience

Upon its release in 1989, *Do the Right Thing* provoked intense debate among mainstream popular reviewers. In this popular context, the film's "message" became a site of struggle as numerous magazines set up the debate in terms like those of *U.S. News and World Report*: "Doing the Controversial Thing: A Provocative Discussion of Race Relations in the 1980s or a Racist Incitement to Riot?" (Sanoff 38). Sensationalizing the subject of race, this either/or structure also implicitly characterized African American resistance as itself racist in origin. This symmetrical structure also conflated violence against persons and violence against property, on one level, and conflated the cinematic staging of fantasy and the advocacy of violence in daily life, on another.

Those critiques that insistently focused on the burning of Sal's pizzeria also consistently related representation—which in this case these critics figured as targeting an African American audience—to reality by imagining that stable identifications shape spectator responses to both images and fantasy. To imagine that spectator identification originates in recognizable resemblances and slides into imitation, as these critics might argue, requires an impoverished theory of fantasy's relationship to agency in the world. This version of fantasy's function disallows the ways in which our access to the fantasies cinema stages is multiple, mobile, and intermittent. It ignores the ways that we invest our fantasmatic identifications in spaces, in scenes, in gestures and movements, and in the technical apparatus of cinema itself—as well as in characters and stories.

In exemplary fashion, *Newsweek* staged the *Do the Right Thing* debate under this heading "'How Hot Is Too Hot?': Spike Lee has always provoked discord—but not like this. Is his new movie irresponsible or

vitaly important? *Newsweek's* critics disagree" (Kroll). Representing the negative position, Jack Kroll asserted: "People are going to argue about this film for a long time. That's fine, as long as things stay on the arguing level. But this movie is dynamite under every seat. Sadly, the fuse has been lit by a filmmaker tripped up by muddled motives." Kroll locates the source of this muddle in an ambivalence that leads Lee "to substitute pizza politics for the hard realities of urban racial conflict," in an "evasion of the issues." And Kroll finds that ambivalence further reflected in the famous juxtaposed quotations about violence—one from Malcolm X and one from Martin Luther King—that conclude the film. Paradoxically enough, he has to advance his own position in a framework that is itself ambivalent, as his article faces off with a positive assessment of the film.

As in Kroll's account, *Do the Right Thing* often appeared as an organic extension of the director's person, in the language of much popular critique. Richard Corliss, for instance, offers this bizarre comment: "He holds the film like a can of beer in a paper bag—the cool sip of salvation on a blistering day—until it is revealed as a Molotov cocktail." Interweaving an anxiety about the film's effects in the real with a fantasy about Lee himself, this quote reminds us that one of the stunning aspects of the "Spike Lee phenomenon" in dominant popular discourse is its compulsive focus on the director as a public figure, and its utter neglect of his screen persona.

If mainstream popular culture sought to acclaim or reject *Do the Right Thing* in terms of the correctness of its "argument," the roots of this impulse lay in a more widespread collapsing of cinematic "real effects" with social reality, and in the corollary impulse of constructing Lee as its privileged interlocutor, speaking for a whole African American population. But in this question of the "real effect," popular journalism begins, surprisingly enough, at times to agree with African American critical reception. Wahneema Lubiano describes a pressure within African American reception that at times constructs a "realist" film as continuous with referential reality and, concomitantly, constructs its producer as a delegate for a community (176). This is the "burden of representation" that Kobena Mercer describes as the "predicament" whereby "the artistic discourse of hitherto marginalized subjects is circumscribed by the assumption that such artists speak as 'representatives' of the communities from which they come" (214).

Under this burden of representation, the black cultural producer becomes something like an anthropological native informant, charged with providing an ethnographic, documentary account of his community.

Realism, Lubiano writes, "suggests disclosure of the truth (and then closure of the representation)" (182). These lines suggest the very paradigms of reception, she goes on to argue, that operate within the dominant representational regime to confine African American film production to an arena of competing claims for realist authority, which is construed as access to sociological "truth." Such paradigms of course foreclose consideration of reality as constructed through representations that are produced within a historical context constituted by competing political interests. But they also shape the concerns of debates that are organized around "positive" and "negative" images, taken as appropriate or inappropriate models for an audience imagined to consume through imitation.

"The question of representation and what anyone should say about his/her community," Lubiano writes, "is a constant pressure under which African American cultural workers produce." "But it is a question," she further contends, "that constantly disenfranchises even as it reinforces the notion of absolutes." That is, for those critics and commentators who evaluate representations through a strict opposition of good and bad, "then 'good' or 'real' cultural production is impervious to reader or audience misbehavior (misreading)," while "'bad' or 'nonrepresentative' or 'unrealistic' cultural production" reinforces racism or "misleads African-Americans" (185).

In various contemporary debates, the failure to see cinematic realist effects as, precisely, representational strategies, elides the tensions within "black representation." Flattening this tension by conflating realism with "reality," or truth, forecloses the complexities of audience response: the critical and analytical side of people's responses to everyday entertainment. As Sasha Torres puts it in her persuasive critique of arguments that base their authority on an identification of stereotypes, such readings leave little room for the complex and "unpredictable effects" of "complex, and often resistant, spectatorship," just as they tend to "flatten textual objects" and to overlook specific *textual* detail (2). Failure to acknowledge these tensions reduces the cinematic text to an argument that does not allow us room to think through any relationship to fantasy structures, or to acknowledge the

ways that hegemonic representation may be challenged at the level of other cinematic strategies, such as antirealism.

Analysis

Antirealism

Like a number of "classic" directors, from Alfred Hitchcock to Jean-Luc Godard to Roman Polanski, Spike Lee frequently casts himself in his films as an ambivalent or treacherous character. Think of Lee's characters in the films whose production bookends that of *Do the Right Thing*. Half-Pint, the socially desperate misfit in *School Daze* (1988) resides at the center of the debates the film wishes to showcase: he waffles between adherence to the "jigaboo" and "wannabe" factions of fraternity culture, while conducting ongoing debates with more politically conscious classmates. Lee also plays Giant, the manipulative manager of Bleek Gilliam in *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), who maintains a gambling addiction that leads him to deceive his friend, eventually drawing him into a physical conflict, the aftereffects of which end his career as a trumpeter. Finally, in *Jungle Fever* (1991), Lee's character, Cyrus, betrays his best friend's affair to his wife. In each case, Lee portrays a shady character toward whom the film is implicitly critical. But equally important, the presence of the "real" director operates as an extradiegetic interruption within the narrative texture.

As a textual figure, Lee circulates his own image through his films as he does the images of many of his regular actors, whose roles from film to film vary dramatically. Such an effect interrupts any easy correlation between on-screen and offscreen realities. *Do the Right Thing* is replete with such extradiegetic effects, borne in and around the faces and bodies of its actors. The film maps and anchors its restricted arena of action, the single block of brownstones and stores in Bedford Stuyvesant, through two iconic figures: Mother Sister (Ruby Dee) and Da Mayor (Ossie Davis). Marked off from the rest of the characters by a generational difference as maternal and paternal poles, they also figure the opposition between mobility and stasis that structures the film, since Da Mayor restlessly roams up and down the street, while Mother Sister, by her own account, "always watches" from a perch in her open window or on her stoop. Significantly, these distinguished actors of both stage and screen call up a whole history of African

American characters and productions. At the same time, their long-term marriage immediately lends an ironic cast to their antagonism within the diegesis.

Likewise, by casting his real sister (Joie Lee) as his fictional one, Lee ruptures the fictional space from the beginning, setting it in dialogue with an outside space, a world beyond the screen. On another level, the four-minute opening credit sequence introduces Rosie Perez in an extradiegetic role. Organized much like a music video, this sequence features Perez's "flygirl" dance moves, and her boxing poses, over the sound track of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." Established here as the film's "theme song," "Fight the Power" will recur as localized diegetic sound that blares obtrusively into the scene, and fades again, following the movements of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) and his boom box.

Meanwhile, like the song, Perez is imported into the narrative place. As the mother of Mookie's child, Hector, however, she is haunted by her initial construction as a maternal figure. She relentlessly scolds (hectors?) Mookie in stunning verbal performances of curse and insult that exceed and suspend dramatic action. Her discourse thus links her through association to the hysterical racist diatribes by men that emerge autonomously from the narrative in a later montage sequence of pure performativity. Troubling the stable and seamless fictional frame that realism requires, Lee's film consistently resists the demand to provide a documentary "window" onto African American culture.

Fundamental to *Do the Right Thing's* antirealist project is its plainly "classical" structure, based on the prescribed rules of classical Greek drama. It adheres strictly to the unities of time and place: set in a single-block location and transpiring within a twenty-four-hour period, the film circles thematically back to the image that introduces Mookie, counting his money on awakening. We can surely see the "Corner Men," Coconut Sid (Frankie Faison), ML (Paul Benjamin), and Sweet Dick Willy (Robin Harris) as an ironic gesture toward the chorus of classical Greek tragedy, as their running patter comments on unfolding events, while they remain strictly apart from the action until the climactic riot scene. Some of the film's funniest riffs come from the Corner Men, theatrically displayed against a solid wall of bright red and framed under umbrellas. Situated outside the zone of

the film's action, the stationary Corner Men regularly interrupt the plot with verbal performance. (Not insignificantly, in this regard, Robin Harris was primarily known as a stand-up comic.)

This film could not be more self-conscious about the ways it sets performance against narrative. In an early incident, the band of four friends who move about *en bloc* stop to berate Da Mayor for his drunkenness. When he responds by giving them a speech about his failed paternity and their disrespect, Ahmad (Steve White) responds with a direct theatrical reference, "I hope you've finished your little soliloquy," thus commenting on the film's proliferation of soliloquies that interrupt dramatic action and verbal exchange. Punctuating the action, the Corner Men call attention to the film's violation of conventional Hollywood plotting. Instead of building action and suspense, this film offers vignettes, a series of mostly verbal confrontations of seemingly equal weight, always unresolved, trailing off as the characters wander away, apparently losing interest or becoming distracted. We will see later in the essay how the camera frequently mimics their behavior, picking up and dropping characters with a kind of free-floating distracted attentiveness, like Da Mayor's and Mother Sister's.

Throughout the film, we find moments of distraction, where layers of message collide or interfere. To take just one example, when Mookie has dragged Jade out of Sal's pizzeria because he interprets Sal's attentions to her as overtly sexual, we see the siblings against a bright red wall under the painted message: "Tawana Told the Truth." This reference to what were then recent news events (the disputed and subsequently retracted charges by African American teenager Tawana Brawley that she had been raped by a group of white police officers) suggests a resistance to the generally accepted facts of the case, and disrupts the scene thoroughly to the extent that we simply don't know how to *read* this message. Is the film endorsing this position? Does it mean to suggest a connection between the Brawley case and Sal's attraction to Jade? Its ornery resistance to clear interpretation both interrupts our absorption in the sibling dispute and calls attention to the interpretive effort this film foregrounds for both the spectator and the characters, who themselves are trying to work through some of these questions. Significantly, the substance of the dispute itself takes a detour: as Mookie insists that Jade stop coming to the pizzeria because of Sal's intentions, she retaliates: "Stop trying to play big brother. I'm a

grown woman. You gotta lotta nerve. Mookie, you can hardly pay your rent and you're gonna tell me what to do. Come off it." Though Mookie insists, "One has nuthin' to do with the other," the discussion turns definitively to his meager earning history.

This veering off is completely coherent within the film's overarching cinematic strategies: the camera consistently picks up characters and incidents, leaving them in the middle of things to investigate another conversation or event, which it will drop in order to return to a previous one. The event that serves as a catalyst for Jade and Mookie's argument begins just after the film's temporal midpoint, with Sal's flirtatious conversation with Jade in the pizzeria. As Sal (Danny Aiello) speaks, the camera migrates to examine Mookie's and Pino's (John Turturro) reactions, captured in medium close-up as it slowly pans back and forth between their hostile looks at Sal and Jade. But before developing Mookie's reaction, the film leaves the pizzeria to pick up Radio Raheem, just as his music begins to distort and fade. We follow him to the Fruit-N-Veg Delight, the Korean-owned grocery store, where he rudely enters into a transaction for twenty "D" Energizer batteries. As he argues with the store's owners (Steve Park and Ginny Yang), insulting their English, we see him from their point of view. Through the distorting effects of a fish-eye lens in medium close-up, the film suggests the couple's subjective view of Raheem as menacing. Significantly, this scene recalls the film's one other use of the fish-eye effect: in Sal's first confrontation with Raheem about his music.

As in most of its scenes of dispute and hostility, beginning with Da Mayor and Mother Sister's first encounter, the film structures this sequence through canted frames, in which the characters emerge on opposing diagonals: Raheem's frame is canted to the right, the couple's to the left. Thus the film seems intent on visually inscribing hostility or opposition, but it also suggests in the same gesture that verbal violence incites a distorting subjectification of view. Like so many of the film's confrontations, this one ends with Raheem relenting, for no particular reason, after the store owner reciprocates with the insult "Motherfucker you!" Raheem concludes: "Motherfucker you. You're alright."

As Raheem exits the store, the film picks up Da Mayor arriving to purchase flowers. We see his arrival from a point of view inside the pizzeria, one that captures Sal's silhouette as it looks through the window. After following Da Mayor to Mother Sister's stoop, where he

presents the flowers, the film detours away to pick up Radio Raheem again and follow him to the Corner Men, who register their annoyance and launch into another exchange of playful insults, beginning with ML remarking, "At least my moms didn't name me Sweet Dick Willie." Sweet Dick Willie picks up on the mother reference and purports to take this as an insult to his mother. The exchange culminates in ML's pronouncing, "Negroes kill me, always holdin' onto, talkin' about their dicks." This remark leads to a back-and-forth discussion about having sex in the heat. The whole scene recalls Richard Pryor's famous comedy routines from the 1970s and 1980s, which frequently deployed racist stereotypes about black sexuality.

An ice cart moving into frame introduces the next sequence. This cart draws the little boy, Eddie (Richard Habersham), into traffic, and forces Da Mayor to knock him to safety at the curb. This, in turn, prompts Eddie's mother to launch into a scathing reprimand, first of Da Mayor and, subsequently, of her injured son. Erupting in a performance of harsh maternal disciplinarity, consonant with the feminine role in this film of judging and managing men, this mother provides a thematic match with Mookie's failed attempt to manage Jade's sexuality, to which the film returns now after some seven minutes of wandering through various vignettes.

This exemplary series of intercut episodes produces a variety of encounters among the neighborhood "types." These are hardly characters, but rather figures, who mark out areas of friction and tension in the public spaces: gender dynamics, struggles around property rights and consumerism, and competing masculine postures. Here, as throughout the film, all the women seem to speak with one voice, and to function primarily as spectators watching the diverse male figures. While mobility is reserved for men, women are confined in place. Though Tina has a job, we never see her leave her apartment. Prior to the riot scene, we see Jade emerging from her apartment only in Mookie's company. Mother Sister remains perched at home, surveying those who pass by, and consistently berating and excoriating Da Mayor.

Likewise, Tina and Jade continually criticize Mookie. Jade consistently pressures him about his earning power and responsibilities, while Tina berates him with the coarsest possible attacks on his masculinity. *Do the Right Thing* charges its women—figured as mothers

and sisters—with judging and disciplining masculinity. They are seen mostly castigating—and occasionally rewarding—men for conduct that lives up to the proper masculine role: as wage earners and fathers.

In their judgmental function, the women are aligned in this one respect with the police and the Corner Men; while in their mobile patrol of the borders of the community, the police serve not only as law enforcers, but as judges. In a striking scene built of sustained shot/reverse shots, the film tracks a prolonged and mutually suspicious exchange of looks between the police and the Corner Men. As Officer Ponte (Miguel Sandoval) comments, "What a waste!" one of the Corner Men reads his lips. (We might note that Lee repeats this moment, with the same actors playing the police, in *Jungle Fever*, when the officers make this comment in regard to the interracial couple.) In a strange ricochet effect, the Corner Men turn their attention from the police to the steady business at the Korean grocery store. Coconut Sid begins, "As I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted by the finest . . .," while ML blurts out, "It's a fucking shame." We see that he means to direct their attention to the store. Though the remark might be directed toward the role and conduct of the interrupting police, it also functions to cast the Corner Men as hostile judges of the Korean entrepreneurs, and it leads to a brutal self-critique about the failure of black enterprise.

Interruption and Alienation

Lee's antirealist project in *Do the Right Thing* brings it closely in line with the theatrical practices of Bertolt Brecht. Walter Benjamin describes Brecht's "epic theater" as a theater that relies centrally on "alienation" effects, eschewing "empathy" in favor of "astonishment" and focusing on situation rather than plot. The two procedures are interdependent. "Instead of identifying with the characters," Benjamin writes, "the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function" ("What Is Epic Theater?" 150). Epic theater "obtains such conditions . . . by interrupting the plot" (*Reflections* 234). Appropriately enough to the context of film, the "principle of interruption" that Benjamin sees as epic theater's organizing function finds its analogue in montage, where "the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted" (*Reflections* 234). Taken in the broadest sense, montage refers not only to editing,