

Color at the Core

In a film on race, it is no surprise that color is critical in its creation. From the very beginning of *Do The Right Thing*, artistic impression of color strikes its audience; the opening credits lyrically use color to illuminate a stage and the body of Tina, the entire neighborhood seethes in tension because every house is painted in hot colors, and the majority of the inhabitants of the block take the streets in dramatic, mixed clothing. Spike Lee not only utilizes the clash between people of different colors, but also utilizes color itself in an array of all forms to make statements on the contentious relationships in the film. In *Do The Right Thing*, color is used as a centerpiece in a display of mise en scène, editing, lighting, and costume that reflects the centrality of color (race) in the divisions or unities between and within the work's characters.

The use of the color as the central force in mise en scène is best seen in the sequence between Sal and Pino in which Pino attempts to convince his father to sell the pizzeria because of his hatred for the black community in which the store is located. The sequence begins with a long shot. The central image in the shot is of two tables, which have a symmetrical alignment—even the napkin holders on the table and the chairs align to form a mirror image. Soon, tense non-diegetic music is heard as the camera begins to track toward the further table at which Sal and Pino sit. As viewers hear the music and the characters begin to be confined to tighter frames, they understand there is intensity in the moment. They are forced to wonder what could be causing such tension in the midst of symmetry—a filmic display that often communicates peace and order.

The answer to this question comes when the camera's movement halts and the audience now has a medium shot of father and son. They see a clearer picture of what lingers in the background beyond the window in front of which they sit. Directly behind the window is a white car with a strip of black near its center. Both Sal and Pino sit directly in front of the white portions of the car in front of the window and the black portion of it is between them. Beyond the car is the Korean market, an explosion of colorful flowers and fruits that separate the two men in this image. On the table itself is a bold red carnation that divides the father and son. This small flower is also a disruption of symmetry in the initial shot—the colorful flowers of the two tables in the initial long shot did not line up from the vantage point of the camera that caused much symmetry. The message from this sequence is clear: though these two men seem to be symmetrical—both white, both Italian, both of the same blood—the barrier of color (race) still causes tension between the two.

In this allegorical film, symbolic meaning is not only drawn from color with mise en scène, but costume coloring is also an important method of representing racial divides and unities the characters and the community harbor. One important example of this is a sequence near the end of the film. The sequence starts with Sal discussing real estate ventures with police officers and terminates with Vito and Pino's fight in the supply closet. What is important in this sequence is that the audience gets a clear image of everyone's costume. Though the rest of the community wears costumes bursting with bold, hot, mixed colors, Spike Lee deliberately utilizes individual colors in costumes that make statements on the dynamics of Sal's family based on racial divides. One can see each family member's costume as a symbolic indication of where they stand.

In Sal's family, Pino's costume serves as a portrayal of his intolerance of blacks. He is dressed in all white—a white apron, a white muscle shirt, and even white shoes. From this comes the symbolic indication of his “whites only” mentality. Interestingly, this was not the outfit in which he arrived to the store at the beginning of the film. Pino first appears in an all black costume, which matches perfectly with what he tells his father in the previously mentioned sequence. He explains to Sal that all of his friends laugh at him and look down at him for working at a business that serves a black clientele. The costume differences make a clear statement: in his own white community, Pino is the *black* sheep—the lowest person on the totem pole. When he comes to work, however, he can make himself the white superior, refusing to mix with non-whites.

Lee displays Vito, on the other hand, in the opposite costume, which fits his racial tolerance throughout the film. He wears a black muscle shirt with white shorts that have long cuffs of black and white stripes. Viewers see that he believes in the mixing of black and white. Not only does his costume show his tolerance, but it also is the only costume he wears throughout the film, which shows his sincere belief in such tolerance that exists even when he is outside of the black community in which he works.

The clash of the brothers' ideologies is clear in the short fight sequence that takes place in the storage closet. Pino, beating Vito, tries to convince his brother that he cannot side with the blacks. “Black and white, no,” he states adamantly. Twice in this sequence he nearly rips the black muscle shirt upon Vito's body. He even threatens to “rip” Vito if he does not side with him as he aggressively grasps Vito's black shirt. The viewer sees the disgust Pino feels from his brother's ideology by his interaction with the black of his brother's costume.

Mookie's costume is also important in the sequence. He is wearing his Sal's Pizzeria uniform. This stands out because no other family member wears the uniform, which is ironic considering he is the only non-blood related worker. The uniform is made of red, green, and white—Italian colors. Though his uniform is Italian, Mookie keeps a medallion of Africa around his neck that dangles at his core. Viewers see Mookie lives within two worlds. He works for whites, for Italians. Sal even states that Mookie is like a son to him and lets Mookie bicker like a family member. Mookie's name is embroidered in red upon his uniform, stressing the connection of identity he has to this Italian family. He does not, however, primarily define himself as one of them, but keeps his African American identity at his center. Mookie is divided, having to side with the Black community or his Italian family. By the end of the film, audience members do not know which side he picks. Did he start the riot on Sal's property out of hate and desire to please his black community, or out of love—protecting Sal's life by focusing the crowd's anger on Sal's property? Maybe Mookie found an alternative between clearly picking sides. Like his costume—red, green, and white with an African medallion—Mookie splits himself across the racial divide.

If one gets clear racially oriented colors upon Sal's sons' costumes, then why is Sal dressed in a solid green shirt? Sal's green costume is testament to his neutrality to black and white and concentration on commerce. He is a man of business, seeing money rather than skin color. He sees customers rather than races. He takes pride in the fact that the community "grew up on [his] food." Being an economic force in the community, Sal gives money to De Mayor for sweeping his sidewalk and offers money to Smiley after

Pino offends him. It makes perfect sense for the professional Sal to wear green, the color of U.S. currency.

Like costume coloring is manipulated to display inter-character dynamics, editing and lighting use color to perform the same task. The one sequence in which Tina and Mookie are finally together exemplifies this use of editing and lighting. Throughout the entire movie, the two are separated--Tina screaming at Mookie to come close over the phone. The long-awaited continuous placement of these characters in the same frame allows for their meaningful juxtaposition. Though it is not made critical in the movie, the relationship between Tina and Mookie is important because it is interracial. They are a rare example of unity in spite of color barriers. The sequence displays close ups on Tina's body as Mookie runs ice cubes over its various surfaces. These series of close-ups on Tina's body parts with Mookie's hand draws attention the contrast between Tina's tan beige skin, and Mookie's significantly darker skin tone, which draws clear attention to their togetherness in spite of being from different races. The sequence ends with an extreme close-up in which one sees a part of Mookie's face hovering over a part of Tina's. In this final shot, the positions of the characters and the angle of the lighting causes the illumination of the border of Tina's face, making it a glowing white, while Mookie's face is completely shaded in darkness. Through a series of frame sharing and a final shared extreme close up of great shading contrast, viewers see the racial tensions that plague the film are cooled off for this brief moment by love like ice—light and dark sharing intimate space on the screen. In this fleeting moment with color at its core, the audience sees the races coexisting without conflict.

Lee clearly utilized color in all forms to make an important statement: color (race) is at the root of this movie. Color is what causes these eruptive tensions, but there are also unities in spite of these color barriers. Lee uses bold, hot colors to draw immediate attention to heated racial conflicts, but he also cleverly integrates color into the center of other cinematic aspects. In Lee's film, color serves as the central force in the cinematic effects of mise en scène, costume, editing, and lighting to reflect the ways in which race is integral in characters' relations.