

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN A BLACK FILM:
Spike Lee's "She's Gotta Have It"

by
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Introduction

"Spike Lee Comes of Age" is the headline *Los Angeles Times* film critic Sheila Benson used for her front-page review of Lee's latest interracial film, "Do The Right Thing."¹ Along with "School Daze," it is the second film by Spike Lee that Hollywood has risked its own capital to produce; Universal backed Lee with a reported \$50 million budget and a 350-screen release June 30 in the nation's top 70 markets.²

It was the commercial success of "She's Gotta Have It," Spike Lee's first independent feature film, that opened for him the doors of the cutthroat film industry.

Because "She's Gotta Have It" is an "all-black" film, it is useful to analyze how the narrative story of this film is created and structured--to understand the process of creating a film to meet the cultural needs of Afro-Americans or any other Third World community. In fact Spike Lee--its writer, director, editor and co-producer -- calls it a "guerrilla film." One way to do this is by analyzing the narrative strategies Spike Lee uses to create his film. His book³ contains rich data to enable us to do this: the film script, a journal from October, 1987-April, 1986, an interview with Nelson George, and the film itself.

Filmmakers use three main strategies for controlling film narrative: production, distribution and exhibition. This analysis is limited only to the narrative strategies Lee uses in his film "She's Gotta Have It."

This analysis is made up of four parts; we will (1) examine briefly two examples of how narrative strategy is used in other Third World films, (2) analyze the strategy system Lee uses to create and structure the narrative story of his film, (3) analyze the functions a narrative strategy performs in creating a film, and (4) compare the goals of "She's Gotta Have It" with those of Third Cinema films.

A "narrative strategy" is a conceptualization of the narrative components of a story; in functional terms, it is a system of criteria-setting concepts for creating or selecting narrative components and structuring them into a film story⁴ and for fleshing out the story to implement the film goals with audience needs and appeals, action line

from problem to solution, characterization, content messages, audiovisual imagery, etc.⁵

Before we start the analysis of "She's Gotta Have It"--to better understand the role of strategy in shaping the narrative content of films and their likely effects--it is useful first to examine how strategy is used in two well-studied films, "Wend Kuuni" and "Rashomon."

Examples of Narrative Strategy

In his analysis of the African film "Wend Kuuni," Diawara describes the major strategy director Gaston Kabore uses to select and structure the narrative components of his film and the consequences this has on the film structure and meanings. Diawara states, "Kabore's strategy consists in combining the functions of three independent stories," (the missing husband, the wanted son, and the emancipated daughter), "in such a manner that a new one emerges."⁶ From three simple and linear stories which serve to maintain the traditional status quo, Kabore creates a complex narrative turned against the repressive forces of tradition. The first two stories are selected from African oral tradition and the last one from African written literature. Each story is composed of several myth functions; for instance, the "wanted son" story is composed of four invariant functions: (1) the desire for a son, (2) the attempts to get a son, (3) the arrival of the son, and (4) his coronation.

Kabore selects from each story only certain functions and ignores others; he organizes them to shape the meanings of the overall narrative -- to best promote the goals he expects his film to accomplish. For instance, in the case of "the wanted son," where only one function (the arrival of the son) is clearly represented in the film, "the story is displaced and the function registers additional meanings" from its new context.

Kabore manipulates the three stories so as to subvert the signs of their functions. Thus, he rejects a traditional closure and establishes a new narrative position: the conditions of resistance to the traditional social order.

Instead of limiting his protagonists' roles to acting in the traditional functions, Kabore raises them above the myth stories and situates them in a new one with contemporary thematic overtones; this evokes the desire to create a new social order--a preoccupation of most African filmmakers.

In his description of "Rashomon," Davidson documents how director Akira Kurosawa takes components of two short stories by other

authors and adds to them his own creative elements in order to fuse them into a different narrative.⁷

"Rashomon" is the story of a crime that takes place in Japan during the tragic period of the ninth century; but in addition, it is about the reality and truth of the crime. The camera focuses on the conflicting versions of the crime of four living witnesses and the victim's ghost, who speaks through a medium.

The film opens on the ruined capitol, once the great symbol of the capital of Japan, now the crumbling reflection of a devastated city. Under the temple gate in the rain sit a priest and a woodcutter bemoaning the crime; the priest says, "I may lose my faith in man!"

We see, traveling a country road, a samurai and his wife on a horse; they are attacked by a bandit; he rapes the wife, then kills the husband. The wife seeks refuge in the capitol from whence she is taken to the police court, after the capture of the bandit. They all testify at the court, but give conflicting stories of the truth.

In order to appreciate the communal significance of "Rashomon" to the Japanese people, as Davidson points out, we must consider that Kurosawa produced the film during the American occupation, when the old vision of a hopeful future springing from a glorious past had been shattered.

In fact, in many of its details, the film is an allegory for the tragic situation the Japanese people were actually living. Indeed, this was a period of confusion and self-doubt, of uncertainty about the national character and morality, about what is right and wrong, true and false. The hydrogen bomb and their national military defeat forced them to question the truth and values of their traditional Shinto morality, their Samurai philosophy, their government ideology and policies as well as the foreign version of truth propagated by the American forces. Seemingly, Kurosawa considered it better to use a strategy of dealing indirectly with the reality of the Japanese people under American occupation, to camouflage it as a story about the reality of a bandit crime in the ninth century, a period of national devastation with similar problems and philosophic dilemmas that, when transposed mentally, could make the Japanese people refer to their own modern experience and think about contemporary problems.

In fact, the end of the film itself brings Japanese audiences back to present-day realities. A commoner sitting by the temple laughs at the human frailty of the priest and the woodcutter; then he says, "Who is honest nowadays, anyway!" They hear a cry and discover an abandoned baby behind the temple, and the woodcutter, who already has 6 children, says, "One more couldn't make it any more difficult!" He takes the baby home, a symbol of the Japanese people's only hope for the future.⁸

A Narrative Strategy System

This analysis is about how Spike Lee uses narrative strategy to create, develop and structure his film "She's Gotta Have It." We need first to describe briefly what the film story is all about; then we will describe Lee's strategy system for creating his film narrative.

The Story

The entire film story of "She's Gotta Have It" takes place in one day, and most of the story action has to do with Nola Darling, the heroine, making love with her three men in her "love shrine" (p. 41). Flashbacks show us how Nola met her lovers, where she works, how she lived and loved when she had a roommate friend, when she was growing up at home, and other information.

The film focuses on the heroine and on what everybody thinks or wants of her (p. 70). The story is told through Nola's eyes and from her viewpoint: the other characters talk into the camera as if they were addressing Nola herself (p. 85).

Nola is a perfectly normal, beautiful black woman, age 22; she loves sex (p. 66) and black men in different ways for their own special qualities (p. 72). But she sleeps with three different lovers at a time. This challenges the macho double standard status quo and causes her to be reproached from different people, especially females who accuse her of taking their men (p. 333).

Nola sleeps with three lovers -- Jamie, Mars and Greer -- simply because she cannot find in one lover those qualities she needs for her own happiness. In fact, she is trying to put them together as one person (p. 44). Nola herself is a paradox: she wants three men, but cannot accept the one she loves (Jamie) having another woman (p. 81).

The film is really "more about men," the crazy things they do and the reasons they do them. The fact that Nola sleeps with three men, does not hide it, and makes them meet in her "love shrine" is beyond their comprehension: each one wants her for himself, cannot understand what she sees in the others, and strives to outsmart them (p. 67).

Finally, the man she truly loves gives her an ultimatum to be his alone; they fight (p. 343). When he hums "Nola's Theme," she knows he loves her and goes back to him ready to settle down. However, she discovers he hasn't given up his macho ways. She leaves, telling the camera,

He wanted a wife, that mythic old-fashioned girl next door. But it's more than that. It's really about control, my body, my mind. Who was going to own it? Them? Or me? (p. 361)

Lee sugarcoats his sex story with humor (p. 67) and filmic magic in such ways as to make the audience believe the film is all about sex; however, sex itself is used to camouflage the real subject of the film: the black male's double standard in sex, and Nola's determination to emancipate herself (a black woman) (p. 66)--a favorite theme of Third World filmmakers.

Lee's Strategy System

An analysis of the data in Lee's book and in the film itself, reveals that the narrative strategy he applies in "She's Gotta Have It" can be described in specific terms: it is a system of criteria-setting concepts which he uses to generate story narrative components, or to select available ones, in order to develop the film characters and plot action and to accomplish his film goals. This system is made up of three levels of strategy concepts: source-concepts, prime-concepts, and directive-concepts.

Source-concepts are original "given" concepts created before the filmmaker begins to develop other narrative components of the story; they constitute the idea of the story; their criteria are the most basic and seminal, and determine the necessity and appropriateness of the other strategic concepts. The prime-concepts derive from the criteria of the source-concepts or are created separately according to them; they generate other narrative components to create an effective film. Script directives derive from the criteria of the prime-concepts, or the original source-concepts; and prescribe the more concrete narrative components of the film, such as the shooting of an actual scene.

Story Strategy Concepts - Seemingly Lee starts "She's Gotta Have It" with four types of original source-concepts of the film story. They have to do with four types of major film narrative components: the story heroine, the film audience, the premise of the story problem, and the film style.

The Heroine Source-Concept: "I had come up with a script...I had the title for it before anything else...'She's got to have it'" (p. 39).

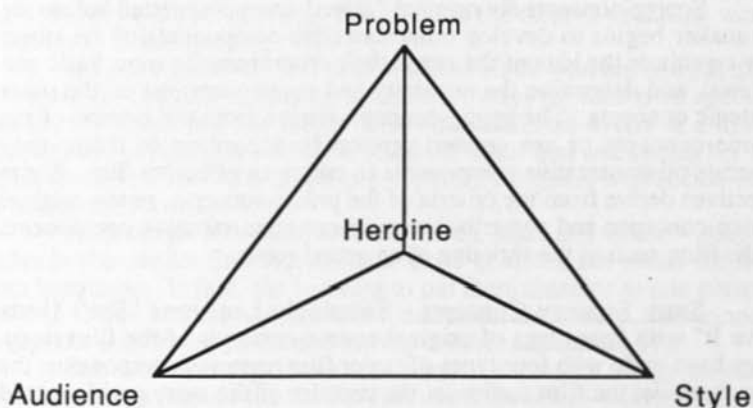
Film Audience Source Concept - Referring to the story heroine as representative of his audience, Lee says: "She's Black, and she's a WOMAN. This is my primary audience" (p. 178).

Problem Premise Source-Concept: - "Men can go out and bone any and everything between fifteen and eighty and it's OK.

They are encouraged to have and enjoy sex, while it's not so for women. If they do what men do they're labeled whore, prostitute, nympho, etc. Why this double standard? . . . That's the basic outline-premise" (p. 66). [emphasis added]

Film Style Source-Concept: - "It is not a conventional script. I'm combining three elements of filmmaking, narrative, documentary and experimental" (p. 108).

These four original source-concepts constitute the "pillars" of Lee's narrative strategy system, the framework structure of his film story; they interact with each other and determine the nature of the film narrative. A graphic way of representing the four source-concepts and their relationships is to think of them as constituting a pyramid with the film's heroine on top, the audience in the lower left corner, the story problem on the upper corner, and the film style on the lower right corner of the pyramid:



From the criteria of the above four types of source-concepts, Lee generates prime-concepts whose criteria in turn generate directives, whose criteria prescribe what concrete narrative components are needed for the film story or how to produce them.

For further clarification, we will describe briefly the four types of source-concepts -- each accompanied by an example of its prime-concepts and an example of its directives.

1. The Heroine Source-Concept - Seemingly, the first idea Lee had of his film was his concept of the story heroine. He reports that he had in mind the film title--"She's Gotta Have It"-- "before anything else" (p. 39).

This title, therefore, is the first source-concept Lee had of his film; automatically it becomes a source of criteria for generating other concepts of the film; it sets two criteria everything else must conform to: the story protagonist must be a woman, and she has a great hunger for sex.

From these two criteria of this source-concept, Lee generates several prime-concepts for further developing in the narrative components of the heroine. We will cite only one example of these prime-concepts: "Every witness (character) has his or her own version, his or her own view of Nola Darling" (p. 85).

This prime-concept has one criterion: "own VERSION;" from it, Lee generates a variety of directives whose criteria he uses to specify concrete film scenes relevant to the heroine's role. Following is one of these directives for setting up a film scene in which Mars tries to persuade Nola to give up her other lovers for him. One of his arguments is his own version of why Nola loves sex so much:

One of the reasons Nola was doing all that boning. . .because she was looking for her pops. She probably had a bad relationship with her father, or he wasn't around or she didn't know who he was (p. 306).

2. The Black Audience Source-Concept - Again and again, Lee reiterates his intention for a black audience for his film: "There is a vast black audience out there that's been longing, craving for an intelligent balck film" (p. 61).

This source-concept specifies three criteria for generating other narrative concepts of the film: black, audience, craving. From each one of these three criteria, Lee generates a variety of prime-concepts for further developing the narrative components of the film audience. Following is an example of the prime-concepts; it has to do with how Lee specifies the "audience" criteria -- referring to a survey of black women he made, Lee says: "From these sessions on tape, I got a lot of background and insight into the kind of woman Nola Darling could be" (p. 61)

This prime-concept sets three criteria for specifying the film "audience" needs: sessions, insight, and kind of woman. From these criteria, Lee generates a variety of directives whose criteria he uses to specify concrete film scenes. We cite three examples of directives whose criteria Lee uses to specify the "kind of woman" appropriate for his audience:

"It is important that audiences have sympathy with Nola. . . Nola will be beautiful, normal" (p. 69).

"I mean finer than fine and BLACK. . . dark chocolate" (p. 67).

"Nola has to be a strong WOMAN CHARACTER" (p. 147).

3. The Story Premise Source-Concept -- As Lee states it, the film will be against the double standard in sex relations:

Men can go out and bone any and everything between fifteen and eighty and its OK. They are encouraged to have and enjoy sex, while it's not so for women. If they do what men do they're labeled whore, prostitute, nympho, etc. Why this double standard? (p. 66)

This source-concept specifies one criterion for generating other narrative concepts of the film: the unfairness of the double standard. From this criterion of the source-concept, Lee generates a variety of prime-concepts for further developing the narrative components of the story problem. We cite only one example of these prime-concepts; it has to do with how Lee specifies the nature of the film protagonist: "Have a character, a beautiful young black woman who loves sex, and can love more than one man at a time" (p. 66).

This prime-concept sets five criteria for characterizing the film heroine; she must be beautiful, young, black, sexual and involved in more than one relationship.

From these five prime-concept criteria, Lee generates a variety of directives whose criteria he uses to specify concrete film scenes relevant to the heroine's role. Following is one of these directives for setting up a concrete film scene:

The following will be a MONTAGE of Nola with her three men, Jamie, Mars and Greer. It will consist of LIVE ACTION and STILL PHOTOGRAPHS. Each segment is a remembrance of the good times Nola spent with each one. Some of the shots will be SUPERIMPOSED over each other, the various locations shall range all over Nueva York (p. 354).

4. The Film Style Source-Concept - Lee labels the film style of "She's Gotta Have It" as "unconventional," "hybrid," "free style," he defines it in one of his original source-concepts: "I'm combining three elements of filmmaking, narrative, documentary and experimental" (p.108).

This source-concept specifies four criteria for generating other narrative concepts of the film: combining, narrative, documentary, and experimental. From each one of these four criteria, Lee generates a variety of prime concepts for further developing the narrative components of film style. We cite only one example of these prime-concepts; it has to do with how Lee specifies "documentary" criteria: "Show there is a lot of miscommunication, no understanding between the sexes" (p. 71).

This prime-concept sets one criterion for specifying the "documentary" element of the film style: miscommunication. From this criteria, Lee generates a variety of directives whose criterion he uses to specify concrete film scenes. Following is one of these scene directives; it specifies a frank discussion between Jamie and Nola, with Jamie trying in vain to understand Nola's behavior:

Now we see that look...of displeasure travel across his face. For months he's had to share Nola and when she's finally decided to come around she joins the nunnery:

JAMIE: "You will always be searching. For what I'll never know."

NOLA: "I do need understanding from you."

JAMIE: "You go from one extreme to another. Is there no middle ground with you?" (p. 360).

Narrative Strategy Functions

Lee's system of narrative strategies, just described, consists of four major types of narrative components (heroine, audience, premise, style)--conceptualized on three levels (source-concepts, prime-concepts, directives). It performs two major functions: it (1) generates and structures the narrative components of the film and (2) slants the narrative components to obtain the desired film effects--so as to accomplish the intended goals.

Here we analyze the first function--how Lee's strategies create and structure the following five major narrative components of "She's Gotta Have It": the heroine, Nola's lovers, other characters, plot action, and film style.

The Story Heroine - The criteria of Lee's system of four original source-concepts generate the useful prime-concepts and directives to tailor the film heroine very effectively in order to satisfy the communal needs of his audience.

Accordingly, the heroine must represent black women, feminists, and must support the values of Afro cultural heritage; she is beautiful, young, and loves sex; she is out to destroy the double standard in her sex relations, and she asserts her individual freedoms. She is on a liberation path.

From the film title, Lee immediately realizes "She" is the female protagonist he needs to appeal to his intended audience: "She's BLACK and she's a WOMAN. This is my primary audience " (p.178). She becomes the energizing core of the story, around whom all characters and action rotate; the entire story is told "through her eye" (p. 66).

Lee names his heroine Nola Darling, "an old black Southern name" from a list of Southern names. Nola has to be "finer than fine and BLACK...Dark chocolate" (p. 67).

On the basis of a directive, Lee designs a 40 question survey about sex and interviews a sample of black women of Nola's age. From the documentation thus obtained, Lee "got a lot of background and insight to the kind of woman Nola Darling could be," and he uses these insights to tailor Nola's character, views and behavior--as well as that of the other characters in the film (p. 61).

Lee organizes a board of 32 black women "consultants" to help him make Nola most appealing to black audiences and to create a film that satisfies their communal needs (p. 73).

Nola is lower class: she works "in front of a word processor," in a huge office with at least "50 people doing the same work" (p. 308). She is single and age 22; consequently, her need for sex enjoyment and freedom to explore life are paramount (p. 147).

"It's important that (black) audiences have sympathy with Nola," Lee says. "She can't be a FREAK. . . Nola will be beautiful. . . dresses and looks like a normal woman. . . We shouldn't be able to look at her and tell "SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT" (p. 69). "I don't want Nola to be stupid" (p. 81). Nola enjoys sex, but is looking for love before she settles down and has "herself a big family" (p. 808).

Given his audience's communal needs, Lee makes Nola a strong supporter of African culture and Black Nationalism. She knows she was born on May 29th, like Malcolm X; Nola's loft is decorated with "giant posters of Malcolm X and Bob Marley, signs that say 'Stop Apartheid By Any Means Necessary,'" and other African icons. A major reason for liking Mars is his knowledge of Black Nationalism (p.291).

When shopping, Nola "buys black": she makes special stops to buy incense and body oils from a Muslim brother (p. 288), and even her doctor is a black woman (p. 322). She spends free time in black communities registering people to vote (p. 164). Unlike some friends, Nola refuses to move out of black Brooklyn (p. 302). She even makes love in rhythm with Olatunji's "African Drum of Passion" (p. 305).

Nola is a "free spirit." She "has to be a strong WOMAN character. . . the one in charge, in the driver's seat. . . FREEDOM is the most important thing to her" (p. 147). At the end of the film--in spite of being truly in love with Jamie (p. 359), hoping to get married and have a big family (p. 308)--Nola breaks up her relationship with Jamie and walks away--free.

The paradox with Nola is that she wants the freedom to see other men, but "gets upset when Jamie Overstreet sees his other female friends. She wants to have her cake and eat it too." She knows it is whoring; she says, "I'm weak and I can't help how I feel" (p. 81).

Nola's apartment is not just a home; it is a "love-shrine": her big bed is sculptured like an altar and surrounded by candles, each one a different shape or length; Nola lights all the candles and burns African incense only when she makes love with the man she truly loves, Jamie (p. 281).

Lee wants his heroine to be a role model appropriate for black audiences (p. 272). In fact, Nola Darling could easily become the symbol of the liberated black woman of the eighties, according to Nelson George (p. 41).

Nola's Lovers - Like his heroine, Lee tailors the other characters of "She's Gotta Have It" according to the criteria of the four original source-concepts of his script; to enhance the heroine's role, "everybody's character was reflected in how they perceived Nola. That's the whole film, how everybody perceives Nola" (p. 42).

This is especially so of Nola's three lovers: Jamie, Mars and Greer. In fact, Lee splits the concept of the one lover most women have into three separate lovers--to satisfy Nola's sex appetite for several men at a time (p. 361); Nola cannot find one man that possesses everything she needs. So she has Greer for physical attraction, Mars humors her; and Jamie is Mr. Stable (p. 44).

Lee tailors Jamie, the hero, to be the special lover Nola needs: he is the one man she truly loves (p. 320). He is the only one for whom she lights the candles of her love-bed (p. 41). In turn, Jamie understands Nola best (p. 69); he confesses that Nola is the only person in this world that is meant to be his "soul mate" (p. 280). Nola reaches orgasm only with Jamie (p. 150); and he is "the only person Nola tells she loves" (p. 104).

Other Characters - To round off Nola's character, Lee creates four supporting characters according to the criteria of his strategy concepts: her musician father who composes "Nola's Theme" for her birthday, her ex-roommate who consoles her whenever she feels blue, her doctor who helps her with birth control, and a lesbian who fails in

her attempts to seduce Nola. They all confess to the camera that Nola is a "normal person with a strong, healthy sex drive" (p. 323).

Also, to enhance Nola's dislike of sexism, Lee creates fifteen one-scene, funny characters, and has them talk "into the camera;" they all want to "bone " Nola. She calls them "dogs" because they look at women as sex objects. She says: "In my experience I've found two types of men: the decent ones and the dogs" (p. 285).

One of the dogs barks to a sex call, typical of the designs on Nola: "Baby, I got plenty of what you need: ten throbbing inches of government inspected grade-A tubesteak" (p. 87).

Plot Action - All the four original source-concepts Lee uses to develop his script ultimately result in directives for the creation of narrative components of plot action. We can examine two of them; these form the premise of the story:

Men can go out and bone any and everything between fifteen and eighty and it's OK. They are encouraged to have and enjoy sex, while it's not so for women. If they do what men do they're labeled whore, prostitute, nympho, etc. Why this double standard?...That's the basic outline-premise (p. 66).

On the basis of this premise, Lee creates another more specific original source-concept: "I'm combining three elements of filmmaking, narrative, documentary and experimental" (p. 108).

Focusing on the "documentary" element, Lee uses it as a criterion to create more specific prime-concepts and to generate narrative components to document the plot action of the film; he does it at least in three ways.

First, he interviews a sample of black women in order to get from them on tape specific statements and views for the film characters to express, as their own:

Before I wrote one word of dialogue for the script, I made up a survey...of forty questions, very personal questions, pertaining to sexual habits (p. 60).

Many of these statements will come from the (survey) tapes. The best statements I got, now they will become Nola's own words (p. 112).

Second, to make the film a more informative discussion of the sex double standard, Lee creates such directives to generate concrete narrative components that make the plot action more like a documentary:

This gonna be a frank, open discussion of sex, something people have seen rarely in a film(p. 110).

The look of the film should be documentary, even the love scenes (p. 74).

Third, to make his film a more dramatic conflict between the different characters' expectations of and views on Nola's sexual behavior, Lee adopts the "Rashomon" film form to show, like a documentary, the conflicting confessions of different film characters as if they were witnesses in a trial court:

The more I think about it the more "She's Gotta Have It" is resembling Rashomon, which is good. Every witness has his or her own version, his or her own view of Nola (p. 85).

The characters in this film are confessing. Of course, not all of them are telling the truth, only what they perceive as the truth (p.112).

The role of Lee's strategy concepts is probably best illustrated by his directives on how to end "She's Gotta Have It."

According to his journal entries, Lee considered at least nine different possible endings for "She's Gotta Have It" ranging from a vague "I want a happy ending" (p. 66) to more concrete ones: Nola "gets rid of Mars and Greer for Jamie," the man she truly loves (p.135). Then Lee states an even more concrete directive for this ever happy ending: "I'm gonna have both walking up the steps, the one hundred steps in Fort Green Park" (p. 128).

But in a complete reversal, Lee states a more drastic directive for a different ending: "In the end Nola got rid of all three; Greer, Mars and Jamie, in that order" (p. 152).

Lee explains why the more drastic final ending:

My new ending is better but more importantly it's truthful. The way it ended before was pretty bogus, a copout (p. 135).

It would be false for the film to end like "a boy-gets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-regains-girl" (p. 132).

Seemingly, the final ending was prompted more than anything else by the criteria of two directives Lee had previously specified: the criteria of strength and freedom:

Nola has to be a lot stronger. . . a strong WOMAN CHARACTER. . . She should talk about her freedom. This is the most important thing to her, her FREEDOM (p. 147).

Now "She's Gotta Have It" ends truthfully, with Nola's last statement against the sexual double standard--the third source-concept Lee developed after the ones on the film title and the black audience:

As for Jamie. . . He wanted a wife, that mythic old-fashioned girl next door. But ut's more than that. It's really about control, my body, my mind. Who was going to own it? Them? Or me? (p. 361).

Film Style - In conceptualizing his script, Lee creates the following two source-concepts for controlling the specification and development of his film style:

"She's Gotta Have It" is not a realistic piece. It's gonna be highly stylized (p. 99).

I'm combining three elements of filmmaking, narrative, documentary and experimental (p. 108).

From the last source-concept, Lee derives prime-concepts and from them directives--whose criteria he uses to generate narrative components to stylize the film accordingly. Following are two prime-concepts whose criteria Lee uses to stylize the experimental elements of the script:

No way will this be a straight, linear, cut-and-dry narrative film. I want to break on the narration, flashbacks, talking directly into the camera, people asking the audience questions. A lot of camera movement, experimental stuff (p. 73).

I really wanted this film to concentrate on the visuals (p. 56).

I'm gonna make still photographs an integral part of this work (p. 78).

Lee uses the criteria of these prime-concepts (non-linear, experimental, visuals) to create the following directive specifying the concrete components of a montage scene:

The following will be a MONTAGE of Nola with her three men, Jamie, Mars and Greer. It will consist of LIVE ACTION and

STILL PHOTOGRAPHS. Each segment is a remembrance of the good times Nola spent with each one. Some of the shots will be SUPER-IMPOSED over each other (p. 354).

We need not repeat examples of the "narrative" and "documentary" elements specified in the source-concept; we have already shown their importance for the film. We can now state a few prime-concepts, Lee uses to generate directives of other style components such as humor, music, and visual metaphors; for instance,

The sex scenes have to be interesting or this whole thing will be monotonous....Her narrations have to be funny....This film has to be really more about men, and the crazy things they do (p.67).

When talking directly into the camera, which in fact is really Nola....It should be hilarious (p. 71).

Given the controversial nature of Nola's sex appetite, Lee camouflages the sex scenes with his humorous treatment of the subject: the funny dialogue, the comic conduct of Nola's lover Mars, and the comic scenes such as when Nola gathers her three lovers in her "love shrine" and feeds them a Christmas dinner with each trying to outshine the other and playing the waiting game to see who will end up spending the night with Nola.

Lee uses several prime-concepts to make music an integral part of "She's Gotta Have It":

Music is going to play an enormous part in this film. I would like one theme to be dominant throughout. . . 'Nola's Theme' (p. 99).

There will be different types of music, Body Music and Funkin (p. 59).

I want a different sound. . . a bigger sound (p. 118).

For instance, Lee's directive on how to shoot in fast motion Nola's lovemaking includes the statement: "The music to be played throughout the entire scene will be Olatunji's 'African Drums of Passion'" (p. 305).

We have already shown how Lee uses the "Rashomon" film form as an allegory for the debate in the black community about diverse views on sex. Lee also uses strategy concepts to visualize sex as a metaphor in the narrative components of film scenes. Nola's own loft

would seem empty but for her "loving bed" right in the middle of the floor, a metaphor of love-making:

A lot of black women have a candle-and-incense thing going....We wanted to make her bed like a shrine, like a cathedral (p. 41).

Nola's apartment must have a hundred candles in it, all lit (p.83).

See nothing but candles surrounding the loving bed (p. 231).

According to the data of this analysis, "She's Gotta Have It" is an excellent example of Third Cinema: it is concerned with both the narrative content and the aesthetic goals of liberation films. Let us compare the goals of "She's Gotta Have It" with those of Third Cinema films.

According to Gabriel,⁹ Third Cinema films have at least five characteristics in common; these can be seen in the following chart. We can also see that, in basic ways, the goals of "She's Gotta Have It" are specific applications of Third Cinema goals:

THIRD CINEMA FILMS

SHE'SGOTTAHAVE IT

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. have revolutionary goals | emancipate black women from sexism |
| 2. raise the consciousness of the audience | educate black people about loving each other |
| 3. show bonds between the individual, the collective and history | show Afro identity, mass culture and heritage |
| 4. show conflict between progressive and reactionary forces | destereotype the image of black men and women |
| 5. devise new aesthetics of liberation | make a successful low-budget artistic black film |

We can now document briefly one by one the goals of "She's Gotta Have It."

1. Sexism - Third Cinema is committed to a direct opposition to oppression and addresses the issues of class, culture, sexism, and armed struggle.¹⁰ One of its major recurring themes is the struggle for the emancipation of women. In films such as the "Last Grave at Dimbaza" (South Africa), "Sambizanga" (Angola), "Lucia" (Cuba), and "Ceddo" (Senegal) the role of women in bringing about social change is one of the most important themes.¹¹

According to Gabriel, in "Ceddo," film director Ousmane Sembene stresses the message that "the earth of Africa must be energized into revolution through womanhood or otherwise remain emasculated in slavery."¹²

"She's Gotta Have It" is essentially a film about sexism; in fact, Lee makes the "double standard" the very premise of the film story.

2. Education - In appearance, "She's Gotta Have It" seems to be mainly about sex. Actually it is also about educating black people to love each other and their ethnicity. Cultural documentation is one of the three main content elements of the film (p. 108).

To give a documentary base to his film and to inform his audience about the sexual values and practices of the black community, Lee reads the major black women writers for their views on sex and researches the topic in many publications (p. 76). He develops a 40-question survey about sex which he uses to interview, on tape, a sample of black women of Nola's age. The survey made Lee

realize that women want the same things men want....We are raised to believe that women aren't supposed to want us...to screw a lot, have sex and run around (p. 61).

Lee sets up a consultants board of black women to help him make "She's Gotta Have It" also a documentary black film (p. 73): "What I am trying to do is show there is a lot of miscommunication, no understanding between the sexes....Not all men are assholes...mumbling idiots" (p. 71).

Lee also uses the film to humanize the image of blacks, among others, by showing black men making love to black sisters: "We wanted to...make an intelligent film that showed black people loving each other...show some kind of black sensuality" (p. 57).

3. Black Heritage - According to Bazin, Western cinema "does not spring from a communal psychology but from a sociology of atomized and gregarious masses."¹³ In contrast, communal psychology and cultural heritage are essential components of Third Cinema films--

which are founded on folk culture and serve their people's struggle for political and cultural liberation. As Gabriel states, "Culture. . . is at all moments the obligatory point of departure" for Third Cinema films.¹⁴

Regardless of its style, the ultimate goal of a Third Cinema film is to elaborate on the cultural elements to allow the audience to recognize themselves in the film and to identify with its protagonist and story.¹⁵

According to a doctoral study by Bouteba, ethnic minority groups in the U.S. have special need of four types of cultural heritage elements: their people's ethnic identity, history, accomplishments, and cultural life style--in that order of importance.¹⁶

Unlike Hollywood movies, Lee incorporates into "She's Gotta Have It" significant elements of the African-American cultural heritage beginning with the heroine: Nola is highly representative of lower class blacks (p. 69).

Lee has his father compose "Nola's Theme," and runs it through the entire film as an invitation to the audience to identify with the heroine (p. 310): he has Olatunji play "African Drums of Passion" during Nola's love scenes (p. 305); he perfumes Nola's "love shrine" with the candles and incense that black women crave (p. 311) and decorates its walls with icons of Black Nationalism (p. 291). Nola "buys black" (p.288) and greases the scalp of her lover Mars, as a sister's gesture of blackness (p. 318).

To keep Nola and the audience laughing, Lee endows Mars with the sense of Afro humor: he speaks in black English, uses the glib jive of black young men joking with one another on street corners, and tells many, many stories. Inherited from Africa, Mars' type of humor is known as "signifying": "Playing around by pitting words against each other" in verbal contests. Signifying was developed during the slavery era to outsmart the "master" by using English in double or even contradictory meanings he couldn't understand.¹⁷

4. Destereotyping - As another major goal, "She's Gotta Have It" destereotypes the racist images of African-Americans. For instance, Hollywood's black film icons were never allowed to make love to a black sister; even Sidney Poitier never made love to anybody. He had to film his own, "For the Love of Ivy," a very chaste film of a black love story. One exception is Harry Belafonte; however, Belafonte was sexual only with white women, not black sisters (p. 57).

Lee shows he is "tired" of Hollywood's stereotypes of black women as copies of white women or as sex objects, and especially of "the whole misperception that all young black males are animals, rapists, muggers" (p. 53).

According to Pearl Bowser,¹⁸ black women in black cinema have not fared much better. Usually they have been the characters

through which the alleged ills of the race are displayed. They have been portrayed as fairskinned copies of helpless white middle class doll-wives; as spoiled heiresses who leave their good husbands and children for a city slickers, who then abandon them to die; as married to upper class men who discard them as inferior, whereupon the women commit suicide; as buxom, misguided mothers who sacrifice themselves uselessly for weak daughters and, because of their own sexual fantasies, are duped by corrupt preachers; as mere vessels for the sexual strokes of strong macho figures. Rarely if ever heroic (exceptions are "Bush Mama" (1977) by Haile Gerima and "Claudine" (1974) by Ossie Davis), black women have been "underdeveloped characters with little role in the changing world."

Now we have another exception: Nola Darling, the heroine of "She's Gotta Have It" (1986) by Spike Lee. She is a beautiful young black woman who loves sex and makes it a magic door to true love, a working class supporter of Black Nationalism, and--more important--she is a feminist fighting to emancipate herself from the double standard in sex relations.

5. Film Success - "She's Gotta Have It" proved to be a major hit with both critics and audiences. It received a standing ovation for five minutes during its world premiere at the San Francisco Film Festival (p.272); at the Cannes Film Festival, it was awarded the *Prix de la Jeunesse* for the best new film (p. 368).

The success of Lee's film is due mainly to the strategies he uses to create the narrative components of the script and to develop them into a popular film. Lee says, from the start, "I wanted the film to be a success and I knew it would be a success" (p. 50).

Lee uses three narrative elements to build the success of his film: a documentary presentation of the sex values and practices of young black women, Nola's love scenes, and humor in both dialogue and scene situations. Regarding the documentary element in the film, Lee states,

The look of the film should be a documentary (p. 74).

This is gonna be a frank, open discussion of sex, something people have seen rarely in a film (p. 110).

In fact, Lee considers the sex scenes to be the prime success factor:

I have to decide how explicit the sex scenes are gonna be. It can't be porn, but it has to be vicious. They have to be a little kinky (p. 66).

This is the only way a small film like this will get recognized" (p. 78).

But Lee also knows that "She's Gotta Have It" would achieve maximum appeal only with lots of humor:

The plot is very funny to me right now (p. 66).

Mars is a funny person and it is his ability to make Nola laugh that gets him over (p. 111).

Lee wants even Nola's sex scenes to be sugarcoated with an appropriate dosage of humor:

The sex scenes have to be interesting or this whole thing will be monotonous. . . Her narrations have to be funny. . . this film has to be more about men, and the crazy things they do and why they do them (p. 67).

Written, directed, edited, and co-produced by Spike Lee--who also acts in the role of Mars--"She's Gotta Have It" is also an outstanding financial success: produced with a budget of \$175,000 and sold for approximately \$450,000 to the distributor Island Pictures (p.274). By early 1987, "She's Gotta Have It" had grossed more than \$8 million.

Such commercial success led Spike Lee to say: "'School Daze' will be the first time that I'll be able to concentrate a hundred percent...to make a film work" (p. 35).

Now, with "Do The Right Thing," his first interracial Hollywood film, we can expect even better and much more successful films from a more experienced Spike Lee, a man who asserts, "I truly believe I was put here to make films" (p. 17).

¹ Sheila Benson, "Spike Lee Comes of Age," *Los Angeles Times* (6/30/89), p.1

² Anne Thompson, "Doing The Right Thing," *L.A. Weekly* (6/2/89), p.1

³ Spike Lee, *She's Gotta Have It*, Simon & Schuster, 1987. Further reference to this book will be incorporated into the body of the text with page numbers indicated in parentheses.

⁴ Dudley Andrews, *Concepts in Film Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.14.

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- ⁵F. A. Rockwell, *How to Write Plots That Sell*, Contemporary Books, 1975, p.221.
- ⁶Diawara Manthia, "Oral Literature and African Film," *Presence Africaine*, #142, 1987, p. 36.
- ⁷James Davidson, "Memory of the Defeat in Japan in Rashomon," in Donald Richie (ed.), *Rashomon*, Rutgers University Press, 1987, p.159.
- ⁸Richie, *Ibid.*, p.90.
- ⁹Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: Aesthetics of Liberation*, UMI Press, 1982, p.18.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.16
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, p.18
- ¹²*Ibid.*, p.88
- ¹³Andre Bazin, *French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance*, Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1981, p.88.
- ¹⁴Gabriel, *Op.Cit.*, p.95.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, p.97.
- ¹⁶P.M. Bouteba, "Designing Chicano Heritage Materials," University Microfilms (82 29 058), Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982, p.94.
- ¹⁷Roger Abrahams, *Afro-American Folktales*, Pantheon Books, 1985.
- ¹⁸Pearl Bowser, "Sexual Imagery and Black Women in Cinema," in Gladstone Yearwood (ed.), *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, Ohio University, Center for African Studies, 1982:42.