

Inside Man (2006)

Major Credits:

Director: Spike Lee
Screenplay: Russell Gewirtz
Cinematography: Matthew Libatique
Editing: Barry Alexander Brown
Music: Terence Blanchard

Cast: Denzel Washington (Detective Keith Frazier), Clive Owen (Dalton Russell), Jodie Foster (Madeleine White), Christopher Plummer (Arthur Case), Willem Dafoe (Captain John Darius), Chiwetel Ejiofor (Detective Bill Mitchell)

Background and Context:

Inside Man represents a departure for Spike Lee: a commercial movie scripted by first-timer Russell Gewirtz and produced by Hollywood veteran Brian Grazer (*Apollo 13*, *A Beautiful Mind*) with a star cast. It is his fourth film with Denzel Washington and includes long-time collaborators like Brown (editing) and Blanchard (music). Despite the high production values, costly location shooting in New York, and celebrated actors, the \$50 million budget was a bargain by Hollywood standards.

Lee rarely works within the conventions of movie genres, but *Inside Man* draws on both the tradition of caper films (the French classic, *Rififi*, d. Jules Dassin, 1955, seems an unacknowledged source) and the contemporary popularity of “puzzle” scripts like *Memento* (2000) and *The Prestige* (2006), both directed by Christopher Nolan. The film explicitly pays homage to *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), directed by New York filmmaker Sidney Lumet and starring Al Pacino in another memorable performance. Two of the supporting actors in *Inside Man* also performed in *Dog Day Afternoon*. Russell's sarcastic reference to Detective Frazier as “Serpico” alludes to another great Lumet/Pacino film shot in New York, *Serpico*, 1973.

Cinematic Techniques:

1. Moving Camera: for a supposed “action” film, *Inside Man* is remarkably *talky*. Lee's restlessly active camera—numerous crane shots, Steadicams, tracking shots, hand-held cameras, and the director's signature shot, what he calls the “double dolly” in which the actor is on a separate dolly as the camera tracks in or out, creating a “glide” effect—animates these dialogue scenes, as when the officers discuss the circumstances while walking in the street or, in the next scene, when Detective Frazier talks to Ms. White in Battery Park.
2. Interrogation Scenes: Lee shoots these improvised scenes with fast film stock that produces a grainy, slightly green image that reminds me, at least, of the night photography associated with the Iraq wars, giving the dialogue an added sense of verisimilitude. Spectators throughout the bank robbery, we feel “imbedded” in these flash forward moments.
3. Set pieces: by contrast, the two extended dialogue scenes between Washington and Foster are shot in one take, with no editing, allowing the accomplished performers to display their virtuosity. Compare these two scenes with the formally composed sequence in which Russell shares a pizza (from Sal's Famous, an allusion to *Do the Right Thing*) with the young hostage.

Questions for Discussion:

1. One big one: Granted the great pleasure of the film's craftsmanship—its intelligent script, slick camera movement, and star turns by a gifted cast—is there any real *substance* to the film? Has Lee “sold out” his talent for commercial success? Can *Inside Man* even *sustain* extended discussion?
2. How does Lee portray New York in the first decade of the new millennium? How does the film reflect the new reality of a post-9/11 world?

