
Introduction

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We've Gotta Have It— Spike Lee, African American Film, and Cinema Studies

Sexist/gynophobes, heterosexist/homophobes, and other witting and unwitting defenders of patriarchy champion Spike Lee films. So do nonreactionaries. So do many progressives. Not because the texts are so malleable that they can be maneuvered into any given ideological space, but because many extratextual elements figure into the response. Hunger for images is one element; pride in Lee's accomplishment is another. That the range of spectators is wide speaks to the power of the films and the brilliance of the filmmaker.

—Toni Cade Bambara, "Programming with *School Daze*"

With the release of his first feature, *She's Gotta Have It*, in 1986, Spike Lee entered the lexicon of contemporary American filmmaking. Starting as an independent filmmaker at a time when American independents were gaining global status, Lee helped usher in a new cinematic look and vocabulary in American filmmaking.¹ More important, he gained visibility at a moment when African American film was at a nadir. Following the industry's shift into blockbuster filmmaking in the mid-1970s, the studios abandoned blaxploitation film, their sole investment in African American cinema during the decade (and only marginally associated with African American filmmaking, since the majority of the personnel associated with the genre were not black). With the success of films like *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) Hollywood had little need or interest in producing films with black characters for black audiences. With the exception of Michael Schultz and Stan Lathan and, to a lesser extent, Warrington and Reginald Hudlin, African American film production had all but disappeared.² That is, until *She's Gotta Have It*.

From the early stages of his career, Lee has been an outspoken proponent of African American film who continues to be a thorn in the side of an industry that has often paid lip service to diversity without supporting it with funding or screen time. Lee's approach to aesthetics and politics is nowhere more evident than in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), his controversial third feature, which sparked a critical pandemic either praising its complex explorations of the interconnections between race and economics or deriding its purported racism and sexism. Wherever the critics landed on this issue, the film ultimately initiated a seminal and enduring microcosmic (Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, New York) and macrocosmic (United States) dialogue about race relations. Lee has continued to focus on the complexities of race and representation throughout his career—for example, in *Bamboozled* (2000), his satire of contemporary television and film; in *Inside Man* (2006), a look at the erasures of history enveloped in the narrative and stylistic conventions of an action film; and in *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), an examination of the government's (state and federal) and media's responses to Hurricane Katrina's disastrous effects on the people and the city of New Orleans. The body of his work, in myriad ways, identifies the tensions inherent in such a diverse national body.

One of the important components of Lee's filmmaking has been its inward extension of the complexities of race and class toward a self-examination of community not seen in African American filmmaking since the early films of Oscar Micheaux, the intervention of Melvin Van Peebles in the 1970s, or the more recent independent works of filmmakers such as Robert Townsend, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Marlon Riggs, or Cheryl Dunye. Lee's cultural critique is geared toward making cinematic and televisional representations of black life more complex by showing its varied looks, sounds, and textures. In this way, the director's films, particularly *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing*, *Clockers* (1995), *Get on the Bus* (1996), and *Bamboozled* often ask African American audience members to consider the ways in which internalized racism can fragment—or unite—a community. Further, they suggest to audiences unfamiliar with black life—and his films, while geared toward black audiences, attract a diversity of viewers—that African American experiences are heterogeneous and complex.

Yet Lee's films are more broadly American, as well. They require their audiences to question conventional structures of feeling, the normative approaches to life as lived in the United States, and to rethink national mythology. Fiction and nonfiction features such as *Malcolm X* (1992), *4 Little Girls* (1997), and *Summer of Sam* (1999), for example, return us to seminal moments in American history to help us understand the present. *25th Hour* (2002), set in an almost immediate post-9/11 context, provides one of the

most heartfelt love letters to a New York and nation still recovering from the horrors of that day. Other films, such as *School Daze*, *Girl 6* (1996), *He Got Game* (1998), and *Bamboozled*, explore the myths of self-determination and success so integral to American literary and cinematic narratives. In *He Got Game*, for example, Aaron Copland's music situates the story of a African American basketball player from Coney Island within the wider scope of American culture. As this suggests, Lee adapts American aesthetics for an African American context and vice versa, in the process creating a mode of address that acknowledges a black subjectivity as part of a national point of view. That he does so by addressing a variety of audiences, as illustrated by this essay's opening epigraph, is an indication of the ways in which his films have encouraged both intra- and interracial debate.

Lee's career and filmmaking style also must be understood in the context of American cinema from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s. During this time, American film aesthetics were transforming as young, university-trained directors such as Martin Scorsese, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg skirted Hollywood's more formal apprenticeship system and (at least) initially made films outside or on the margins of the industry. Often these filmmakers were influenced, if not narratively, then stylistically, by post-World War II national film movements such as Italian Neorealism, the French New Wave, and the films of the Japanese filmmakers Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu. By the 1980s, audiences were accustomed to films that revised genre and reworked narrative conventions, and that often did so through quotation, allusion, and homage. Lee, as well, is a university-trained filmmaker who is familiar with a variety of international filmmaking styles. The stylistic imprints of the New Wave, cinema vérité, classical Hollywood, and New Hollywood Cinema (especially early Martin Scorsese) can be found in his films as early as *She's Gotta Have It*, which combines black-and-white film stock, direct address, and jump cuts with a Technicolor homage to Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) in a story about a sexually liberated woman in Brooklyn. This formal experimentation, influenced by global cinema movements, remains one of the characteristics of the director's filmmaking and explicitly marks some of his films, such as *Summer of Sam*, which is just as much about Scorsese's New York from the 1970s as it is about the Son of Sam murders from 1977.³

She's Gotta Have It was a box-office success (one of the few outright profit earners Lee has produced), earning approximately \$10 million in its first year of release. But the film was historic for other, more important reasons: First, it inspired a critical dialogue about its filmmaker, its images, its place in independent film, and its status as an African American film at a time when black films and filmmakers were absent from the national and international scene.



She's Gotta Have It (1986). Tracy Camilla Johns as Nola Darling.

White critics in the popular press mostly lauded the film (perhaps they, like the black press, were also tired of blaxploitation caricatures) while having a less amicable relationship with its outspoken director, who often forced them to reconsider their own attitudes toward race and representation. African American critics and scholars had more mixed responses because the film raised (and in some instances resurrected) often difficult questions regarding African American representation—for example, did Lee's films define a black aesthetic, and if so, how? And how might black women fit into this aesthetic?

At the same time, there's no doubt that the film and the two that quickly followed—*School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing*—were responsible for sparking a renewed interest in African American film production, and it is not an overstatement to credit Lee with influencing a new wave of contemporary black filmmaking, a New Black Cinema movement, over the subsequent years. The combined critical and financial success of Lee's films, along with the attention garnered by Robert Townsend's self-financed *Hollywood Shuffle* (1988) and Reginald Hudlin's *House Party* (1990), ignited Hollywood investment in African American projects in the early 1990s—most notably, John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) and its imitators, such as Allen and Albert Hughes's *Menace II Society* (1993). Lee's stylistic and narrative innovations also have had more far-reaching influence. For example, international filmmakers such as Mathieu Kassovitz (*La Haine*, 1995) of France and Jean-Paul Bekolo (*Quartier Mozart*, 1992) of Cameroon cite Lee as the inspiration for

their cinematic explorations of the politics of race, economics, and postcolonial tensions in their specific national contexts. More indirectly, Lee's aesthetic imprint can be found in the urban settings, youth communities, pop-culture references, and reflexive aesthetics of films such as *Amores Perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, Mexico, 2000) and *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, Brazil, 2002).

A consideration of the impact of Lee's career, however, should not be limited to aesthetic influence. As the opening epigraph suggests, and the rich critical history of films like *She's Gotta Have It* and *Do the Right Thing* indicate, Lee's career has coincided with, and influenced, a crucial moment in film scholarship. While the articles collected in *The Spike Lee Reader* illustrate the depth and complexity of Lee's oeuvre, they also represent the rich variety of responses his work has inspired over the past two decades. The director's films have raised a variety of questions, from attempts to outline the nature, or "essence," of a black cinematic aesthetics to a re-visioning of American film as a whole. They have sparked critical inquiries into the nature of genres, the role of the auteur, and the interactive mechanics of an active text and an oppositional spectatorship. They have asked us to reconsider spectatorial pleasure; to revel in and deconstruct the complexities of their polyphonic visual and aural fields. They consider not only race, but also the often blurry and fraught interconnections among race, gender, sexuality, and class. In short, they have encouraged and, in some cases, forced us to interact with what's on screen and, perhaps more important, with each other, whether it be in the theater, in the café, in the classroom, or on the street corner. *The Spike Lee Reader* continues this dialogue; the essays are meant to interact with each other and with readers.

Lee has been prolific, directing more than twenty feature films, producing other directors' works, directing videos for musicians such as Branford Marsalis, and making commercials for companies that include Nike, the Gap, and Pepsi. The essays collected here consider a selection of the director's feature films rather than his entire directorial output, since to do so would be unwieldy in a project of this nature. A majority of the films included here are considered by critics and scholars to be major works in Lee's aesthetic and formal development, and many, including *She's Gotta Have It*, *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, and *Bamboozled*, have been the focus of detailed critical assessments elsewhere.⁴ Other films, such as *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Crooklyn* (1994), *Clockers*, *Get on the Bus*, *4 Little Girls*, *He Got Game*, and *Summer of Sam* are important, though critically underexamined, films. They, like the director's better-known work, often ask us to reconsider American history through an African American lens by adapting, according to Keith M. Harris, "African American rhetorical traditions through the medium

of cinema.”⁵ Finally, Lee’s *Inside Man* completes the collection because it provides the first example of the director adapting his signature style for a studio-based big-budget action film, in the process becoming secondary to studio machinery. As such, the film raises compelling questions about directorial control and authorship, topics that run throughout the collection—in Anna Everett’s consideration of *Malcolm X*, for example—but that coalesce in a film that has been discussed less as a director’s project than as either an action film or an actor’s showcase.

With a director as productive as Lee, it is inevitable that some films, unfortunately, are not included in *The Spike Lee Reader*. They include some with theatrical releases, including *Mo’ Better Blues* (1990), *Girl 6* (1996), *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000), *25th Hour* (2002), and *She Hate Me* (2004), and the majority of Lee’s made-for-television films (*Sucker Free City*, *Jim Brown: All American*, *A Huey P. Newton Story*, *Freak*, and *When the Levees Broke*, among others).⁶ Films were selected for the collection because of their place in Lee’s oeuvre and the critical coverage they may or may not have received. Most of the examples listed earlier (with the exception, perhaps, of *When the Levees Broke*) are arguably “minor” films according to this criterion. Some, like *Girl 6* and *She Hate Me* feel more like transitional pieces—experimentations with style or narrative structure—rather than fully fledged ideas. In addition, some excluded films are flawed, especially in their treatment of gender, in their development of character, or in their execution of narrative. While it can be reasonably argued that all of Lee’s films are flawed in some way—which is what makes them interesting to scholars—the issues raised by the excluded films are covered elsewhere in the collection. For example, essays by Anna Everett, S. Craig Watkins, and Krin Gabbard discuss gender and sexuality in detail.

There has been no end to the critical coverage that Lee has generated. The director and his films have produced active and ongoing scholarly debates, from mass-market biographies to academic articles and books. Reviewing the scholarship devoted to Lee’s films is the equivalent to revisiting some of the most important critical and theoretical moments in film studies from the past two decades. Again, because Lee’s career has encompassed significant methodological changes in the field (coinciding, for example, with the establishment of cultural studies and the expansion of film and media studies across college and university curricula), a survey of “Spike Lee scholarship” provides an opportunity to review the critical landscape. With this intention, *The Spike Lee Reader* contains previously published pieces dating back to as early as bell hooks’s seminal “‘whose pussy is this’: a feminist comment,” an intervention against the early euphoria surrounding *She’s Gotta Have It*, and Michele Wallace’s discussion of Lee’s treatment of gender relations in this

and *School Daze*, his next feature film. hooks, Wallace, and other scholars writing during the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Wahneema Lubiano, Ed Guerrero, and Toni Cade Bambara, provide a telescopic rendering of the questions many scholars were asking of black film at the time by surveying Lee's filmmaking precedents, situating his work in the contemporary moment, and opening discussion for future critical assessments of African American life on screen. As such, they form the foundations for later considerations of Lee's work; indeed, one cannot understand contemporary approaches to the director's films without a familiarity with these essays.

The Spike Lee Reader also includes a selection of new essays by prominent film and media scholars. These new pieces reassess Lee's major films, such as *Malcolm X*, while at other times they consider films, including *Get on the Bus* and *Crooklyn*, that have received little or no critical attention. S. Craig Watkins's work on the former and Mark D. Cunningham's on the latter, for example, offer important insight into some of Lee's overlooked films. Other essays, such as Beretta E. Smith-Shomade's discussion of *Bamboozled*, build on earlier Lee scholarship and engage in a metacritical dialogue that extends beyond the texts to the films' reception. Still others, such as Keith M. Harris's essay on *Clockers* and David A. Gerstner's on *Inside Man*, interpret the director's works through wider theoretical frameworks, such as those of Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. A few previously published but relatively unknown pieces continue this trend. For example, Dan Flory situates Lee's *Summer of Sam* among recent philosophical theories of race. As a collective, these critical approaches to the director's work suggest not only the malleability of the texts but also the depth of their cinematic significations.

Because Lee's films raise questions that have been central to African American life and letters for more than a century, many of the articles, both old and new, return to seminal cultural and political figures, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, to remind readers that the desire to author an African American identity has long been bound up in an attempt to define an African American aesthetic; in other words, black identity often has been connected directly to what is on the page or the screen. (In the past, this often became a question of positive or negative representation.) Lee's films play an interesting role in these debates. On the one hand, the films and their director often encourage viewers and critics to identify what is on screen with an essential blackness, or a "Black thing," to quote Lee on *Do the Right Thing*. And yet, as Wahneema Lubiano so eloquently argues, the films also "represent a problematic through which the political difficulties that inhere in African American cultural production . . . can be usefully discussed,"⁷ a point James C. McKelley makes as

well in his discussion of the relevance of Du Bois's theory of "double consciousness" to *Do the Right Thing*. While critical reactions to Lee's films often belie the scarcity of black images on screen, and the overdetermined expectations many viewers bring as a result, their shortcomings, omissions, and flaws enable—in fact, initiate—a more extended dialogue regarding representation, stereotype, and caricature. Their skillful and self-conscious dialogue with representation reminds us, ultimately, that they are commenting on reality and its representations, not representing reality itself.⁸

To this end, Lee often references different filmmaking styles. Like those of many of his immediate predecessors in American filmmaking, especially Martin Scorsese (whom he often cites as an influence), his films often reconsider genre, and a number of the essays in *The Spike Lee Reader* discuss this facet of his filmmaking. Toni Cade Bambara, for example, suggests that Lee uses the conventions of the musical to "make a wake up call about intracommunity self-ambush."⁹ Anna Everett, in her discussion of the genealogy of Malcolm X's life story and the controversies surrounding the film project, places Lee's *Malcolm X* within the traditions of the Hollywood biopic, arguing that the director's attempt to make an African American variant of the genre was fraught with outside expectations (from within and outside the black community) on how the leader's life should be portrayed on screen. Mark D. Cunningham places Lee's semiautobiographical *Crooklyn* in the tradition of the print and screen fairy tale, linking the film to predecessors such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Victor Fleming's film adaptation of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (and referencing the musical genre via Fleming's film).¹⁰ Keith M. Harris argues that in *Clockers*, "Lee places the dramatic elements of tragedy and melodrama in dynamic conflict and discontinuous relief" as a means of disrupting the generic conventions of the hood film.¹¹ And Dan Flory argues that *Summer of Sam*'s use of *film noir* conventions introduce race into a film that is otherwise considered to be the director's first film to focus on non-black characters.

Lee's films, however, are more than examples of genre revision, and the essays collected here seek to understand them as a polyphonic system of cultural and political references engaged in diegetic and extradiegetic dialogues. His films draw from literature (for example, Zora Neale Hurston, Alex Haley, Richard Price), music (ranging from Aaron Copland, Bill Lee, and Terence Blanchard to Public Enemy, the Roots, and Mos Def), visual culture (black memorabilia, including print materials, sculpture, and other artworks), and contemporary popular culture, including television (sitcoms and music video) and advertising (print and television). Many of the essays in *The Spike Lee Reader* seek to decipher this complex signifying system, including the selection by Krin Gabbard, whose analysis of *He Got Game*'s soundtrack suggests

that Lee's choice of Aaron Copland's music was a strategy of reversing "the familiar Hollywood practice of using the visible . . . sounds of black music to accompany the actions of white people" through the inclusion of work by a gay Jewish composer.¹² Tavia Nyong'o interprets *Bamboozled's* references to the history of blackface minstrelsy and other racist visual culture as a form of "racial kitsch," a method of "oppositional curating" that seeks to understand and implement racist content in a critical manner,¹³ whereas Beretta E. Smith-Shomade argues that in the film Lee uses the frameworks of "paradox and authenticity" to "examine the ways in which Lee both forwards and undermines notions of black progress in twenty-first-century visual culture and within real-lived actualities."¹⁴

As this suggests, Lee's films are textual systems employing quotation, allusion, and homage to explore the shared national trauma of racism and its continuing social, economic, and political affects. While most of his theatrical releases have been fiction films, many refer to actual historical or contemporary events from large-scale global disasters, such as slavery and the Holocaust, to more localized events (Malcolm X's assassination; church bombings in Birmingham, Alabama; the Million Man March in Washington, D.C.; the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles; the deaths of Eleanor Bumpers, Michael Stewart, and Yusuf Hawkins in New York City; or the Bush administration's abandonment of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina) with national repercussions. In many cases, such as *Malcolm X* and *Get on the Bus*, real-world actualities structure a narrative in which fact is skillfully blended with fiction. In other cases, such as *Jungle Fever*, *Summer of Sam*, and *Inside Man*, historical moments and myths are inspirations for the narrative; they exist beside the story, always reminding audiences of their presence. Ed Guerrero suggests, for example, that *Jungle Fever*, following a cinematic legacy that can be traced back to films such as *The Masher* (1907) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), works against society's ambivalent and often hostile attitude towards interracial romance.¹⁵ And David A. Gerstner reads Lee's New York in *Inside Man* as the director's (perhaps) indirect comment on the Patriot Act's forced homogenization of national diversity.

This ongoing acknowledgment of the world outside the text reminds us that one of Lee's consistent goals has been to introduce a distinct, historicized, African American point of view into a medium that is often solely associated with entertainment, at least in its American (and Americanized) variant. From the floor plan of a slave ship filling the establishing shot of *School Daze* to references to the Holocaust in *Inside Man*, Lee's films have returned us to decisive moments in history, often announcing, as in *Bamboozled's* definition of satire, their pedagogical intentions. This strategy extends to Lee's nonfiction work, as well, which explores important events and figures

in black history. The film *4 Little Girls*, as Christine Acham suggests here, functions like many other African American documentaries in that its purpose is to preserve, remember, and recuperate black stories, especially in a contemporary context where so much of the past has been forgotten. In this film, as in his other nonfiction films, Lee combines contemporary interviews with historical footage to suggest continuities between past events and attitudes and the present context. As in *Bamboozled*, the suggestion is made that we can only move forward as a society by understanding our past.

As early as *She's Gotta Have It*, Lee was aware that to succeed as an African American filmmaker he had to continue making films while also maintaining a level of autonomy from the industry; therefore, he set out on a path that belied the mainstream experience of most black directors who rely on studios to sporadically fund their films. Even before his first feature was released, Lee established 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, his production company. This followed, in 1996, with an advertising company, Spike/DDB, through which he directs commercials aimed at urban (i.e., young African American and Latino) markets.¹⁶ While he has often worked with studios such as Columbia Pictures and Warner Brothers, Lee's production and advertising companies (the latter in particular) provide the financial foundations that enable him to make films that otherwise would not be made. They have also guaranteed that Lee retains the right of final cut over his films, a form of directorial control that remains rare in the industry and provides us with, perhaps, one of the strongest cases of a director fully in charge of his work.

Lee is the quintessential inside/outside man, often working with the industry, but just as often looking elsewhere for financing. *She's Gotta Have It's* patchwork of funding sources was the director's first attempt to make an independent feature film.¹⁷ Since then he has often sought alternative sources of financing, perhaps most famously when the completion-bond company on *Malcolm X* closed down the over-budget production before the film was completed. Lee financed the remaining \$3 million by taking a cut in salary and soliciting donations from high-profile African American personalities, including Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Magic Johnson, and Tracy Chapman.¹⁸ In other instances, especially with his more politically "sensitive" films, Lee has experimented with cheaper technologies as a means of cutting production costs. As Craig Watkins discusses, *Get on the Bus* is an example of just such an innovative approach to low-budget filmmaking. Since Lee received no studio interest in his film about the Million Man March, he and his producers solicited private investors, eventually raising \$2.4 million from a variety of African American celebrities, including Will Smith and Wesley Snipes. He shot the film on Super-16 mm film stock, a cheaper and more flexible format, thus enabling his exploration of African American masculinities to make it to the screen. This

technological experimentation continued with *4 Little Girls* and *Bamboozled*, both of which were shot using digital video technology, the latter with consumer-grade digital videocameras and some Super-16 mm footage.

Despite his continuing role as the studios' conscience, Lee is also an inside man who wields tremendous power and influence. While many of his films have been low-budget independents, he has also worked on big-budget studio films—most notably, *Malcolm X* and *Inside Man*.¹⁹ Anna Everett, in her consideration of the former film, identifies the multiple effects that the studio had on the making of *Malcolm X* years, even decades, before it went into production. And David A. Gerstner's essay on *Inside Man* asks compelling questions about Lee's status as an auteur, particularly if we take the accepted notion of an auteur as a director working within the studio system and yet having a consistent signature style. The essays in *The Spike Lee Reader* suggest a number of continuities across Lee's oeuvre: a focus on race and representation, technical experimentation, and a self-conscious approach to film form, narrative, and genre. Yet what do we make of Lee's *Inside Man*, a studio-backed action film with a \$45 million budget, by far the largest that the director has ever enjoyed? As Gerstner suggests, Lee has been marked as a difficult filmmaker—he's political, didactic, and controversial—so much so that he was "erased" from the film's marketing campaign, which focused on its stars rather than its director. There is no denying, however, that Lee's traces exist throughout the film's narrative, form, and politics. The result is a film that asks important questions about film authorship and the economics of filmmaking.

Throughout his career, Lee has been a "difficult" filmmaker whose films are marked by political, didactic, and controversial subject matter. To some, he's a "polarizing filmmaker . . . someone to whom a large segment of the population won't listen, just because of who he is."²⁰ To others, however, he's the sole black filmmaker with the power and financial clout to make films focusing on African American people, African American stories, and African American history. This dichotomy is no better exemplified than in the juxtaposition of *Inside Man* and *When the Levees Broke*, Lee's two releases from 2006. The latter film, an HBO-produced, four-part documentary about the destruction of New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina, was released in August 2006 and marked the first-year anniversary of the catastrophic event. Like *4 Little Girls*, *When the Levees Broke* is Lee's attempt, through the juxtaposition of contemporary interviews and archival footage, to create a history, an audiovisual record of events to ensure that New Orleans's people and neighborhoods are not forgotten. It was a personal film, driven by Lee's desire to expose the truth about the collapse of the city's levees and the government's massive mismanagement of the situation.

Unlike *Inside Man*, *When the Levees Broke* was a Spike Lee film from very early in the production, and the director was the face of the film in all of its

pre- and post-release marketing (including for DVD format). The reasons for this bring us back to many of the concerns laid out in the essays collected in *The Spike Lee Reader*: Lee's concern with history and with telling African American stories; his belief in both the didactic and the entertainment strengths of film; his interest in film form. But why did Lee receive more coverage in the popular press for a \$2 million made-for-television nonfiction film than he did for the \$45 million *Inside Man*? While some of this might be due to Lee's amicable relationship with HBO, some of the attention paid to the documentary suggests the influence that genre has on the reception of the director's films. Lee's fiction films upset the compact between Hollywood and spectators because they ask uncomfortable questions of their audiences (both black and white) rather than entertain them; in this sense, they are difficult. His nonfiction films, by contrast, are expected to be historical and informative, and therefore visibility is a virtue rather than a limitation.²¹ Such differing treatments between the films suggest that Lee's relationship with the film industry remains complex, even as he enters his third decade of making films. It is this characteristic of his work as a filmmaker that allows us (indeed, forces us) to continue reframing the questions we ask of African American filmmakers and American film more generally.

In *Bamboozled*, a frustrated African American television writer creates a satirical minstrel show, *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, in the hope of being fired from his dead-end network job. To his surprise, the show is a success, and blackface minstrelsy becomes almost as fashionable among contemporary audiences of various races and ethnicities as it was in the nineteenth century. The film's use of blackface is at once literal and metaphorical; it is the director's comment on the state of African American representation and cultural production at the turn of the century. As one character observes of the show's content, "It's the same damned thing all over again. The same damned thing." The essays collected in *The Spike Lee Reader* suggest that it's not the same damned thing anymore—not cinematically, not industrially, not intellectually. Spike Lee's filmmaking career, and the exemplary body of scholarship it inspires, attests to the fact that black filmmaking *and* black film scholarship have reached a new level of complexity and self-consciousness in the twenty-first century. If not for Lee, we wouldn't be here. "And that's the truth, Ruth."

NOTES

Epigraph: Toni Cade Bambara, "Programming with *School Daze*," in this volume.

1. American independent filmmaking received a boost in 1985 when Robert Redford's Sundance Institute took over management of the Utah/U.S. Film Festival. The event was renamed the Sundance Film Festival in 1991 and has become one of the defining forums for independent and first-time filmmakers. Following a trend in independent

filmmaking at the time—spearheaded by fellow New York University graduates Susan Seidelman and Jim Jarmusch—Lee entered *She's Gotta Have It* in international film festivals, including the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Prix de Jeunesse for young directors. In 1982, Seidelman was nominated for the Camera d'Or at Cannes for her feature debut, *Smithereens*. Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* won the Camera d'Or in 1984, and his *Down by Law* was nominated for the Golden Palm in 1986.

2. Michael Schultz was one of the few African American directors who continued working in the late 1970s and early 1980s, most notably on films such as *Car Wash* (1976), *Greased Lightning* (1977) with Richard Pryor, and *Krush Groove* (1985). Ernest Dickerson, Lee's New York University classmate and his long-time cinematographer, worked with Schultz on *Krush Groove* before shooting *She's Gotta Have It*. Stan Lathan had a prolific career directing television series such as *Barney Miller* and *Hill Street Blues* in the 1970s and early 1980s. He also directed *Beat Street* in 1984, a music film that, along with Schultz's *Krush Groove*, was a precursor to later films featuring rap and hip-hop stars. The Hudlin brothers were not a significant presence until 1990 and the release of their comedy, *House Party* (written and directed by Reginald; produced by Warrington). Warrington, however, had been making films since the 1970s, and he helped to co-found the Black Filmmaker Foundation (BFF) in 1978. The brothers knew Lee, and Reginald makes a brief appearance in *She's Gotta Have It*.

3. See, for example, Paula J. Massood, "Review of *Summer of Sam*," *Cineaste* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 62–64.

4. For example, see Ed Guerrero's *Do the Right Thing* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001); Mark Reid's edited anthology, *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Michael Eric Dyson's *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), among others.

5. Keith M. Harris, "Clockers (Spike Lee 1995): Adaptation in Black," in this volume.

6. From *4 Little Girls* onward, Lee has enjoyed a positive working relationship with HBO. After *4 Little Girls*, he made *Freak* (1998), *Jim Brown: All American* (2002), and *When the Levees Broke* (2006) for the cable network.

7. Lubiano, "But Compared to What? Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse," in this volume.

8. Here I am echoing W. J. T. Mitchell's "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*," in Reid, *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing*, 107–28.

9. Bambara, "Programming with *School Daze*," in this volume.

10. As mentioned, Lee referenced *The Wizard of Oz* as early as 1986 in *She's Gotta Have It*.

11. Harris, "Clockers," in this volume. The "hood," or "gangsta," film refers to a group of films that gained popularity following the success of John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). Hood films focus on young African American men living in urban centers such as Brooklyn and South Central Los Angeles and facing the seemingly inescapable pressures of poverty and crime. Other notable films in the genre include *Straight out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992), and *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993). In *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), esp. 158–59, I trace the hood film to Lee's early work, including *She's Gotta Have It*. I also argue that stylistic

precursors to the hood film can be found in rap/graffiti films such as *Beat Street* and *Krush Groove* from the mid-1980s. See also Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You? Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

12. Krin Gabbard, "Spike Lee Meets Aaron Copland," in this volume.

13. Tavia Nyong'o, "Racial Kitsch and Black Performance," in this volume.

14. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, "'I Be Smackin' My Hoes': Paradox and Authenticity in *Bamboozled*," in this volume.

15. Ed Guerrero, "Spike Lee and the Fever in the Racial Jungle," in this volume.

16. Lee established 40 Acres & A Mule Musicworks, a subsidiary of Sony, in 1992. The company's focus was marketing the soundtracks to his films, along with music from a selection of artists. He also founded Spike's Joint, a chain of retail stores (in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles) in 1989. Both stores closed in 1997, the result of competition from an increasing number of clothing brands, such as Tommy Hilfiger and Fubu, marketed to urban (and suburban) youth.

17. Before he successfully produced *She's Gotta Have It*, Lee spent more than a year attempting to secure financing for a semiautobiographical film called *Messenger*. The project folded for lack of funding.

18. Kaleem Aftab, *Spike Lee: That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 164–65.

19. *Clockers*, for example, was made for \$25 million with Universal; *Summer of Sam*, for \$22 million with Touchstone; and *25th Hour*, for \$15 million with Touchstone. All figures are from <http://www.imdb.com>.

20. Michael Sicinski, "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts." *Cineaste* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 55.

21. Ironically, Lee's filmmaking style tends to be more subtle in his nonfiction films. In fact, except for a few examples of self-conscious camera work, and the framing device that Lee uses to introduce his subjects at the end of the film, *When the Levees Broke* is one of his most conventional films.