Delphine Letort, *The Spike Lee Brand: A Study of Documentary Filmmaking*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015

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- 1 Spike Lee is known the world over for films like *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), etc. This association with fiction films is so strong that one could mistakenly think that Delphine Letort's book *The Spike Lee Brand: A Study of Documentary Filmmaking* would explore the connection between these fiction films and the documentary genre. However, the first pages of the book clearly indicate that it will focus on Spike Lee the documentary filmmaker. Making people aware of this fact, therefore, comes across as one of the main goals of this book, as the author states clearly, "The filmmaker's commitment to documentary is rarely discussed in the abundant critical literature devoted to his filmic output which prioritizes his fiction drama" (2). Indeed, she explores the two-part series based on Hurricane Katrina, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts* (2005) and sequel *If God is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise* (2010), as well as Lee's other documentaries, *4 Little Girls* (1997), *A Huey P. Newton Story* (2001), *Jim Brown: All-American* (2002), *Kobe Doin' Work* (2009), *Bad 25* (2012). A quick glance at the literature on Spike Lee confirms Letort's affirmation. For example, in the book *The Spike Lee Reader* (Paula Massood (ed.), Temple University, 2008), among the 16 articles that comprise the 250-page book, just one is devoted to the documentary film *4 Little Girls*. And sometimes Lee's work as a documentarian is totally absent. David Sterritt, author of *Spike Lee's America* (Polity Press, 2013), bluntly defends this choice saying, "I find his documentaries and filmed theater works a generally unimaginative lot, however fascinating their subjects may be in themselves"

(Sterritt, 6). Letort's scholarly contribution is therefore considerable because it not only deals with Lee's neglected documentary output, but also, considering that books about Lee tend to be edited compilations of different contributors, it is perhaps the first in-depth study carried out exclusively by one author. The book discusses certain distinguishing features of Lee's fiction films as well, not in a comparative approach, but merely as a way of foregrounding his nonfiction work and explaining how issues like black agency, institutional racism, and black pride can be found in both film genres.

- 2 After a brief introduction, *The Spike Lee Brand* sets out to explore this new virgin territory in four main chapters, each divided into three or more sub-sections. Chapter 1 deals with the fabrication of the Spike Lee documentary. The focus is on the modes of representation, defined by theorist Bill Nichols, that Lee uses in his films and how to discern his authorial voice. Letort explores the artistic and creative use of the camera, the fictional aspects that Lee incorporates into his documentary film, and the overall aesthetic gaze that is used. She then connects these techniques with the activist message they are meant to serve. Lee's creative appropriation of documentary technique is then followed by an exploration of the history and memory of African Americans in chapter 2. Here, the book compares and contrasts different elements of history and memory, ranging from the intimate family recollection and traditional oral history to plain and simple photographs. In chapter 3, the author delves into the representation of race in the media and, notably, black stereotypes. This chapter is divided into three parts, first dealing with stereotypes of black crime, then the myth of the black athlete, and finally how the media portrays the Black Panthers. The fourth and final chapter comprises six diverse sections, all of them arranged under the umbrella heading of Black Nationalism. The author covers musical resilience and creativity, black pride, sports as the path to success for African Americans, the racial politics of New Orleans and its fight for civil rights, before ending the chapter on the documentary's ethical and political stance. *The Spike Lee Brand* concludes by focusing on the economic and artistic aspect of making "nonfiction joints"¹ and how Lee had to strike the right balance between the two. The author briefly weaves into her concluding remarks each documentary film and its relation to *The Spike Lee Brand*. The last paragraphs then return the focus on Spike Lee, the person, by evoking Lee's own possible bi-racial ancestry and how he encapsulates the history of the United States and its complex interplay of racial identity as witnessed in his documentaries.
- 3 "*The Spike Lee Brand* makes a very important contribution to scholarly studies of the film-work of Spike Lee." I could not agree more with what Mark A. Reid, the author of numerous films on black cinema,² wrote in the foreword to this book. Letort's contribution is extensive and rich. She breaks new ground and brings new knowledge to the public arena. Letort has achieved this through a very articulate, in-depth, and thorough analysis that sheds new light on a worthy subject in the field of documentary film. She demonstrates her expertise in this area, yet at the same time her writing is clear, concise, and easy to understand, avoiding the academic traps of jargon and technicality. She makes pertinent observations not only about what is seen on film but also what is not seen, what is ignored by Spike Lee. For instance, she notes that in *Jim Brown: All-American*, the filmmaker could have done more to challenge the stereotypical narrative surrounding the black athlete by mentioning that the former football player obtained a Bachelor of Arts from Syracuse University. This information would have stressed the fact that Brown used his intellect as well as his physical body (90). She cites

other scholars who have noted similar problematic omissions. Film scholar Valerie Smith pointed out that Chris McNair, one of the central social actors in the documentary *4 Little Girls*, was convicted of bribery and that this information would have weakened the film's argument (48). In fact, Letort calls upon a whole host of qualified scholars in specialized academic fields (history, philosophy, geography, cultural studies, sociology, etc.) to complement her observations. She treats the subject with enough critical distance to allow her to point out Spike Lee's own contradictions and conflicts. For example, Lee denounces, on the one hand, stereotyped media images of African Americans (the black athlete) and on the other, he takes part in perpetuating these very same images. The research is methodical and extensive, as evidenced by the 34 pages of end notes³ and 15-page bibliography.

- 4 Despite the book's numerous merits, there are a few aspects that could be improved. First of all the title relegates the word "documentary" to the subtitle and stresses the word "brand" which can be misleading. Moreover, this undermines the author's stated purpose of raising awareness of Lee as a documentary filmmaker. Perhaps *The Spike Lee Brand* was chosen to make the book more marketable by appealing to the reader who knows about Spike Lee the fiction filmmaker. It is true that he started making documentaries years after he was established as a feature filmmaker.⁴ Second, Letort analyzed *A Huey P. Newton Story*, which is not a pure documentary, but makes no mention of the documentary *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000), not even a word to say why she would not be analyzing it. Finally, *Bad 25* and *Kobe Doin' Work* were not fully exploited. Letort does provide analysis but it's very little compared to what the other films received and it could be pursued even further. Of course, since the book is only 150 pages long, choices have to be made. Perhaps this could be the subject of a second volume. She could then include not only the aforementioned *The Original Kings of Comedy* but also Lee's latest documentary, *Michael Jackson's Journey from Motown to Off the Wall*, which came out in 2016.
- 5 To conclude, the few minor quibbles should not take away from the fact that this is a beautifully written piece of work, which is intellectually stimulating and enriching not only from the standpoint of documentary films but also in terms of American Studies.

ENDNOTES

1. "Nonfiction joint" is a term used by the author to describe a Spike Lee documentary film. Chapter 1 of the book is called "The Making of Spike Lee's Nonfiction Joints". "A Spike Lee Joint" is what appears on the screen during the end credits of Spike Lee's films.
2. *Redefining Black Film* (U of California Press, 1993), *Post Negritude, Visual and Literary Culture* (SUNY Press, 1997) and *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
3. In total 354 notes.
4. *4 Little Girls* was made in 1997, 14 years after Joe's *Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads*.

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