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## Spike Lee: Avant-Garde Filmmaker

Spike Lee came into mainstream consciousness with 1986's *She's Gotta Have It*. Since then, he has enjoyed a long and illustrious career as a filmmaker, writing, directing, producing, and starring in several very successful pictures that have highlighted some aspect of Black life in America. Films such as *Do the Right Thing*, *School Daze*, *Jungle Fever*, *Bamboozled*, and *Malcolm X* have catapulted Spike Lee into international stardom, making him one of the most, if not *the* most, notorious Black filmmakers of today. Arguably, he has reached the status of cultural icon in this country, evidenced by a parody of him on "The Simpsons"; as we know, an appearance on "The Simpsons" is the true sign that you've "made it."

Spike Lee's films typically explore some issue prevalent in the Black community. Spike Lee's rise to fame can be attributed to his bold and daring manner of dealing with issues previously unexplored in the mainstream. *She's Gotta Have It*, his debut feature, explored intraracial dating, female promiscuity, and sexual power relations. '88's *School Daze* again looked at intraracial relations, this time bringing to light the topic of skin tone and color bias within the Black community (that is, light-skinned Blacks versus dark-skinned) and the deep-seated tensions surrounding this issue. 1991 saw the release of *Jungle*

*Fever*, the film that, arguably, catapulted Wesley Snipes and Samuel L. Jackson to stardom; in *Jungle Fever*, we got Spike Lee's take on, this time, interracial dating, between a Black man and a white woman, and the tension surrounding such relationships. The following year, 1992, was the year of *Malcolm X*, a biopic of the gone-but-never-forgotten civil rights icon Malcolm X. *Bamboozled*, released in 2000, boldly explored modern-day blackface and minstrelsy. This is but a sampling of controversial topics within Black culture that Spike Lee has brought to a mainstream audience, an audience that had never before seen such issues explored on screen.

Considering Spike Lee's extraordinary success in the mainstream, it is no wonder that he is largely thought of as a mainstream filmmaker. In light of the subject matter he covers as well as his filmmaking style, however, I argue for the consideration of Spike Lee as an Avant-Garde filmmaker.

Black filmmakers accepted into the Avant-Garde canon include such filmmakers as those of what is termed the Los Angeles School (also herein referred to as the "LA School" and the "LA Filmmakers"), the group of radical Black filmmakers, many trained at UCLA Film School, who banded together under a pact to make films that reflected conditions in their inner city community and the struggle their fellow Black brothers and sisters faced within the community. These filmmakers of the LA School include Charles Burnett, director of 1977's *Killer of Sheep*, Barbara McCullough of 1979's *Water Ritual #1*, Julie Dash of 1991's *Daughters of the Dust*, and Haile Gerima of 1979's *Bush Mama* and

1993's *Sankofa*. These are examples of Black filmmakers who, motivated by a sense of insurgency, sought to produce a new, radical brand of films.

Having received formal film training at UCLA (largely but not exclusively), the LA Filmmakers utilized the elements of their filmic training that they deemed useful and eschewed others, instead seeking to create a unique film language that spoke to and for Blacks. In his book White screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side, James Snead describes the filmic ideals of the LA Filmmakers in this way:

[The LA Filmmakers] sought to rewrite the standard cinematic language of cuts, fades, frame composition, and camera movement in order to represent their own “non-standard” vision of Black people and culture. The LA School wished to make films that highlighted Black life from an insider, or Black, perspective; it is through independent films such as those produced by members of the LA School that the viewer achieves an understanding of a complex Black world from within, rather than a caricature of it from without (117).

Fresh off the heels of Blaxploitation, the LA Filmmakers are heralded for doing what Blaxploitation failed to do: represent Black like from a Black perspective. Blacks have always been seen merely as a market segment that the industry could exploit. The LA Filmmakers came along and provided Black filmgoers the opportunity to see themselves and their lives reflected; while also offering a cinematic experience unlike the typical studio-produced fare. Highly stylized visions of Blackness from the minds of Black filmmakers are what the LA School to a Black audience that had never before seen such offerings. With this, the LA School ushered in a new generation of Black filmmakers.

Spike Lee's foray into film took a similar route as members of the LA School. Having been bitten by the filmmaking bug while at historically Black Morehouse College, Lee continued in film, earning an MFA from NYU Film School. In addition to the commonality of having received formal film training at prestigious institutions, Lee is also quite similar to members of the LA School of filmmakers, particularly Charles Burnett, in Lee's reliance on friends and family as actors in his early films, as well as his neighborhood as location. Many of Lee's films are situated in his neighborhood of Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn.

Frequent comparisons between Lee and such Avant-Garde-identified filmmakers as Charles Burnett abound. Black cultural critic and cinematographer Arthur Jafa adds an interesting perspective on the comparison between Spike Lee and the LA School of Black filmmakers. Jafa served as Co-producer and Director of Photography on Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* and Spike Lee's 1994 feature production, *Crooklyn*. With this firsthand experience with both Lee *and* the LA School, Jafa recalls his first impression of Lee's debut, *She's Gotta Have It*:

I remember excitedly proclaiming to Charles Burnett and Julie Dash, "This is it, this shit's gonna break." Up until then, the L.A.-based core of Black independent filmmaking had settled into a tacit acceptance of the incompatibility of its work and mainstream distribution. These filmmakers adhered to the generally unspoken yet ongoing, radical aspiration to create films with some measure of the power, alienation, and beauty of Black cultural practices, particularly

the music. Independents who'd compromised their visions for mainstream success were understood as traitors. *She's Gotta Have It* demonstrated that an independent-minded Black filmmaker could be successful in mainstream terms. Its impact was immediate and profound.

Spike Lee's debut feature, *She's Gotta Have It*, is a sort of "what if..." story, a reversal of sexual roles and power. The film, which was Spike Lee's breakthrough piece, tells the tale of a woman and her three male lovers. Nola is involved with three men, Jamie, Greer, and Mars. (Note that the character of Mars was played by Spike Lee.) Nola is honest and upfront with her lovers; all three are fully aware of Nola's polyamory. Despite Nola's clarity in her lack of desire to be in a monogamous relationship, all three men continue to vie for a commitment.

*She's Gotta Have It* is a film that is both celebrated and castigated. On the one hand, it is praised as showcasing a strong, sexually liberated female protagonist, one completely divergent from typical portrayals. Nola is placed in a position typically reserved for males, that of the sexual conqueror and possessor of power in sexual relations. Nola treats her men the way that women are typically treated; it is usually the man that is highly sought after by competing female hopefuls. In her refusal to be "tied down," Nola has dodged the constraints of what Adrienne Rich outlines in "compulsory heterosexuality"; Nola refuses to settle into her prescribed gender role, and refuses to relinquish control of her sexuality (or any other aspect of her life, for that matter) to her suitors. Not until *She's Gotta Have It* had we seen such a bold depiction of a Black woman so in control of her sexuality and her very being. Or so some people think. The arguments against the

film are many. The film is said to be an impossible fantasy of sorts. Essentially, the story is told from a male perspective, which, on its own, limits the authenticity of the representation of the female character. The situation is said to be one that simply would not exist in reality. A total role reversal may work onscreen, but would not translate in the real world. As we discussed within feminist theory, there is no evidence of how a woman would respond free from patriarchy. In the real world, under patriarchy, women do not often find themselves in equal positions as their male counterparts; complete role reversals with no account of differences on the part of gender, particularly emotional and social differences between genders, makes for an unbelievable scenario in the eyes of dissidents. In an essay examining the films of Spike Lee, William Harris puts it this way:

Spike Lee forces us to consider Black male repertoires and the possibility of role reversal. But has he built the character of Nola on a real character type in the Black community? Probably not. A Black woman with multiple partners is a woman besieged, controlled, put upon, and demanded of on all sides. She has not the comfort and serenity of a Nola no matter what her age, income, or physical attributes are.

Harris goes on to include a statement by Felly Nkweto Simmonds<sup>1</sup>, to strengthen his argument against Lee's portrayal of Nola. According to Harris, Simmonds states that:

Liberation has economic and political dimensions that outweigh sexual freedom. Nola is, in fact, a man in a woman suit, a persona constructed from the male standpoint (15).

While Harris' viewpoint is not completely groundless, I argue his opinion is flawed on more than one account. His question of whether Spike Lee based Nola on a "real

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<sup>1</sup> Simmonds, Felly Nkweto. "She's Gotta Have It: The Representation of Black Female Sexuality on Film." *Feminist Review* 29 (1988): 10-22.

character type in the Black community” serves to essentialize Blackness. Is Harris suggesting that the Black community is monolithic, wherein every members acts according to some “type”? That Nola isn’t an Everywoman but an anomaly seems a more reasonable of an assertion than to flatly discount Nola as an utter impossibility. Lee never asserted that Nola represented every Black woman’s experience, in direct defiance of the tenets of Deleuze’s minor literature, that everything within a minor literature (forms of expression which a minority constructs within a major language) is political and inherently collective:

[In a minor literature,] everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that “master” and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. The political has contaminated every domain.

According to Deleuze’s assertion, since Spike Lee represents a minor literature (as one of very few prominent Black filmmakers), his characterizations extend beyond his own self-imposed constraints and seep into the boundaries of his community, the Black community. Per Deleuze, Spike Lee, whether he intends to or not, is representative of the Black community as a whole; therefore, any images he emits can be taken to be representative of his community. This seems to be the point of contention. Critics, such as Harris, maintain that Nola of *She’s Gotta Have It* is not an acceptable representation of Black women, as she does not represent the average Black woman’s experience. Spike Lee begs to differ; while he has committed himself to depicting his community in his films, he also, in the spirit of creative license, takes liberty to create characters and

situations that should be taken as individual entities and not as representative of all Black people. In this sense, Lee straddles the fence; he is at once Spike Lee, champion of the Black cinematic experience and Spike Lee, freethinking film director with an artistic vision.

Elements of Harris argument seem to have patriarchal influences. In Harris' view, a Black woman with multiple partners is inherently a woman besieged. Harris appears to find fault with Spike Lee's portrayal of such a woman. I call question to Harris' broad generalization that a non-monogamous Black woman is necessarily an unhappy one, as well as his displeasure with Lee's depiction of an alternate reality. I interpret Lee's depiction of Nola as his stand against the status quo and the typical depictions of womanhood contained within in. In *She's Gotta Have It*, Lee creates a world where, rather than controlled, Nola is empowered and unhindered. Lee has created a universe where a woman can be free from the confines of her gender role and express her sexuality in whichever way suits her? Does a polyamorous woman necessarily besieged? Spike Lee offers a resounding "No!," and provides viewers a glimpse at what this happily unrestrained woman's life might look like. Lee commits the radical act of challenging conventions; I believe Lee should be commended for daring to envision such a world where a Nola can and does exist.

Simmonds' claim that Harris references, that states that "liberation has economic and political dimensions that outweigh sexual freedom," also seems steeped in patriarchal influence; it appears to spoken from the standpoint of one who has not had to fight for



sexual freedom, although Simmonds is herself a woman. In this patriarchal paradigm under which we exist, “male sexual liberation” is a non-existent concept, a given that has not had to be won. Liberation is liberation, and the struggle for liberation continues to be fought worldwide. The view of sexual liberation as relatively unimportant since it represents only the struggle of women is a very male-centric viewpoint. In his essay “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” Cornel West calls to task this male-centric point of view:

The coffin used to bury the innocent notion of the essential Black subject was nailed shut with the termination of the Black male monopoly on the construction of the Black subject. In this regard, the Black Diaspora womanist critique has had a greater impact than the critiques that highlight exclusively class, empire, age, sexual orientation, or nature (qtd. in During, 212).

Simmonds’ statement, as well as Harris’ use of it, are both heavily influenced by the Black male monopoly of which West speaks. In Simmonds and Harris’ view, Nola should be more concerned about her political and economic struggle, rather than expending energy on her own sexual freedom, energy that could better be spent on the greater good. To this I say, women under patriarchy continue to struggle for sexual liberation (which includes reproductive rights, an end to sexual violence, etc.); the fight for sexual freedom affects Black women every day. If such issues affect even one Black woman, then it then become a “Black issue.” Then the fight for sexual liberation becomes of equal significance as the struggle for economic and political liberation.

In revisiting comparisons between the LA School and Spike Lee, critics often suggest that Spike Lee's reliance upon a more traditional aesthetic cause his films to lose their impact. Commenting on *Do the Right Thing*, Ed Guerrero asserts, "the film's slick, color-saturated look has the effect of idealizing or making nostalgic the present, rather than dramatizing any deep sense of social or political urgency" (148). I respectfully disagree with this point; it appears to be based upon the underlying assumption that a film has to look "gritty" to be affecting. In spite of (or perhaps thanks to) its "look," *Do the Right Thing* remains at the forefront of discussions of important films that tackle race relations. Perhaps Lee's aesthetic choices were driven by an artistic vision that, in Lee's view, did serve to invoke "a deep sense of social and political urgency." At the very least, the film's look more than likely helped it appeal to a wider audience, in effect boosting the popularity of the film and increasing the reach of the meaningful messages contained therein.

Just as Spike Lee is praised for bringing a fresh, new cinematic voice to a mainstream audience that spoke to and about Blacks, he is criticized for having not lived up to the hype, essentially. Lee is chastised for, as some see it, fizzling out over time. The rebellious and insurrectionist loud bang he brought with him in the beginning has fizzled into a commercial, sedated dull hum. Apparently, Lee's fame and positioning as cultural icon would be the downfall of the very insurgence that brought about this fame in the first place. As Ed Guerrero puts it,

What is revealed in the ever-grander slicker promenade of images in the trajectory of Lee's films is that, unlike Charles Burnett, Lee is diligently struggling to learn the

conventions and clichés of market cinema language,  
instead of struggling to change the dominant system by  
creating a visionary language of his own (148).

This sentiment sums up the argument against Spike Lee's consideration as an Avant-Garde filmmaker. Does this mean that being featured on "The Simpsons" isn't such a great thing, after all? Hardly. Rather than trying to pander to the Hollywood, as Guerrero suggests, I interpret Lee's "ever-slicker promenade of images" as Lee's calculated attempts to boldly bombard audiences with images of Blackness, Hollywood-style. While Lee's career has progressed into slicker films, with bigger productions, he has continued to explore Blackness, and has slickly obtained big money from Hollywood studios to do it. Whereas films of the LA School saw limited release, Spike Lee has acquired an international audience, and has brought Black issues to the international forefront. There is no rule that says that conscious Black films have to be relegated to art houses and museums; Spike Lee has brought Black images to the Cineplex, a feat largely unseen since Blaxploitation. His ability to bring the in-depth exploration of Blackness into a commercial arena that traditionally only seeks to exploit the Black image is in itself avant-garde.

There is also something to be said of Lee's continuing use of the minor language, literally. Lee not only speaks Ebonics in interviews, no matter how prestigious or formal the interviewer, but also invokes the minor language in his films, right down to the titles, e.g. *He Got Game* (1998) and *She Hate Me* (2004). Although there is fierce debate surrounding Ebonics within the Black community (whether it is a uniquely Black American patois or unintelligent slang), I commend Lee for holding on to his "native

tongue,” and infusing Black English into his work, thereby infusing Blackness into his work. In refusing to neglect his own language, written off as unintelligent, for the more socially acceptable Standard English (the way that intelligent people speak, Bill Cosby might argue), holding on to speech with which he feels most at home and comfortable, and boldly utilizing this minor language in the public and professional sphere, Lee continues to commit radical acts.

In spite of the fact that Lee’s films have gotten more polished over time, and his productions have gotten progressively larger, much of the subject matter he tackles has remained among the more insurgent. Around the time that *Bamboozled* was released, we were hit with two films that featured what many consider stereotypical depictions of Black characters, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* in 2000, and *The Green Mile* the previous year. The film featured very controversial images of blackface and minstrelsy, drawing parallels between previous caricatures of Blacks and present-day portrayals that we see in popular film and television.

*Bamboozled* tells the story of a Black network executive, Pierre Delacroix (played by Damon Wayans) who is dissatisfied with his job and devises a means of escape. Obligated under contract to stay on the job, Delacroix concocts a scheme to get fired. His plan is to create a show so utterly offensive that the network will have no choice but to fire him. He creates a modern-day minstrel show, replete with blackface, coonery, and tap-dancing buffoonery. To his utter shock and dismay, when Delacroix presents his heinous idea, the network loves it; it becomes a tremendous hit with viewers. The

minstrel show takes off, and pretty soon, Blackface Fever has struck; before Delacroix knows it, it is cool to walk around in blackface.

With *Bamboozled*, Spike Lee forces the viewer (particularly the Black viewer) to consider not only outward displays of racism, but also covert ones. He calls attention to such pop culture icons as Tommy Hilfiger (already a controversial figure, thanks to past indiscretions, such as his family owning a pony with dark, coarse hair and naming it “Nappy,” as well as being the center of a controversy that accused him of making offensive comments expressing the dissatisfaction from having his clothing line embraced by a large Black consumer base). Virtually no one is safe; the film even made light of the incident wherein Ving Rhames insisted on giving his Golden Globe award to Jack Lemmon, proclaiming that Lemmon was “more deserving.”

*Bamboozled* includes an ending montage, a four-minute clip consisting of cinematic representations of Blacks throughout history. The montage featured images from films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), highly touted as cinematic genius despite—or perhaps for? — its exceedingly (and pridefully) racist content, as well as other such films presenting Blacks in ingratiating and stereotypical roles as servants and buffoons. Also included were animated clips, featuring Blacks with grotesque and exaggerated facial features, eating watermelon and performing other such tasks stereotypically linked with Blackness. The clip seems to go on forever; at the point the viewer can no longer take any more bombardment, the bombardment continues, relentlessly, to drive home the point that, at the time that these images were popular, there was no turning away. Such images

were ubiquitous and inescapable. This clip exemplifies Spike Lee's radical and insurgent filmmaking style. Spike Lee's inclusion of the montage speaks to his insistence on highlighting social problems facing the Black community. The clip in particular and the film in general serve as a disturbing reminder of where we've come from and that the fight for equality is not over.

Spike Lee's contribution to cinema cannot be denied. His bold vision of exploring Blackness within the cinematic realm, and his willingness to take chances stylistically, make him Avant-Garde. From *She's Gotta Have It* to *Four Little Girls* (1997, a bold documentary exploring the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama that killed four girls, and the racial terrorism experienced by Blacks during this particular period) to *Bamboozled*, Lee continues to explore and boldly depict issues prevalent within the Black community, placing in-depth explorations of Blackness in the center of the white mainstream. He continues to provide a forum for Black actors, telling stories that speak to Black filmgoers. It remains to be seen whether the next generation will follow the cinematic tradition ushered in by Spike Lee and the LA School.

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