

**Delphine Letort**, *The Spike Lee Brand: A Study of Documentary Filmmaking*, Albany: SUNY Press, African American Studies series, 2015, 226 pages. ISBN 978-1-4384-5763-5\*

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Exerting a level of critique that forces the reader to confront Spike Lee's complexity and ambiguity as it interrogates his political ideology and commercial interests, Delphine Letort's book on Lee as a documentary filmmaker significantly expands the discourse surrounding this important American filmmaker. Letort establishes her premise and argues that while Lee's "feature films established the cinematographic rules that became idiosyncratic style in his fiction and nonfiction endeavors, they also demonstrate Lee's consistent interest in factual history, which may account for the reason why he turned to documentary filmmaking..." (2). Detecting a void that existed in the literature regarding Lee's documentary filmmaking practice, she assumes the challenge of investigating Lee as a documentary filmmaker. Letort narrows her examination to an interrogation of the following documentaries which include: *Four Little Girls* (1997), *Jim Brown: All American* (2002), *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four* (2005) and *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* (2010), *A Huey P. Newton Story* (2001), *Kobe Doin' Work* (2009) and *Bad 25* (2012). In conducting her methodology she employs a "comparative approach" which critiques the narrative and aesthetic strategies these documentaries deploy (4). Letort contends that the twofold values of Lee's documents which gives voice to African Americans is 1) to provide critical insights into events that are racialized in American society and 2) provide a sociological record which become a text for representing the director's "worldview" (5).

In Chapter I, Letort examines how Lee investigates facts through the camera's lens, interrogates his use of the participatory and performative modes of investigation, explores the authorial voice which is diminished for the sake of eye-witness testimony, and engages the reflexive mode which "is made visible through visual cues that undermine the illusion of unmediated access to the real" (28). Regarding Chapter II, Letort demonstrates how Lee, like French critic Marc Ferro, engages history and memory forcing viewers "to look beyond the frame ... to understand how cultural politics shape collective memory through contemporary cinema... (37). According to Letort, Lee utilizes "prosthetic memory" to preserve individual memories and encourages viewers to appropriate as well as incorporate these memories into their own life. Moreover, Letort suggests that Lee employs oral history as a means of preserving public memory, recording unofficial history, and capturing living history. In Chapter III, Letort examines Lee's use of mediated representations of race evident in the archival footage included in his works to question media biases that proliferate in the public culture. Specifically, Lee explores Jim Brown and Huey P. Newton as iconic black figures to expose how racial politics shapes the public perceptions of these figures as well as capture certain historical moments. In Chapter IV, Letort examines the legacy of black nationalism in

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Lee's work, observing that he frequently excludes figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. while endorsing others and applauds those who have excelled in a capitalistic system which provides a "skewed vision, for the accomplishments of a few [who] have neither lessened the levels of poverty nor tempered inequality among African Americans" (106). It is here that Letort challenges Lee's ambiguity because while he celebrates black nationalists, he also celebrates those who have excelled under a capitalistic system in addition to advancing his own socioeconomic position through his alignment with major corporations. Letort insists that Lee's commercial interests conflict with his political ideology. The author concludes that "Lee's films [reflect] his struggle to combine art and commerce, prompting us to explore the tension between profit and creativity which characterizes his career" (149).

This book is a substantive examination of Lee's documentary filmmaking practice and strongly contributes to the canon on Spike Lee. Letort's work is a major contribution not just to Lee's documentary work but to documentary filmmaking as she interrogates a variety of practices and theories necessary to understanding Lee's work. Those who work in documentary filmmaking cannot ignore Letort's work because she demonstrates how those outside of the dominant documentary filmmaking practice invert, subvert, and convert to cinematographic rules for making productions that document the lives of marginalized groups. This work is well written, theoretically sound, and insightful in its attempt to deconstruct the complexity of an African American filmmaker who attempts to give voice and establish a space for those marginalized within a dominant hegemony not only propelled by capitalism but also propelled by a system intent on controlling the dominant narrative.