

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPIKE LEE

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Whereas politics and art are fundamental categories of everyday experience, philosophy provides a critical lens through which politics and art come into deep focus. *The Philosophy of Spike Lee* follows a similar vein, providing thoughtful and in-depth readings of Lee's artistry and the ways in which it hosts subject matter pertinent to contemporary issues within pop culture, identity politics, and discrimination. This book is unique because of the way it addresses deep structures of racism, sexism, and violence through the cinematic form, which are so often neutralized in critiques of Lee via hasty acts of moralization and vies for political correctness. Although there's no doubt that Spike Lee's name is forever synonymous with controversy, the content of this book demonstrates a different approach to Lee through a philosophical lens; by deploying figures from Plato to Heidegger and beyond, the book extrapolates a philosophical texture from Lee's *oeuvre*, collecting perspectives on his aesthetic that have been in high demand and yet seemingly inaccessible.

By asking central questions within popular debates on race in films such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Bamboozled* (2000), as well as gender politics in *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Girl 6* (1996), this text encourages its readers to extend their relationship with Lee's films beyond their run-times. Although not completely devoid of rote argumentation, the text highlights Lee's ability to challenge homogenous images and ideologies that permeate the history of Hollywood cinema, while also outlining examples in which Lee himself falls victim to stereotypes and an over-dependence on Hollywood convention. Each contributor confronts Lee in a way that grounds his work in a *telos* without resorting to either oversimplification or convolution of his films. While the ongoing debates surrounding Lee's work reaffirm his important role in the history of cinema, *The Philosophy of Spike Lee* embarks on more nuanced critiques of Lee's work and its inexhaustive potential to provoke dialogue on contemporary issues.

In flux with Lee's status as an auteur, this volume highlights the socio-political commentaries central to his point of view as well as his unprecedented assemblage of techniques as a filmmaker. This text manages to mirror the bold imagery of Lee's films through the contributors' candid descriptions of American history in general and film history in particular. For instance, Ronald Sundstrom's chapter on Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991) revisits early films dealing with taboos linked to race and sexuality, opening with an extended commentary on the miscegenation-narrative in D.W. Griffith's notorious *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In addition to highlighting the racist roots of Hollywood cinema, Sundstrom goes into the construction of race as it developed in the western world. By linking these two examples, the reader is exposed to the propagandistic undertow of American cinema and how societal influences are similarly translated into the apparatus of film.

Mark T. Conard, an associate professor of philosophy, chair of the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department at Marymount Manhattan College in New York, and editor of the volume reviewed, acknowledges that this book can appeal to an eclectic audience. He states, "[w]hether you're a die-hard fan (or even a detractor!) of Spike Lee, a film buff generally, or someone with interest in philosophy, the following essays will help enrich your understanding of and appreciation for this iconic American filmmaker" (ix). Despite recognizing Lee's influence, Conard takes an ambivalent stance towards Lee's work in the preface, which provides the book as an accessible object for the reader to digest its content without tactical bias or intimidation. With similar effect, Conard thematically echoes many profound philosophers and critical theorists, all while denying any deep-seated backgrounds in philosophy or film studies. In this way, Conard does not try and convert the reader, but rather guides them toward further reflection and in-depth interpretation.

The book itself is broken down into three main sections: the first, "Justice, Value, and the Nature of Evil," the second, "Race, Sexuality, and Community," and the third and final section, "Time, the Subject, and Transcendence." Among the philosophical features, the reader will find detailed explications of Lee's signature shots, and important themes that define Lee as a filmmaker. For instance, Jerold J. Abrams looks closely at Lee's "floating-man" effect and the films the technique is featured in. Not only does Abrams address Lee's cinematic ability to mix realism with expressionism but incorporates the psychological results that the effect has on spectators. Restoring responsibility in the

spectator is crucial in the ongoing task of meaning-making and a common thread throughout the book, considering its commitment to theory and other philosophical investigations.

This text is an ideal aid for learning about Lee given that he is a figure who demands critical analysis, and therefore, a sharp philosophical lens. Lucid explications of the complex details in Lee's mise-en-scène, sound design and cinematographic style are paired well with their philosophical correlates, aiding understanding of the conjunction between cinema and philosophy. The reader gets to know Lee through his style and aesthetic choices rather than forcing Lee's personal experiences to be the basic rationale for these choices, which is often the fault of many interpretations of black filmmakers. In this way, *The Philosophy of Spike Lee* is in contrast to other texts on Lee's body of work, such as the 2005 autobiography, *That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It*, which emphasizes Lee's experience more than his artistry. While detailed accounts of Lee's life are important, they may stifle the freedom of interpretation fostered by philosophical inquiry. This book offers a wellspring of supplemental information pertaining to Lee's aesthetic.

In addition to the distinguished perspectives of the contributors, there is a well-blended mix of sources referenced and cross-examined. By visiting ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophies, the reader is able to become acquainted with thinkers such as Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Marx, Locke, Hume, James Baldwin, Slavoj Žižek, bell hooks, Cornel West, James Cone, and others in new and innovative ways. In similar fashion, the book evokes classical and bygone epochs, such as in the volume's opening essay by Douglas McFarland, who discusses Lee's *Clockers* (1995) within the frame of Greek tragedy, evoking the idea of contagion, the symbolism of blood, and violence in the development of ritualized civic narratives. This essay is particularly relevant for today, as it seems to forecast one of Lee's recent films, *Chiraq* (2015), and its explicit resemblance to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Although some may read this as relevant to Lee's more contemporary work, this book may come off to some readers as a bit dated, given that Lee's most recent titles *Oldboy* (2013), and *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus* (2014) among others were released after the 2011 publication of this volume.

While each contributors' approach is inviting with clear arguments, there are certainly moments where ideas wander and it may be easily forgotten that Spike Lee is the topic at hand. While abstracting Lee's work is useful insofar as it assures the reader that his robust personality is not the only gauge of his cinematic potential, it would have

been welcomed for more coordinates to have been drawn within Lee's *oeuvre*; a greater degree of cross-reference between titles and motifs within Lee's body of work would support his paramount status as an auteur and his distinctive voice in New Black Cinema. This would also aid the reader in gaining a stronger ability in recognizing/distinguishing the styles and characteristics belonging to Lee.

Despite this minor setback, one particularly strong argument comes from Michael Silberstein's chapter entitled, "The Dialectic of King and X in *Do the Right Thing*." Silberstein comments on the still photograph of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and the way in which their politics were paradoxically unified and at odds during the Civil Rights Movement. For Silberstein, the photograph goes beyond signifying the disparate approaches belonging to the two revolutionaries by converging on underlying ethical conditions toward the larger concept of justice. While Silberstein's thesis applies to *Do the Right Thing*, it may easily suffice as a fair description of Lee's work in full when he observes,

no conclusion is ever reached regarding the question of which ideology is more *right* [...] since one of the characteristics of a rich and thought-provoking film is that it raises important questions without imposing definitive answers. Viewers are left to fend for themselves and consider the merit of each position. (128)

Expanding this perspective disengages the passivity of many spectators as well as it initiates new ways of thinking and acting in an unsettling social climate.

At first glance, this book's cover bears little contrast to other texts on Spike Lee, offering yet another portrait of Lee's ultra-serious gaze emanating from behind his wire-rimmed glasses. However, the content within the edited volume marks a vast departure, freeing Lee's work from constrictive perspectives of the past while welcoming a new form of contextual exploration of the filmmaker's impressive filmography. By targeting ways in which Lee's aesthetic output receives emotionally charged responses, this book pinpoints the philosophical ideas necessary in making the problems of a single auteur the problems of a collective body, endlessly interpreted, negotiated, and defended. Whether or not the reader approaches Lee in a favorable light, this volume illuminates the philosophical importance of his subversive brand of cinema.