

## S/20 – Spike Lee’s Joints

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**Books:** Paula Massoud, *The Spike Lee Reader*; Janice Hamlet and Robin Means Coleman, *Fight the Power! The Spike Lee Reader*; Cynthia Fuchs, *Spike Lee: Interviews*. Books are available at Amherst Books in downtown Amherst. Please purchase your copies there and help support local independent business. Readings outside these books are available as links or PDFs via email or Moodle.

**Aim of the course** | This course explores the cinema of Spike Lee, beginning with his early film *School Daze* and concluding with his recent *Black KKKlansman*. We will not watch Lee’s entire oeuvre – that would take much more than a semester – but instead examine key films in order to understand and come to terms with his thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as his aesthetic choices that loop and thread together those overtly political concerns. All of these are structured around the central theme in Lee’s filmmaking: what it means to put Black bodies, Black people, and Black life on the cinematic screen. Across film history in the U.S., this screen is terrifying. Lee works to counter that by taking on the burden of Black representation.

The burden of filmmaking is therefore a central theme of our critical engagement with his films.

We begin with two pieces that place the crisis of Black people on the cinematic screen and the burden of filmmaking in raw, almost traumatic terms: Robert Townsend’s *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) and Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000). How does Lee respond to this crisis? How is his response reflected in character, story, lighting, sound and other cinematic languages? How does Lee work as a political actor – a critic of Black life, defender of Black life, and witness to disastrous state violence? And, how does Lee develop as a thinker and maker, both in terms of self-criticism and commentary on emerging issues?

At the end of this course, you will have a strong sense of Spike Lee’s vision and development as a filmmaker. That is paramount. But you will also develop a clear sense of what a Black Studies approach to film looks like, how to practice it, and how to see Lee’s films in particular, and Black filmic practices and tasks more broadly, as part of the African-American intellectual tradition. Cinema *thinks*. With Lee, we will see how cinema *thinks* in specifically African-American ways as witness, elegy, and criticism.

Lastly, a word on discussion. I want us to move away from affirming or non-affirming judgment – “I liked this film” and “I didn’t like this film” – and toward what I call simply *the interesting*. We will ask: “What did you find *interesting* about this film and why?” This will allow us to explore edifying *and* problematic aspects of Lee’s work in productive ways.

**Method of evaluation** | You are required to attend class every day. Any absences past three will result in a 1/3 final grade penalty upon each absence. You are also expected to contribute to class discussion, whether that is critical intervention, asking about clarity, exploring ideas, and so on. This is a crucial part of your classroom experience and therefore comprises **15%** of your final grade.

Each student will contribute to a shared blog. I expect a minimum of eight original posts and eight comments on other posts. The shared blog is your opportunity to discuss the materials from the course outside the classroom, to share thoughts and alternative sources, and explore ideas in a student-to-student setting. (Details in a separate document.) This will comprise **20%** of your grade.

We will have three short writing exercises – called “exams,” “quizzes,” “focused writing,” or whatever makes you happiest – on Moodle. These exercises will require you to write briefly and concisely about key ideas in the course. Details when appropriate. Each exercise will be timed and total 1500-2000 words. Each exercise comprises 15% of your grade for a total of **45%**.

The final assignment will be a two-part blog project: group engagement with a Lee interview and solo curation of a scene from a film. Details when appropriate. This comprises **20%** of your grade.

I am happy to accommodate any student learning needs. Please have the appropriate person get in touch with me about those needs as soon as possible so that we can make any necessary arrangements. I am committed to your success in this course, no matter what particular accommodations you need, and will cheerfully make adjustments or modifications to ensure your best effort. We are here to learn together. You have a right to that learning on your best terms.

## Schedule of viewings and readings

In this course, we will follow a straightforward pattern: view the film over the weekend, open-ended lecture and discussion of the film on the first class day of the week, critical engagement with assigned commentary on the second class day of the week. Please read all the (modestly paged) assignments closely and plan to come to class with critical questions, clarification inquiries, and creative engagements. Also, I have provided content warnings on relevant films. I am happy to accommodate in any way you feel necessary, so please let me know how I can be helpful and keep relevant people in the loop (student services, class Dean, etc.). It is important to note that Lee puts various forms of violence – sexual, racial, misogynist, state-sponsored – on the screen, but his representations are not voyeuristic, excessive, or explicit. But those representations are in his films with designed effect and affect (they are powerful) and that is why I’ve provided content warnings.

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28 January \ intro to course

30 January | Townsend, *Hollywood Shuffle*

04 February \ *Bamboozled* (cw: minstrelsy, racialized degradation)

06 February | Smith-Shomade, “I Be Smackin’ My Hoes” in SLR and Chidester & Bell, “Say the Right Thing” in FTP

11 February \ *School Daze* (cw: sexual violence)

13 February | Bambara, “Programming with *School Daze*” in SLR

18 February \ *Do the Right Thing* (cw: antiblack violence, death)

20 February | Abiodun, selection; McKelly, “The Double Truth, Ruth” in SLR

25 February \ *Mo’ Better Blues*

27 February \ *Jungle Fever* (cw: drug addiction, gendered violence)

03 March \ *Malcolm X*

05 March | Stevens, “Subject to Counteremory,” in FTP

10 March \ *Crooklyn* (cw: parental death)

12 March | Cunningham, “Through the Looking Glass,” in SLR

17 March | ☺ | Break

19 March | ☺ | Break

24 March \ *Get on the Bus*

26 March | Watkins, “Reel Men” in SLR

31 March \ *4 Little Girls* (cw: antiblack violence, death)

02 April | Acham, “We Shall Overcome” in SLR and Jddell, “Interview with Spike Lee” in SLI

07 April \ *Red Hook Summer* (cw: child abuse)

09 April | Lapin review (linked on Moodle)

14 April \ *Chi-Raq* (cw: violence and death)

16 April | Richard Brody and Dan Hyman, et al reviews (linked on Moodle)

21 April \ *When the Levees Broke* (cw: images of death)

23 April | ... continued discussion

28 April \ *BlacKkKlansman*

30 April | Lee’s beginnings, at the end: Mars Blackmon & Nike (final discussion of Black icon making)