

The Making of Spike Lee's Nonfiction Joints

Drawing on film theorist Bill Nichols's groundbreaking study of the documentary, which he divides into six modes (poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative), this chapter reviews Spike Lee's television nonfiction filmmaking practices. Rather than lay the emphasis on the documentary's claim to authenticity, based on the supposedly mimetic power of the camera to capture truth without interference, Nichols's reflection builds on John Grierson's 1926 definition of the documentary as a genre that puts forward the "creative treatment of actuality,"¹ evoking the seemingly endless creative possibilities incipient in the relationship between the camera and its subject(s). Nichols pinpoints that filmmakers constantly modify the conventions of the documentary by exploring the interstices between creative vision and factual reproduction with a view to expressing their own perspectives and opinions. "Documentary engages with the world by representing it"² contends Nichols, questioning the ethical position of the filmmaker who produces a specific discourse on the world represented—oscillating between persuasion ("*I speak about them to you*") and expression ("*I speak about us to you*").³ This tension between two viewpoints permeates Spike Lee's documentaries, revealing the degree of intimacy he develops with his subjects and his authorial presence behind the camera. Although Lee does not put forward his body on screen, rarely intruding in the frame, the films nonetheless bear the imprint of his authorial signature. His idiosyncratic voice determines the overall message endorsed by the films, whose strong informative value yet resides in the testimonials of individual subjects invited to tell their own stories in front of the camera. Documentary filmmakers are keen to express their unique view of things, spotlighting their own experiences (in the autobiographic mode) or their interlocutors' to confront commonly held assumptions. Nichols explains that their films should be analyzed as discourses: "What makes it a documentary is that

this expressiveness remains coupled to representations about the social, historical world, including the world of the filmmaker as a social actor, going about his life or her life among others.”⁴

This chapter discusses the director’s creative appropriation of the documentary modes, which he explores to interrogate the values and the structures behind the media portrayal of African Americans. Through pulling together fictional and nonfictional devices, Lee prompts the viewer to take a critical stance at the representation of African-Americans’ experiences in the media and to recognize positive role models among ordinary characters fighting for their civil rights. Lee calls attention to ordinary citizens’ bravery when suggesting that the struggle of the 1960s continues in post-Katrina New Orleans; he strives to overturn the negative stereotypes foisted on nationalist figures like Huey P. Newton, whose political message of rebellion he endeavors to retrieve from the controversies surrounding the Black Panthers’ history. Based on the narrative arc fashioned by the stories of individuals whose names have become renowned (or not) in relation to their deeds, Lee’s documentaries exploit the biographical focus that personalizes his approach to the social and historical topics he investigates. The emotional dimension of the endeavor challenges the detached and distanced glance which may be expected from a documentary; however, it promotes debate over racial issues and translates the filmmaker’s commitment to fighting prejudice through analyzing concrete examples. Delving into the personal experiences of African-American characters, Lee aims to assess the weight of history and politics on their everyday life, thereby producing an inside view of racism which he is able to perceive through their eyes. A political agenda undergirds Lee’s nonfiction filmmaking, geared toward rejuvenating the image of African Americans, whose active historical and social role he wishes to underline.

Rather than adopt the expository mode of documentary filmmaking, which puts forth the indexical quality of the recorded footage and the truth value of the verbal commentary helping shape a logical argument, Lee’s documentaries are reflexive tools insofar as they question the informative value of the archival records which compose his film materials. Significantly, Lee unveils the filmic apparatus during his interviews, revealing their staged dimension for example, which may be read as a sign of his desire to lay bare the technical aspects of the film’s construction in an attempt to convey authenticity. From the credit montage he develops to introduce the viewers into a complex situation, which was simplified into a few iconic shots and catchphrases in the media, to the narrative

construction of the documentary as a television series that investigates the long-term consequences of Katrina, Lee leaves his creative imprint on the genre's flexible formula.

Investigating the Facts through the Camera Lens

Spike Lee's fiction and nonfiction filmmaking practices feed off each other: his feature films include multiple references to extradiegetic reality whereas his nonfiction films exhibit fictional devices that dramatize the documentaries' search for truth. Based in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, *Do the Right Thing* dramatizes the daily misdemeanors which press on individual interrelationships in a multicultural environment. Giving rise to an array of stimulating comments, the film influenced and shaped the popular perception of Lee's cultural politics. Political scientist Catherine Pouzoulet evokes the creative tension between fact and fiction that permeates the diegetic space of *Do the Right Thing*. She draws a list of all the news items that transpire into the fictional representation of New York, highlighting plotlines and tropes that resonate with notorious cases of racist violence.⁵ The film's narrative builds on explicit references to "incidents of interethnic violence, such as the killing of Michael Griffith, who, as he was leaving a pizzeria in the predominantly white Howard Beach section of Queens, was fatally beaten by Italian-American youths armed with baseball bats."⁶ Lee's storylines unfold against a historical-factual background and allude to real-life events, the individual and community impact of which he explores through employment. Fact and fiction characteristically interweave in Lee's filmmaking, allowing crossovers that challenge generic conventions and audience expectations. The warm yellowish tones of the image track in *Do the Right Thing* signify the pull of fiction, which undermines a realistic depiction of the ghetto's societal ills.⁷

The credits of *Malcolm X* cut from a burning American flag to video footage showing the police beating of Rodney King, whereas the opening sequence of *Clockers* includes staged autopsy and crime-scene photographs in a drug-plagued city.⁸ *School Daze* opens with a montage of photographs portraying African-American athletes Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Muhammad Ali, thus evoking sports as a cultural background shared by the characters and the viewers. These glimpses of an outside reality are presented as the basis for the dramatic situations presented, suggesting that the fictional characters are enmeshed in plots that

are drawn from the commonplace world of everyday experience. Factual and fictional elements are tightly intertwined in Spike Lee's filmmaking following an editing technique which is epitomized in the title sequence of the previously mentioned films. Interestingly, he adopts a similar strategy to introduce the thematic concerns that are developed in such documentaries as *Four Little Girls* and *A Huey P. Newton Story*, ambiguously resorting to fictional devices to engage us with the facts mentioned—including music, editing, and characterization, among others. His documentaries make use of musical scores and carefully stylized filmmaking that affect the meaning of the film.

Four Little Girls examines the psychological impact on both individual and community levels of the terrorist murders of fourteen-year-old Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and eleven-year-old Denise McNair, killed by a blast while preparing for a special youth service at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The title of the film echoes the label coined by the media which dramatized the fate of the victims into a news flash story: the girls' lives were ended by the explosion of the bomb, which had been planted in the basement of the church and went off during Sunday School service on September 15, 1963. The documentary's explanatory approach to segregation provides valuable insight into the power dynamics of the period, whilst its heterogeneous visual style questions the oral and visual discourse commodifying the memory of the victims.

The opening sequence of *Four Little Girls* interestingly presents the film as a fictional biopic as the voice of Joan Baez sings "Birmingham Sunday" while the camera tracks along a cemetery, capturing through a blue filter tear-blurred images of the graves that dot the landscape. The sequence shifts back and forth between the present and the past, stitching together black and white archival footage of the 1960s' police repression and protests for equality with colored shots of the tombstones. Editing dramatizes the introduction of the four teenagers' photographic portraits resting in the cemetery where they were buried. The entwined visual tracks oppose the peace and quiet of the cemetery where the youngsters now lay to the archival photographs of children proudly marching the streets. The camera zooms in on the boys' and girls' determined, smiling faces standing out in the crowd of demonstrators, thus spotlighting the children's political awareness and commitment. The credits capture the imaginary imprint left by the struggle in a few shots that slowly morph into an animated drawing, depicting three figures holding hands in a chain of solidarity, symbolically linking the present and the past. The

abstract images foster poetic contemplation as the voice of Joan Baez transcends yesterday's violence to enshroud the deceased girls with motherly tenderness. The singer recounts the events of that fateful day in a lullaby song, numbering the dead as though she was teaching counting rhymes. Her soft soprano voice creates an intimate proximity with the dead, setting the emotional tone that pervades the film.

Four Little Girls sacrifices the expository mode drawn from the indexical quality of the photographs included in the montage for the poetic affect achieved by the haunting, ghostly quality of the blurry blue-tinted cemetery footage. Nichols argues that "this mode stresses mood, tone, and effect much more than displays of factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion."⁹ The film, although undergirded by an expository purpose and dedicated to the memory of the "four little girls," combines informational and entertaining elements without giving in to sensationalism. While the poetic mode indicates the director's authorial presence, it also metaphorically introduces the film as a remembrance tool and a tribute. The tragedy of the "four little girls" is told from a subjective standpoint, marked by an affective relationship to the past which Lee does not try to repress, for he wishes to grasp and convey the emotional impact of the girls' deaths on the African-American community. Lee is obviously not just concerned with recovering the truth through an investigation that drives him to examine archival documents.¹⁰ Even though he resorts to the same narrative strategies of compilation filmmaking as Emile de Antonio and Errol Morris, collecting interviews and archival material to plumb the past, Lee's endeavor does not aim to produce objective truth. His documentaries blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, thereby putting forth the uncertainties raised by the investigative process. The portrayal of the "four little girls" limits the documentary project, for Lee can only give us access to memories of them, prompting the viewer to imagine their characters from the anecdotes related about them. Nichols contends that the documentary and the nondocumentary films overlap as categories, for filmmakers experiment with the medium to interpret the documents and facts exposed.¹¹

Spike Lee's second nonfiction film broaches the radicalization of the civil rights struggle through the emergence of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Rather than retrace the life of Huey P. Newton in a biopic that would strive to capture the elusive personality of the Panthers' leader, *A Huey P. Newton Story* is a recording of Roger Guenveur Smith's one-man show first presented in February 1997 at the Joseph Papp Public Theater on Broadway. While the film plays on the fascination elicited by

the nationalist rebel, Spike Lee deconstructs the iconic figure of Huey P. Newton by laying stress on the political reasoning behind the party's call for revolutionary social action. The credits of *A Huey P. Newton Story* are conspicuously edited from an array of archival footage used to convey contextual information and to construct the visual discourse of the film, thus adding Lee's personal perspective to Smith's portrayal of Huey P. Newton. The focus on archival footage anchors the documentary in the 1960s, providing a historical background to the performance. The film starts with a sequence that cuts from a prologue to the informative credits: the story of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense is encapsulated in a few iconic shots taken from television newsreel archives whereas red typed letters appear over a grey wire netting drawn on a dark screen, giving background information on the making of the film. Cross editing disrupts the narrative flow in *A Huey P. Newton Story*, signifying gaps in the history of the Panthers, whereas the motif of the wire netting metaphorically connotes a prison tale. The opening sequence articulates the distance between the media story of the Panthers and the version endorsed by Lee, signified by the slow musical score which downplays the dramatic media spin. The interstices between the two narrative strands, opposing archival footage to the title credits, shed light on the spectacle of the Panthers' political performances, attracting cameras and reporters in search of sensational breaking news. The *mise en scène* organized by the Panthers themselves creates a *mise-en-abyme* in the film, which challenges the documentary form to engage with the notion of representation.

The events that marked the decade are visually summarized through iconic scenes: the Panthers demonstrated along with peace activists against the Vietnam war; Malcolm X called for change; the counterculture of the hippies blossomed; Angela Davis accused the police of discriminating against African Americans; Edgar J. Hoover warned the people against Newton as a violent revolutionary; Orson Welles characterized Hamlet in one of Newton's favorite plays as "a gangster with a conscience"; the Panthers were dubbed a "threat to harmony" by Oakland's mayor; window posters of Newton were targeted with gunshots; Newton was arrested for allegedly killing a policeman; Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were murdered by "99 shots" fired by the police¹²; Hollywood star Marlon Brando took a public stance in support of the Panthers at Bobby Hutton's funeral; Martin Luther King called for a "revolution of values." Every piece of film divulges incomplete information as though the story of the Panther Party for Self-Defense had not yet been written. Archival footage in the credit sequence spans the events from Newton's arrest in 1967 to Fred Hamp-

ton's murder in 1969; it is not randomly organized nor chronologically arranged as could be suggested by the compilation of facts it covers. Fast editing adds to the tense and confused atmosphere of the period, envisioning the Black Panther Party as part of the counterculture movement of the 1960s.

The opening sequence depicts the Panthers' activists demonstrating outside the Alameda courthouse in Oakland with a reporter cynically commenting on the load of work awaiting the Panthers' lawyers working for Newton's defense attorney Charles Garry, considering the high rate of arrests that took place among the Panthers. Another reporter then appears on screen, faltering in his speech and calling for a "cut" that points to the media's everyday *mise en scène* of the world in the news programs. The film cuts from the media spectacle of the Panthers to the responses they provoked. It includes an interview of an African-American woman testifying about gunshots she witnessed in front of the camera which lingers on graffiti adorning the outside wall of a tenement house ("off the pigs"), thus dramatizing the risk taken by the television crew in a Panther dominated area and by the policemen venturing in a quarter that has dangerously run out of control. The close-up on the words defiantly sprayed on the wall draws attention to the engagement of the Panthers, who conspicuously claim the territory with "graffiti style [that] disrupts the aesthetic of authority."¹³ Through the insertion of a behind-the-scenes glance at media reporting, the documentarian self-reflexively pinpoints that the positioning of the camera constructs the representation of the world and frames its perceptions.

Based on a one-man show whose narrative Lee interweaves with archival images, *A Huey P. Newton Story* interestingly merges fiction and nonfiction which documentary critic Michael Renov considers as two interrelated narrative modes that share key conceptual and discursive characteristics. Facts and fiction merge when the camera starts rolling, transforming an interviewee's words and body language into acting for the camera. Playing the role of Huey P. Newton and assuming his political voice, Roger Guenveur Smith's interpretation enhances the process of filmmaking surrounding him. Renov notes that the creative power embedded in the documentary when stating that "nonfiction contains any number of 'fictive' elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention."¹⁴ Nonfiction filmmaking relies on the same processes of narrativization and characterization that underpin fiction films, making use of stylistic elements including angle shots and editing to dramatize the

nonfiction stories investigated by a conspicuous camera. Lee resorts to recognizable tropes such as low-angle shots reminiscent of *Do the Right Thing* and musical tunes used in other fiction films,¹⁵ which signify his presence behind the camera and contribute to the transformation of his interviewees into characters.

From the Participatory to the Performative Mode

In *Issues in Contemporary Documentary*, Professor of communications Jane Chapman assesses the state of current documentary film practice through a series of case studies that explore the creative tension between two contradictory intents within the genre:¹⁶ she argues that the performative documentary oscillates between “two poles of either letting the event speak for itself (observation) or providing a single authoritative voice (narration).”¹⁷ The consistent appeal of the documentary resides in its conflicting approach to the real world, opposing an unmediated reflection to a subjective perspective. Spike Lee’s documentaries draw their fascinating power from this negotiation between two viewing modes: apart from a few questions that can be overheard, Lee remains in the background and offers screen space to his filmed subjects, whose stories he shapes into a narrative. The voices of the characters interviewed come to the fore: witnesses testify to the truth of events they recount, voicing their views and feelings toward the situations they mention.

Characterization is best achieved through performance in Spike Lee’s documentaries, empowering the interviewees who directly address the camera, eagerly staging their speech and action to make themselves heard. Following Nichols’s documentary classification, Lee’s nonfiction films interweave the participatory and performative modes. Although they mainly revolve around a web of interviews, illustrating a pattern of collaboration between filmmaker and subjects, they nonetheless bring the emotional intensities of embodied experience and knowledge to the fore through characterization. Nichols explains that “performative documentaries intensify the rhetorical desire to be compelling and tie it less to a persuasive goal than an affective one.”¹⁸ Spike Lee develops characterization to overcome the boundaries of the participatory mode, prompting his interviewees to bring in such props as photographs and objects presented as pieces of evidence that characterize their relationship to the past. The documentary participants therefore seem to pose as themselves, which turns the whole filmmaking process into an empowering experience for

them. Lee's camera operates as a go-between between the personal and the public, allowing private comments to become political statements as they are broadcast on television, reaching a wider audience.

The documentary series *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* and *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* provides an illuminating example of the power which can be drawn from the camera, reversing the dynamics of filmmaking: the camera's investigative function is reduced by each interviewee's *mise en scène*. Rather than being the object of the gaze, the interviewees become the authors of their speech, which they embody and interpret in front of the camera eye. The two films illustrate the journey of Phyllis Montana-Leblanc whose story is disseminated throughout the episodes of the series, making her a familiar figure by the end of the first season of the series. A few minutes before the ending credits of Act 4 in *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, she speaks to the camera in a direct address. Sitting inside her Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) trailer, she reads a very intimate statement about her experience of Katrina, which testifies to the relationship of trust and confidence that has developed between herself and the filmmaker:

Not just the levees broke, the spirit broke, my spirit broke
The families broke apart
I want my mama back, I want my sister back, I want my
nephew back.
The auction block broke from so many African American
bodies.
The sense of direction was broken because of all the darkness
There was light from time to time but they broke away and
left us.
My being together broke when I fell apart.
The smell broke away from my skin when I came out of the
waters
The waters that came and stood, still, with the bodies of my
people.
The dogs, shit, pigs, rats, snakes and "heard of" alligators.
The broken smile, the broken minds, the broken lives.
And you know something? Out of all this brokenness I have
begun to mend
With God and my deep deep commitment to infinite
strength, to never give up

I am mending, God willing, for a long long time.
 So when you see the waters, when you see the levees breaking,
 Know what they really broke along with them. [WTLB, End
 of Act 4]

The commentary soundtrack of the DVD discloses unexpected details as to that scene: Lee explains that the woman proposed to read a poem she had composed the night before and he turned the camera on, sensing that it would provide further insight into post-Katrina New Orleans, where chaos was still visually and psychologically overwhelming. He asked her to re-enact her reading in order to adjust lighting and framing, which provides a highly moving and thought-provoking moment in the film. One stops gazing at the spectacle of destruction to ponder on the words the woman utters, her voice betraying the deep emotions she struggles with. Viewers sense that her statement was indeed no improvisation: she reads out the poem articulating what it means to go on living after Katrina has torn her life apart, giving vent to her frustration and disappointment with the authorities in charge. As an active participant in the film, she self-consciously opened the door of her FEMA trailer to expose what her life had become to outside observers, thus reversing the relationship which the camera establishes with the filmed subject: she would not content herself with being a witness whose testimony was recorded, for she was determined to reach out to the outside world. Her private thoughts become political statements as she sits reading in front of Spike Lee's camera, which represents a window onto the world for the woman who grabs the opportunity to make herself heard. Her comments are not unlike the rap songs of Shelton Shakespeare Alexander with their blend of politics and poetry; the young man sings his own rap at the end of Act 2 to recount his experience of Katrina (WTLB). Talking in front of Spike Lee's camera obviously became part of the healing process for Phyllis Montana-Leblanc—and other filmed participants, for she made efforts to jot down the words she wanted to communicate and to have the audience listen to. She even wrote a book after the film, which Spike Lee prefaced, thus pursuing the autobiographical narration she had started in the film.¹⁹

If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise begins with a prologue by the same Phyllis Montana-Leblanc who delivers a two-minute soliloquy and stages her performance in stark contrast to her final appearance in *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*: she was seated in a FEMA trailer then, bending over to read her text in a low voice, whereas she delivers her speech like a rap song with fast rhythm and alliterations

that underline her bold defiance in the sequel to the film. One can only be struck by the change of tone that permeates her voice as she endorses the role of a spokesperson for New Orleans African-American community. As a witness and a survivor, she has relinquished the first person narration to enhance the political overtones of her comments, using the plural "we" to convey collective sentiment. She raises her voice and her arms to physically embody the resilience she has developed over the past five years, thus fostering aliveness in her performance of resistance. The background provides a theatrical setting that points to the integration of ruins into local landscape: the woman stands in front of a rundown house whose barred windows suggest the place has been abandoned, maybe even condemned for safety reasons, visually exhibiting the traces of Katrina's devastating impact on building structures. Rather than convey an image of destruction, the façade has been painted over with graffiti depicting New Orleans skyline, thus hinting at the redeeming power of art. Phyllis Montana-Leblanc's introduction to the film discloses the psychological journey she has made since Katrina, transcending her frustration and depression into an activist commitment that pervades every line she speaks out loud.

In *When the Levees Broke*, the woman recounted that she had cried for help on a drowning rooftop, desperately watching helicopters hover about and away. At the time she was concerned with bearing witness about her experience of Katrina whereas she draws a list of political demands in *If God Is Willing*, demonstrating that she has engaged in a healing process by reflecting on the political and collective dimension of Katrina. Calling for change with the past, Phyllis Montana-Leblanc's presentation foreshadows the documentary's thematic concerns: poverty, death statistics, education, levee maintenance, politicians' lies, health care, corporate greed, environmental issues will be broached, widening the scope of the documentary beyond the racial issues Spike Lee brought to the fore when dealing with Katrina in *When the Levees Broke*. Her opening lines point to the prejudices that victimized the low-income residents in New Orleans, suffering from the cold-blooded contempt of those "in tailored suits" whom she accuses of being responsible for the deaths she metaphorically evokes as "hooded white sheets." The recurring line "If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise" evokes a natural cycle that cannot be broken, suggesting that New Orleans's fate belongs to forces that are beyond man's power to control. The speaker, however, uses the anaphora "no more" to suggest Katrina should prompt a rupture with the racial, segregated past of the city:

No more weeping mothers as their child's body lies in the streets.
No more hate from those whose tailored suits still resemble
hooded white sheets.

If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise

No more closing schools in all-black neighborhood meant to
teach.

No more lying about the numbers they said they couldn't reach.

If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise

No more nightmare of breaching levees, black waters that did
come, murder and drown.

No more silence, Tea parties, racial division, poverty, yes, we
can.

The pavements we will pound.

If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise

No more leaving poor folks to die because they cannot afford
medical care.

No more singing we shall overcome 'cause we're already there.

No more political pushers who use our time to sell their lies.

No more sacrificing the American people leaving us with noth-
ing but sighs.

No more total audacity, explosive fire is gone. Bodies are nine
plus two.

No more corporate oil wanting their lives back. Indictment of
criminal charges, the whole damn crew.

No more use of our Gulf Coast waters, wetlands, heritage and
soil.

No more "up yours, Louisiana."

But we all know there's blood in the BP oil.

If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise.

Phyllis Montana-Leblanc's stance of individual fortitude is both appealing and disconcerting, expressing her sense of outrage and frustration in the face of continued perceived injustice.

The last but one line of her soliloquy evokes the 2010 Gulf Coast oil spill, known as the Deepwater Horizon incident, which destroyed a significant amount of fish and wildlife before it was finally contained. The oil slick caused havoc that affected Americans along the Mississippi Gulf Coast beyond class and race. As she channels her rage into powerful lines that connote the unending struggle which underpins individual and collective survival in the "new New Orleans," Phyllis embodies a civic stance that has reverberated throughout the city, giving rise to a network of citizen

initiatives led by individual celebrities such as Brad Pitt and by the collective mobilization of civil society. Sociologists J. Steven Picou and Brent K. Marshall note that “countless private citizens from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast have volunteered both time and resources to initiate a grouping of their neighborhoods and communities”²⁰ and to organize life after Katrina. Lee develops what could be dubbed a “citizens’ documentary” through *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*, articulating the concerns of all those who have been affected by the neoliberal choices guiding reconstruction in New Orleans. The film highlights the commitment of a group of citizen activists among the interviewees who, while addressing such issues as education, housing, labor, and crime on a local level, testify to broader national and international dynamics. As he investigates further the conditions of reconstruction in post-Katrina New Orleans, Lee provides an overview of the impact of neoliberal policies, which more often than not are perceived in a negative light by the African-American residents. He adopts a militant tone which is missing from the other films, proposing models of action through the characters he accompanies.

Spike Lee's documentaries are mainly built around a web of interviews, providing a host of individual perspectives on the stories which constitute the narrative backbone of the films. This technique allows the filmmaker to grasp some events such as Katrina from various angles, assessing the multiple consequences of the breach of the levees for a diversity of people. The films achieve an overview by combining an overlay of archival material with the voiceover of witnesses, whose views either converge or diverge, thus constructing a dialectical relationship between the present and the past, the private and the public, articulated to issues of race and class. This type of construction enhances the discourse built around characters or events, the perception of which was reductively framed by the media. Not only are the “four little girls” fleshed out by the memories confessed in front of the camera, but Michael Jackson is also humanized through the voices that recall him in *Bad 25*. The interplay of several documentary modes highlights the prominent role given to interviews in Lee's films; however, they are incorporated in a filmic discourse that first and foremost displays the director's creative input and political views.

Discerning the Authorial Voice

Contrary to Michael Moore who conspicuously stages himself as a filmmaker in search of truth,²¹ Spike Lee remains almost invisible in his nonfiction films. The overall narratives nonetheless betray his pervasive

authorial presence: his musical scores poeticize the filmed landscapes; editing produces dramatic effect and conveys his reasoning; low-angle shots express his presence behind the camera as he strives to empower his interviewees through framing; he may even orally intrude in some of the filmed testimonies although he is nowhere to be seen on screen. Lee draws attention to racial prejudice by interviewing characters whose speech endorses stereotypical views. The filmmaker's voice can first be heard in Act 2 of *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, asking Emil Dumesnil, a white man, whether he was looking for Bin Laden when he returned to the Lower Ninth Ward with a 9mm handgun. Lee's mocking tone exposes the racial bias of his interviewee's fear-induced self-protective violence, whereas the question enhances the shocking irony of the situation he wishes to denounce as fear prevailed over solidarity. His selection of interviews undergirds the dramatic arc of the films, retaining the most outrageous statements among white characters whose racist views he thus spotlights.

Spike Lee's interviewing technique echoes Claude Lanzmann's obsessive search for technical details when investigating the processes of human destruction in *Shoah* (1985). The directors thereby dig up stories that account for the crushing psychological trauma their interviewees have been through. When Will Chittenden explains he has been on medication for months, for sleep would never come after Katrina, Lee asks him to name the type of medication he has been taking. The man gives a long list of brand-name pills, which attests to the trauma he has undergone and to its enduring effect in the present. Paris Ervin restrains his tears when recalling that he discovered his own mother's corpse in a house that had not been searched by FEMA contrary to what the markings on the door indicated, which prompted him to imagine her death more vividly as her body was found crushed under a refrigerator [*WTLB*, Act 4, 14:00]. Editor Sam Pollard explains that he selected from among a hundred and thirty interviews the stories which fit into Lee's narrative of devastation in New Orleans. Gathering together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, he helped produce a film which puts forth the witnesses' experiences instead of the filmmaker's authorial voice. His editing work consisted in organizing the film's narrative from the witnesses' accounts, whose emotional authenticity he strove to retain:

Everybody's got different pieces of the story, and someone who might be good at the beginning is not so good when it comes to talking about the evacuation. Someone who doesn't

say much in the beginning is great when it comes to talking about the flooding. So I'm trying to find the rhythms of these people, to create a journey, an arc. . . . If you find the right characters, the right interviews, they can give you a visceral sense of immediacy, of being there, so you feel emotionally connected to it. When this man tells you about finding his mother's body under the refrigerator, because she hadn't gotten out . . . [. . .] You try to get out of the way, not to condense too much, edit too much.²²

Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1969) provided the model that many documentary filmmakers emulated in the 1970s and 1980s, combining a rich variety of archival source material with trenchant interviews to recount the background to the Vietnam War in a way radically at odds with the American government's official version.²³ Drawing from the compilation montage which de Antonio turned into a powerful discursive device, Lee constructs a multiple perspective narrative, which confers an interesting polyphonic aspect to the films. Different layers of information are interwoven as narrative levels mingle, shifting from the past to the present, from the personal to the political, from the intimate to the public. Experimenting with Sergei Eisenstein's concept of intellectual montage, which puts forth the use of colliding shots as a structuring principle, Lee questions the representation of African-American figures on screen. The witnesses' personal stories either combine or collide with archival media footage, challenging the monologic discourse of the media with an array of anecdotes that testify to a diversity of experiences.

Even though the performative documentaries put forth the witnesses' acts of bearing witness, Lee introduces a critical edge into the films' enquiries—either endorsing his subjects' testimonies or interrogating the truth of their comments. While grounded on the collaboration between filmmaker and interviewees, the narrative is fashioned by the filmmaker whose views pervade the film. Dramatic camera angles function as indices of his authorial role, articulating a critical view throughout the narratives and even conveying his own judgment on his interviewees' statements. Lee heightens the urgency of the message his interviewees wish to get across by physically engaging with them. In *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*, he uses a tracking shot to film the housing projects that have been closed since mandatory evacuation suggesting through the camera's movement that the process of demolition cannot be prevented. His camera becomes a powerless witness; the panorama created depicts a landscape

of desolation as the red brick buildings have been abandoned, boarded up, and the windows sealed out to prevent anyone from getting in.²⁴ The filmmaker's physical commitment is made conspicuous as he walks behind M. Juakali with a handheld camera which captures the images of a walled city. The Saint Bernard projects, which M. Juakali explains were built during the Roosevelt era, have disappeared from view behind the panels that hide the demolition site. The activist's commentary provides an explanatory voice-over to the blocks of empty apartments, filmed in a long tracking shot that underscores the absence of residents:

All of this area here—we had 1500 families, mostly poor, black women with children. And right now, it's empty. These are the kinds of building they had before the storm, solid brick, they were built by the Works Progress Association during the Roosevelt era. During the storm hardly anyone evacuated because we felt we could survive. We had three-story building and we felt it was better than going to a shelter. [IGIW, Part 1, 34:49]

Not only does Lee offer his interviewees a platform to address an audience his camera will give them access to, thereby expressing his engagement with the issues mentioned, but he also includes them in a critical discourse through analytical editing. Some interviews are used in counterpoint to each other, blatantly pointing to the distance between the speakers. The director thus reveals institutional forms of white supremacy when filming Mitch Landrieu (lieutenant governor of Louisiana, today's mayor of New Orleans) standing in front of his New Orleans mansion, which rises clean and undamaged in the background, reflecting a different social status to the displaced, ruined houses of the Lower Ninth Ward.²⁵ The documentary lays bare racist tensions underlying the *façade* of American life,²⁶ expressing Lee's critical views through angles and jump cuts that are easily identified as recurring features in the director's fiction films—including *Do the Right Thing* (1989). The famous "racial slur montage" through which the characters of the film express their anger at each other, based on their own prejudice in a multicultural community divided by race and class, is transferred to *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*: the camera abruptly cuts from upward medium close shots to frontal close-ups of a man wearing a tee-shirt that features New Orleans black and gold striped flag, standing for the "Who dat nation" in reference to the community of supporters behind the Saints' football team. Quick editing dramatizes the words of the speaker as he bellows a series

of variations on the acronyms of British Petroleum, labeled as “billionaire pirates” and “belligerent plunderers,” thus leveling mounting criticism at the firm’s environmental policies after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in an entertaining fashion.

Lee may not conduct ambush interviews; however, he metaphorically comments on the events recounted through the choice of a setting that denotes the witnesses’ experience.²⁷ The images of *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* consistently point to the relationship between interviewees and place: the storm shattered the witnesses’ sense of place and the filmed landscape conveys the extent of destruction on their everyday landmarks. Whether they stand in a derelict landscape or sit still in front of the camera with a colored wall in the background, the witnesses’ tales of displacement and memories of terror are reflected by the setting around them as all landmarks have been turned over or shifted away by the flows of the flood. When the camera tracks along a street amidst the rubble with Terence Blanchard playing his trumpet in a deadly silent neighborhood, trying to appropriate the place by filling it with music [*WTLB*, Act 3, 41:00], the film must needs grasp a feeling of estrangement from an environment that seems to resist the people’s return.

Wherever they speak from, the interviewees look lost in their immediate surroundings, which display no personal or intimate connection: the pink wall used as a background to the interview with Clovina “Rita” McCoy and Catherine Montana Gordon (Phyllis Montana-Leblanc’s sister and mother) shows no personal item as though the two women had been cut off from their past by moving away from their home city to Humble, Texas. Their testimony points to the disruption of the affective relationship between individuals and places: the women stand in front of the house they bought in Humble, which however displays their indifference to the place. There are neither trees nor any flowers adorning the garden around the house, which does not seem to have been invested with affection. Humble is the site of no cultural or family memory for New Orleanians who look back at the Big Easy as their home city. Still, Lee tries to counter this feeling by creating a sense of belonging as he specifies each interviewee’s name along with the quarter where they live or lived in the city, thus symbolically trying to restore the broken link with New Orleans. Just before the fourth episode’s ending credits, every person interviewed in the series gives their names and address, speaking through painting frames that invite us to see them as characters belonging to the same community. The frame serves as an iconographical reminder of the director’s spin on their stories, further underlying the role of portraits in his filmmaking.



Figure 1.1. The closing sequence of *When the Levees Broke: a Requiem in Four Acts* shows all the characters interviewed in the film through the frame of a painting, which signifies the ambiguity between fiction and nonfiction that characterizes Lee's documentary portraits. Phyllis Montana-Leblanc stands at Armstrong airport, where she was stranded for hours before boarding a plane. *Courtesy of Photofest*

Jane Chapman observes that contemporary documentaries are grounded in the experiences of the filmed characters who are granted a form of authorial voice through the films that stage their stories: "The participants seem to be generating their own cinematic text, rather than being guided. This gives the impression that they are integral to the text and to the production device, rather than merely being recorded by it."²⁸ This ambiguity pervades the portrait documentaries dedicated to Jim Brown and Kobe Bryant—two African-American figures whose achievements the filmmaker wishes to underline by giving them a voice. The critical distance that seeps in such historical documentaries as *Four Little Girls* seems to disappear as the two men contribute to drawing their self-portrait. *Jim Brown: All American* (2002) begins as a sports documentary dedicated to the charismatic figure of Jim Brown, whose exceptional career as a football player paved the way for his success in Hollywood as

a hyper-masculine hero in the Blaxploitation cycle. While the biographical documentary maps out the structural barriers Jim Brown encountered on his way up and down the social ladder of American society, leading him from the limelight to the tabloids' gossip columns, the first-person narration endows Jim Brown with an authorial voice, which allows him to pose as the hero of his own life story and to refurbish his tarnished public image.

Brown lingers on the practical details of his game and his self-imposed strenuous training when addressing Lee's camera, unlike Kobe Bryant who indirectly speaks to the intrusive cameras when devising team strategies during a game which he retrospectively comments on in voice-over. *Kobe Doin' Work* (2009) does not tell the personal story of Kobe Bryant, giving neither biographical detail nor personal information about the player who skipped college and integrated the National Basketball Association straight after high school. *Kobe Doin' Work* draws attention to Bryant's dynamic role within the Lakers and captures his determination to win, expressing the filmmaker's fascination for the Lakers star player whose glowing career has nurtured many more hoop dreams. Close shots betray the aficionado's passionate gaze at the game, focusing on Bryant's outstanding talent at throwing down dunks and delivering blind passes when his team played San Antonio Spurs at the Staples Center on April 13, 2008. Bryant's voice-over strives to demystify basketball by depicting it as his everyday life, presenting himself as a worker on the court under the guidance of coach Phil Jackson. Spike Lee and Kobe Bryant can be heard discussing the technical details of the game, which may sound quite boring unless the spectator is a keen basketball follower. The interview happens out of shot and the duration of the game generates a sense of frustration, enhancing the split between Bryant's image as a Lakers star player and his view of himself as an ordinary basketball player.

As suggested through the latest example, Lee disrupts the spectacle of his films by resorting to self-reflexive techniques that prompt the viewer to question the very images he is watching. Ellen C. Scott points out the duality which characterizes Spike Lee's films, using "the power of the word to challenge the image track" and exploring "the ability of sound to provide a cultural depth of field—a rich store of information about culture—that challenges the stereotypical, flattening tendencies of the screen image."²⁹ While the interstices between the visual and oral tracks more often than not convey the author's critical voice, articulating an illuminating perspective on the tackled subjects, they also reveal the ethical underpinnings of his engagement.

The Reflexive Mode of Engagement

Although Bill Nichols approaches documentary filmmaking through a chronological lens, for example underlining the fact that the development of portable synchronous sound recording devices underpinned the growing popularity of the observational and participatory modes, he also emphasizes that the different documentary modes provide but a loose frame of affiliation.³⁰ Spike Lee's documentaries are best defined as non-fiction films, a term that signifies their ambiguous status considering they exhibit qualities common to all the proposed modes. Nonfiction writer and senior editor at *The Atlantic Monthly* Robert Vare argues that "narrative nonfiction bridges those connections between events that have taken place, and imbues them with meaning and emotion,"³¹ merging nonfictional data with such fictional devices as narrative spines, characterization and suspense. Narrative nonfiction therefore draws its entertaining power from the fictional devices it employs to report factual events. Lee's documentary filmmaking practice resonates with this definition, enhancing the power of fictional strategies to capture more than the facts.

Lee's documentaries operate in several modes, shifting from the poetic (e.g., the credit sequence of *Four Little Girls*) to the expository (through a compilation of archival footage), merging the participatory (based on interviews) and the performative (allowing the witnesses to perform their speech at their pace). His films are not only characterized by formal heterogeneity, but they also call attention to the principles that underlie the four modes. The filmmaker's engagement with the issues broached in the documentaries is made visible through visual cues that undermine the illusion of unmediated access to the real. Whether he verbally intrudes in an interview through an ironical remark or a sincere comment or visually expresses his presence through a few skewed angles, Lee points to the film as a construction or a representation. When juggling with archival newsreel footage and personal photographs in a compilation montage, the filmmaker deconstructs the elements of a visual culture that has shaped the viewers' knowledge of the past or their perception of iconic African-American figures. Spike Lee's documentaries are highly self-reflexive works, which prompt us to interrogate the representation at work in his own films.

The title of *A Huey P. Newton Story* epitomizes this practice, hinting at the fluid boundaries between fiction and nonfiction by turning the biographical endeavor into "a" story, which suggests that characterization may only allow a limited aspect of a multifaceted personality to emerge