

CAAS 340, American Culture 340, English 411
By Any Means Necessary: Studying Spike Lee's Films

Professor Michael Awkward

Tuesdays 3-6, Angell Hall G115

Office Hours, Location, and Phone Number: T 9-10, Th 10-11, Tisch 3062, 4-0444

This course will survey a selection of the feature films and documentaries of Spike Lee, and some of the scholarship these films – and the often-controversial Lee himself – have generated. We will begin with the 1986 release, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), which began what has been called a black (American) film renaissance, and end with his compelling 2006 releases, the blockbuster *Inside Man* and the acclaimed HBO documentary about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, *When the Levees Broke*. Our task will be to examine, among other topics, whether there are recurrent themes, points-of-view, attitudes, and stylistic flourishes that characterize what he calls a "Spike Lee Joint." We will be particularly concerned with how dominant categories of identity -- race, class, sexuality, and gender – are treated within his corpus of films. In addition, we'll explore the variety of critical responses to U.S. films generally, and to Lee's releases in particular (especially newspaper, internet, and magazine reviews and scholarly essays).

Required Texts:

Paula J. Massood, editor, The Spike Lee Reader (Temple University Press)

Films (to be streamed onto ctools site):

She's Gotta Have It (1986)

Do the Right Thing (1989)

Jungle Fever (1991)

Malcolm X (1992)

Clockers (1995)

Get On the Bus (1996)

4 Little Girls (1997)

He Got Game (1998)

Bamboozled (2000)

When the Levees Broke (2006)

Inside Man (2006)

Course requirements:

Constantly evolving writing portfolio, shared with movie partners, consisting of:

250 word weekly reactions to the films and reading (four as group projects) 15%

Collection of film reviews (three on each film) 10%

One brief (500 word) and two longer (1000 word) "reviews" of Lee's films 30%

Midterm examination 15%

Final Examination 20%

Class attendance and participation 10%

Course Policies:

Late written assignments will be penalized severely – half of a letter grade a day – and will not be accepted if you attempt to hand them in more than four days after they are due. Please be advised that, as a rule, I will not write comments on late assignments.

Multiple unexcused absences will impact your final grade. If personal emergencies arise that impact your availability and/or the quality of your participation, it is your responsibility to inform me in a timely fashion. Do not wait until the end of the semester to explain habitual tardiness or what you view as inferior performances.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will be punished as severely the University's laws allow.

Course Schedule:

September 7:
Introduction

September 14:
She's Gotta Have It; Massood essays: Paula Massood, "Introduction," bell hooks, "'whose pussy is this?' a feminist commentary."

September 21:
Do The Right Thing; Wahneema Lubiano, "But Compared to What?," James McKelly, "The Double Truth, Ruth."

September 28:
Jungle Fever; Ed Guerrero, "Spike Lee and the Fever in the Racial Jungle; Michele Wallace, "Spike Lee and Black Women;" Review I (500 words) due

October 5:
Malcolm X; Anna Everett, "'Spike, Don't Mess Malcolm Up.'"

October 12:
Midterm Examination

October 19:
Fall Break

October 26:
Clockers; Keith Harris, "*Clockers* (Spike Lee 1995): Adaptation in Black"

November 2:

Get On the Bus; S. Craig Watkins, “Reel Men”

November 9:

4 Little Girls; Christine Acham, “We Shall Overcome.” Review II (1000 words) due.

November 16:

He Got Game

November 23:

Bamboozled; Tavia Nyong'o, “Racial Kitsch and Black Performance,” Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, “‘I Be Smackin’ My Hoes’: Paradox and Authenticity in *Bamboozled*”

November 30:

When the Levees Broke; reading: to be announced. Review III (1000 words) due.

December 7:

Inside Man; David Gerstner, “De Profundis: A Love Letter from the *Inside Man*.” Final Examination.