

SPIKE LEE

TEACHES INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING

MASTERCLASS

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

MASTERCLASS

MEET YOUR NEW INSTRUCTOR



If there was one word to describe Spike Lee it would be *maverick*. What else to call the iconic film director who has managed to do it his way in a career spanning three decades and counting?

Spike first captivated our cultural consciousness in 1986 with his debut film, *She's Gotta Have It*, a story about a sexually empowered woman in Brooklyn and her three lovers, told in black and white (but for a whimsical dance scene). *She's Gotta Have It* was startling, not just because of its provocative subject matter, but also because it was made by a Black director telling compelling stories about Black people. Such films were few and far between in Hollywood, and for an underserved audience starved for greater representation, Spike's movies were manna—and intentional. Spike named his production company 40 Acres and A Mule Filmworks, a reference to land reparations to be given (but eventually revoked) to freed Black families along the South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida coast during the Civil War.

Spike's earliest works solidified his place in the canon. Films such as *School Daze* (1988); *Do The Right Thing* (1989), which received an Oscar nod for Best Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor; *Mo' Betta Blues* (1990); *Jungle Fever* (1991); and *Malcolm X* (1992), which received two Oscar nominations and enjoyed both critical and commercial successes. Spike often drew from the well of his own life to spin his tales, which encompass everything from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), colorism in the Black community, culture clashes in Brooklyn, love and jazz, interracial relationships, and addiction. Success for Spike meant success for other creatives of color, as he arguably set the scene for a renaissance in Black entertainment in film, television, and music.

Shelton Jackson Lee earned his nickname early: his mama called him "Spike" as a baby because she noticed he was tough. The eldest of three was born in Atlanta, Georgia, though his family would move to what he calls "the Republic of Brooklyn" when he was two years old. This relocation would radically inform the future director's storytelling. Spike grew up in a household which embraced the arts: his father, Bill Lee, is a jazz musician who would go on to score many of his son's films. Spike's mother, the late Jacquelyn Carroll, was a high school teacher who taught Black Literature and liked to go to the movies. She often took her eldest son as her date. (He says his 1994 film *Crooklyn*—a coming of age story about a young girl in Brooklyn whose family must deal with the death of their matriarch—is his most autobiographical.) Spike's interest in movies intensified when a friend lent him a Super 8 camera the summer before his junior year at Morehouse College. Bit by the film bug, Spike transferred to Clark Atlanta to study mass communications. Upon graduation, he went on to earn his Masters of Fine Arts at New York University, where he, for a time, served as artistic director and is now a tenured professor.

In his three decades in the entertainment business, Spike has refused to be fenced in by any form. His documentaries tell bold, unflinching truths about America—particularly in *4 Little Girls* (1997) and *When the Levees Broke* (2006). He has directed music videos for legendary artists such as Prince, Michael Jackson, and Stevie Wonder. Spike's work in advertising is equally groundbreaking: in 1997, he partnered with DDB Worldwide to start his own agency, Spike DDB, and has shot campaigns for corporations such as Levi's, Cadillac, and HBO. Most

notably, Spike's two decades-long relationship with Michael Jordan and Nike was spurred by his own character in *She's Gotta Have It*, Mars Blackmon.

Spike Lee continues to make movies—and make moves. In 2010, the Library of Congress selected *Malcolm X* for preservation in the National Film Registry. His most recent work, *BlackKkKlansman*, won the Grand Prix award at Cannes. *She's Gotta Have It* has been adapted into a television series for Netflix. It's now in its second season.

SPIKE'S FILMOGRAPHY

Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads. Performed by Monty Ross, Donna Bailey, and Stuart Smith. (1983)

She's Gotta Have It. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Tracy Camilla Johns, Tommy Redmond Hicks, and John Canada Terrell. 1986

School Daze. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Laurence Fishburne, Giancarlo Esposito, and Tisha Campbell-Martin. 1988

Do the Right Thing. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Spike Lee, Rosie Perez, and Danny Aiello. 1989

Mo' Better Blues. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, Halle Berry, Samuel L. Jackson, and Spike Lee. 1990

Jungle Fever. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Wesley Snipes, Annabella Sciorra, Spike Lee. 1991

Malcolm X. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Denzel Washington, Spike Lee, and Angela Bassett. 1992

Crooklyn. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Zelda Harris, Alfre Woodard, and Delroy Lindo. 1994

Clockers. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Mekhi Phifer, Delroy Lindo and Harvey Keitel. 1995

Girl 6. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Theresa Randle, Isaiah Washington, and Spike Lee. 1996

Get on the Bus. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Richard Belzer, De'Aundre Bonds, and Andre Braugher. 1996

4 Little Girls. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Bill Cosby, Ossie Davis, and Walter Cronkite. 1997

He Got Game. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Ray Allen, Denzel Washington, and Rosario Dawson. 1998

Summer of Sam. Directed By Spike Lee. Performed by John Leguizamo, Adrien Brody, and Mira Sorvino. 1999

The Original Kings of Comedy. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Steve Harvey, D.L. Hughley, Cedric the Entertainer, and Bernie Mac. 2000

Bamboozled. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Damon Wayans, Tommy Davidson, and Jada Pinkett Smith. 2000

25th Hour. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Edward Norton, Phillip Seymour Hoffman, and Barry Pepper. 2002

She Hate Me. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Anthony Mackie, Kerry Washington, and Ellen Barkin. 2004

Inside Man. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Denzel Washington, Clive Owen, and Jodie Foster. 2006

Miracle at St. Anna. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Derek Luke, Michael Ealy, and Las Alonso. 2008

Passing Strange. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by De'Adre Aziza, Daniel Breaker, and Eisa Davis. 2009

Red Hook Summer. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Clarke Peters, Nate Parker, and Thomas Jefferson Byrd. 2012

Bad 25. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Michael Jackson and Spike Lee. 2012

Oldboy. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Josh Brolin, Elizabeth Olsen, and Samuel L. Jackson. 2013

Da Sweet Blood Of Jesus. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Stephen Tyrone Williams, and Zaarah Abrahams. 2014

Chi-Raq. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Nick Cannon, Teyonah Parris, and Wesley Snipes. 2015

Michael Jackson's Journey from Motown to Off the Wall. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Michael Jackson. 2016

Rodney King. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Roger Guenveur Smith. 2017

Pass Over. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by Jon Michael Hill, Julian Parker, and Ryan Hallahan. 2018

BlackKkKlansmen. Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by John David Washington, Adam Diver, and Alec Baldwin. 2

SUGGESTED READING

Spike Lee's Gotta Have It: Inside Guerilla Filmmaking. Spike Lee. Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Do the Right Thing. Spike Lee, with Lisa Jones. Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Thinkin in Pictures: The Making of the movie Matewan. John Sayles. Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema. John Pierson. Miramax Books/Hyperion, 1996.

Sex, Lies, and Videotape Movie Edition Screenplay. Steven Soderbergh. Harpercollins, 1990.

ADDITIONAL VIEWING

Chapter 2: Film Is a Powerful Tool

- *The Birth of a Nation*. Directed by D.W. Griffith. Performed by Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, and Henry B. Walthall. 1915

Chapter 9: Collaborating With Your Director of Photography

- *Apocalypse Now*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Performed by Martin Sheen, Marlon Brando, and Robert Duval. 1979
- *The Last Emperor*. Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Performed by John Lone, Joan Chen, and Peter O'Toole. 1987

Chapter 13: Directing Actors

- *Dog Day Afternoon*. Directed by Sidney Lumet. Performed by Al Pacino, John Cazale, and Penelope Allen. 1975

Chapter 14: Directing With Intent: *On the Waterfront*

- *On the Waterfront*. Directed by Elia Kazan. Performed by Marlon Brando, Karl Malden, and Lee J. Cobb. 1954
- *Rashomon*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Performed by Toshiro Mifune, Machiko Kyō and Masayuki Mori. 1950

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER TWO

PUTTING WORDS ON PAPER

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2. PUTTING WORDS ON PAPER

SUBCHAPTERS

Capture Ideas in Notebooks

Do the Research

Organize With Index Cards

Set Daily Writing Goals

Respect Your Dedicated Writing Time

Get Feedback

Research for *BlackKkKlansman*

Working With a Writing Partner

The story that you keep thinking about over time is the story you've got to write.

Spike begins his writing process by jotting down ideas about the story in a notebook—character names, dialogue, plot points, et cetera. Once he feels like he has everything down, he transfers his notes onto index cards. He then begins the process of ordering. Using cards allows him to order and reorder until he feels that he's gotten it right. This work—plus research—gives him an abundance of material, which he eventually transforms into a script.

If you find it daunting to think about finishing an entire script, it may be easier to break the writing into manageable chunks that you tackle daily. Know what works for you. For instance, Spike knows he writes best in the morning for four to five hours at a stretch and he writes every day until the first draft is completed.

When you sit down to write, endeavor to remove all distractions—especially smartphones. Be experimental. Let your mind wander. This is a necessary, sacred time to get to know your characters.

When you feel you've gotten to a place you can share your script, select a trusted reader. Being prepared to receive input can often make your work better.

Spike believes that research is a fundamental part of the screenwriter's job. His approach is to immerse himself in the time period—he listens to the music of the time, reads books and magazine articles, and watches documentaries. When Spike embarked on the *BlackKkKlansman* project, about a Black man who infiltrated the Klu Klux Klan in the 1970s, Spike and his co-screenwriter Kevin Willmott immersed themselves in the 1970s—the Vietnam War, the Black

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Cinema is about storytelling. So you gotta pick the right story, the story you want to do at that time, the one you're most passionate about.

Power movement, the Civil Rights movement—making sure that they knew their material front to back.

If you work with a writing partner, make sure you share the same sensibilities and that your skills complement each other. If you're strong in dialogue, someone who is strong in structure could make a great partner. On *BlackKkKlansman*, Spike and Kevin tackled the rewriting of the script by dividing and conquering. They divvied up the material between them, and then exchanged scenes to get feedback from the other. Working remotely over email can work, especially if you have a long-standing relationship with your writing partner. Make sure you're both committed to the project over your egos—and always meet your deadlines.



LEARN MORE

Familiarize yourself with [the Black List](#), a network that allows you to submit your screenplay for review, potential purchase, and feedback (for a fee). More than 300 screenplays that were submitted to the Black List have been made into feature films, including *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The King's Speech*, and *Argo*.

ASSIGNMENTS

If you're still working to zero in on the story you want to tell, think about stories from your own life. What jewels are there, diamonds in the rough, ready to be mined? Write down a list of memories that have made an impression on you; like an occurrence from your childhood or a family ritual, for example. After you've written down your list, free-write a synopsis of each memory, jotting down any and every detail, and make it a story. As you're writing, you may discover the nugget of an idea.

WRITING A SCREENPLAY IS A LONG PROCESS. USE THIS OUTLINE,

BASED ON SPIKE'S PROCESS, AS A BLUEPRINT WHEN YOU'RE READY

TO WRITE YOUR SCRIPT:

- Dedicate a notebook to your film. Jot down all the ideas that come to your mind—characters, dialogue, plot twists, backstory, and the like. Continue to keep your notebook, jotting down ideas as they come to mind.
- When your notebook is full, transfer the information onto index cards.
- Then organize the index cards in the order that you can visualize your story unfolding.
- Begin writing your script with these index cards as a roadmap.
- Create a realistic writing schedule for your film, setting aside a certain number of hours per day or week to write. During that time, eliminate distractions—especially your cell phone.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER THREE

STORYTELLING

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3. STORYTELLING

SUBCHAPTERS

Be Bold With Your Character Invention

Don't Make a One-Sided Narrative

Find Stories That Resonate With You

Make Your Own Rules

Urgency of BlackKlansman

As a writer-director, it's important to have your own voice. This means having a distinct approach, whether it's via a favored camera angle, lighting, or the city or culture your stories explore. Voice is what gives your work style.

One way to have a unique voice is to tell unique stories, and no better way than to mine your own life for material. Many of Spike's earliest films were inspired by his personal experience. *She's Gotta Have It* originated from conversations he and his friends had about women. *School Daze* was reminiscent of his college days at Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta, both HBCUs (Historically Black College and University). In *Do The Right Thing*, Spike recalled a time in New York City when race relations were at a fever pitch, particular between African Americans and Italian Americans. He knew versions of those characters growing up in Brooklyn—how they spoke, their mannerisms—and recognized the growing cultural tension. The result was a powerful story that not only resonates, but is sadly reflected in real life to this day. Stories which originate from your own life will often be the ones about which you're most passionate and know intimately. Let this passion carry you through the tough but rewarding task of taking your film from conception through to completion.

Trust your instincts when writing your screenplays. Don't be afraid to break the rules. For example, when Spike writes, he doesn't think about his work fitting into a three act structure. Some may consider this blasphemy, but Spike believes it's important to question the norm. It also takes courage to create characters whose thoughts and opinions may be wildly different from your own—unsavory even. But if you can write two characters who are at odds and yet they are both somehow right, you've hit the drama jackpot.

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I've never really believed there's only one way to do anything, especially tell a story.

If you're telling a historical story, remember your audience. You want your audience to make the connection between the period you're depicting and today, so that it has urgency. Humor is a powerful tool that can help you make this connection; don't be afraid to use it if it's there and it feels natural to do so. Endeavor to make your story more than just a history lesson.

DID YOU KNOW...

In the end credits for *Do The Right Thing*, Spike dedicates the film to “the families of Eleanor Bumpurs, Michael Griffith, Arthur Miller, Edmund Perry, Yvonne Smallwood, and Michael Stewart”—all African Americans who died in police custody. The Radio Raheem character, played by the late Bill Nunn, was meant to represent those affected by police brutality. The 2014 death of Eric Garner by police chokehold was eerily similar to the death of Radio Raheem in the film. Both men were known in their communities as “gentle giants.”

ASSIGNMENTS

Write a scene in which two characters are in some sort of conflict. Write the scene from each POV.

Think about the time and place your film is bringing to life. In your notebook, describe this world. Who lives there? What do they wear? How do they talk? What does the environment look like? What does it sound and smell like? What kinds of interactions are common among people? Do people interact in public spaces or behind closed doors? Describe the interiors. Allow these textural details to color your script.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER FOUR

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER: *ON THE* *WATERFRONT*

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4.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER: ON THE WATERFRONT

SUBCHAPTERS

Film as a Powerful Tool for Truth
Every Choice Drives the Storytelling
A Classic Film's Relevance to the Contemporary

Film is an excellent medium to effect social change. Spike has long used his art as a platform to bring awareness to matters of injustice. One of Spike's all-time favorite movies is 1954's *On the Waterfront*, directed by Elia Kazan and starring Marlon Brando. Spike uses this work as an example of how movies can operate as a kind of activism. In the film, Marlon Brando's character, Terry Malloy, is a longshoreman who testifies against a corrupt mob-controlled union, and is shunned for this betrayal. Spike draws a strong parallel between this story and the plight of former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick who, after first taking a knee in 2016 to protest racial injustice and police brutality against Black people, has been vilified by the President and locked out of the NFL. Both men are silenced for having the courage to speak out. That a film made in the 1950s can be a metaphor for modern day events is the mark of an enduring human story and the power of our craft.

LEARN MORE

Watch *On the Waterfront*—which won eight Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, Best Editing, Best Cinematographer, and Best Story and Screenplay.

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Truth to power.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER 5

SPIKE'S FILM 101

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5. SPIKE'S FILM 101

SUBCHAPTERS

Budgeting Takes Compromise
Do It Yourself
Feed Them Now, Pay Them Later
Respect Your Locations
Designate Your Cover Sets
Crew Diversity

Before Spike writes a word of his script, he takes into consideration how much money he can raise to make the movie. He writes his scripts with that in mind. If you write a script that you can't realistically shoot at this moment, shelve it until you can raise the money needed to make it. Or, be ready to make compromises that will allow you to make the film for a realistic amount of money.

As an independent filmmaker, you'll probably have to make your budget yourself. To figure out how to best spend the money that you have, seek out copies of budgets from other directors who have made movies for an amount of money similar to what you can raise.

As you make a line by line assessment of what you can pay for, you'll need to make hard decisions about how to cut costs. One way to cut is to ask actors and crew to work on a deferred payment. If you're working with people who know you, they may be willing to take a leap of faith on a project they believe in. Just make sure to put everything in writing.

Most importantly, keep your crew happy! You may not have a huge craft services budget, but it's essential to feed everyone lunch and dinner during long shoot days, with snacks to nosh on in between. A little bit of attentive effort on your part can go a long way in making people feel their work is appreciated.

When you're working on location—especially in someone's home—be respectful. Apply the golden rule: treat a location as if it were your own home. Work quietly so you're not a nuisance to the neighbors. Otherwise, you may not be able to come back the next day. Flexibility and preparation are crucial

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**Do the film that you can
raise the money for.**

to independent filmmaking. Losing locations is inevitable, so be prepared with a cover set, which is essentially an alternate location. Extra places to film in case of unforeseen circumstances can save your day and keep your shooting schedule and your budget on track.

LEARN MORE

Review [Variety's synopsis](#) of how to create a film budget.

Many states offer filmmakers financial incentives in the form of tax credits, cash rebates, or grants. It's worth doing your homework—especially if you're shooting on a budget—to find locations that come with savings. [This guide](#) to the state by state incentives gives you a quick primer.

ASSIGNMENT

Create a working budget for your film.

- Project how much you can raise.
- Research comparable budgets for your film from other independent filmmakers.
- Create a production schedule. Read through your script scene by scene to determine how much you will need to make your film including locations, special effects, music, and the like. How will you pay your actors and crew throughout the process? Also factor in feeding your crew.
- With the production schedule in mind, you have a step by step timeline of how much money you will need during each phase of the moviemaking process, from preproduction to post.

If you're in preproduction on a film (or beginning to think about production), begin tracking ideas for locations and cover sets. Assess them for practicality. Are they accessible? (i.e: Is your location in a walk-up building with narrow stairwell?) Are they prone to bad weather?

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER SIX

CASE STUDY: FINANCING *MALCOLM X*

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6.

CASE STUDY: FINANCING *MALCOLM X*

SUBCHAPTERS

Self Determination and Self-Reliance

When making *Malcolm X*, Spike knew it would take more than two hours to tell the epic life story of the assassinated Muslim leader and human rights activist. He also knew he wasn't going to have the money to finish the film. When the crew inevitably ran out of funds and the studio stopped production, Spike asked prominent, wealthy members of the Black community for donations to help him get the film made. Early screenings of the film, combined with the heavily publicized financial support, convinced Warner Brothers to restart production. Spike even put his fee for making the film back into the budget. Spike's story is a reminder that no matter how established you are, or how big of a studio is funding your film, you may still have to pound the pavement to raise more money.

DID YOU KNOW...

Pledge rewards included (but were not limited to) vintage *Mo' Betta Blues* pins, *Malcolm X* jacket patches, movie posters, t-shirts, autographed limited edition posters, tickets to the world premiere, a phone call with Spike, autographed Nike's worn by Spike, custom designed Jordans, and courtside seats at Madison Square Garden with Spike to see the Knicks. With the help of 6,421 backers, Spike raised over his goal: an incredible \$1,418,910.



**You know the saying
from *The Godfather*: We
went to the mat on that.**

LEARN MORE

There are a multitude of ways to approach finding the capital you need to make your film. Here are a few points of entry:

- Sundance offers a variety of funding opportunities and creative labs for directors, screenwriters, producers, and independent storytellers of all genres. Review their opportunities [here](#).
- Similarly, [Tribeca All Access](#) offers funding and support services for independent filmmakers.
- [Creative Capital](#) provides artist grants to fiction and nonfiction filmmakers.
- [IFP](#) is a non-profit that offers grants, fiscal sponsorship, community, and resources to filmmakers of all genres.
- [Cinereach](#) is a nonprofit that offers developmental funding and filmmaker support to fiction and nonfiction filmmakers.
- PBS offers a comprehensive grants database for documentary filmmakers. Dive into it [here](#).
- Documentary filmmakers can consider partnering with a fiscal sponsor like IDA. Review their funding opportunities for nonfiction filmmakers [here](#).
- [Kickstarter](#) and [Indiegogo](#) are the go-to crowdfunding platforms for creatives. Crowdfunding is not only a revenue source, but it also puts your film on the radar of sales agents and investors, and serves as a proof of concept to potential buyers.
- Spike references a “bond company” in regards

to *Malcolm X*. In independent film, a producer can work with a bond company to get upfront financing for the a film. It works like this: the producer gets a distribution contract that promises a minimum distribution guarantee payment upon completion, but needs that money up front to fund production. So, they use their distribution contract as collateral to get a production loan from a bond company. The loan is essentially an advance on their minimum distribution guarantee. The producer—along with the distributor and the bond company—all sign a completion bond agreement (also known as a completion guarantee), which is a promise to complete the film as per their contract and deliver it to the distributor. The bond company then takes the minimum distribution guarantee as repayment of the loan. Under this kind of agreement, the bond company has the right to take over the film if it is going over budget—such is the situation Spike faced with *Malcolm X*.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPORTANCE OF CASTING

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7. IMPORTANCE OF CASTING

SUBCHAPTERS

Take Your Time: Casting Halle Berry

Chemistry Is Important

Seek Out New Talent

Casting Rosie Perez

Don't Be Shy

Casting in *BlackKkKlansman*

Casting Topher Grace

Casting John David Washington

Choosing the right cast for your film is critical and should not be rushed or taken lightly. Taking time on the front end to audition actors can save precious time and money on the back end, as it can be difficult and costly to fire an actor or edit out a bad performance. Do not be afraid to ask an actor to audition more than once. It is through this process you can witness the actor's approach over time and ultimately trust them with the role. Don't be afraid to cast people who might not look the part, as Spike learned with Halle Berry in *Jungle Fever*. Spike initially believed Berry, a former pageant contestant, was too attractive to convincingly play the role of a crack addict. He and his casting director, Robin Reed, called the actress back to read five or six times. On one of these auditions, Berry dressed the part to convince them she had the acting chops, which won her the role.

When casting two leads, Spike believes it's integral for the actors to read together before they get the role to ensure there is chemistry. He asks these fundamental questions: Do they get along? Do they interact? Is it believable that these people are together? Do you believe them? Yes or no?

As an independent filmmaker, be open to working with new acting talent. If you're able to hire a casting director, utilize their resources to help suss out new talent. Good casting directors often have connections to agents and talent, as well as a sharpened eye for choosing the right actors for your project. Several famous folks got their first movie credits with Spike, including Halle Berry, Martin Lawrence, Rosie Perez, and Queen Latifah.

Spike found Rosie Perez at a dance club in LA. She was dancing on top of a speaker, and when the bouncer told her to get down, she cursed him out—in a Puerto Rican-Brooklyn accent that captivated

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The wrong actors, the wrong roles could turn out the wrong movie.

Spike. He cast her as Mookie's girlfriend in *Do the Right Thing*, and made the character Puerto Rican for her.

While it's true that having the right actor attached to your film can help get the project financed, as an upstart director, you may not have the connections to get a script into the right hands. In the event you meet an actor on the fly, have a 30 second pitch for your film already prepared. “You really can't be shy,” Spike says.

On the flipside, if you don't get your first choice actor for a role—especially if it's a big star—don't despair. Oftentimes a lesser-known actor will surprise you—and it will work out for the better.

Spike cast Topher Grace in *BlackKkKlansman* at the urging of his longtime agent. Even though Spike was skeptical at first, Grace proved himself to be a great fit for the role. Spike encourages you to be open to letting the actors make what you wrote better—take your ego out of it and give them at least one take to try it their way.

Finally, when you have a strong instinct about someone being right for the role—like Spike did with John David Washington—follow your gut. Even if it's risky.



ASSIGNMENT:

- Be prepared to pitch your film to actors. Are you able to tell them what your film is about in two minutes? Rehearse your pitch over and over, so that when opportunity knocks, you'll be ready.
- As an independent filmmaker, there may be times in which you can't afford to hold a rehearsal for your actors, but you need to build relationships and shared history between characters. Once you've cast your actors, you can ask them to write letters to each other in character. You can leave this open-ended or give them prompts to inform their letter writing.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER EIGHT

COLLABORATING WITH YOUR DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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8.

COLLABORATING WITH YOUR DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

SUBCHAPTERS

Audition Your Director of Photography

Your DP Should Elevate Your Vision

Find a Flexible, Efficient DP

Plan Ahead and Know Your Shots

Crawl Before You Walk

A cinematographer—also known as a Director of Photography (DP)—is the person responsible for creating the look of your film. When you find a DP who understands and can capture your vision, it is a relationship worth keeping. A good DP will elevate your vision, and introduce ideas and concepts you as the director may not have considered. It's no coincidence many directors and cinematographers work together repeatedly, such as Steven Spielberg and Janusz Kaminski or Spike and his NYU classmate Ernest Dickerson, who shot six of his films.

Make sure you do your homework before you hire your DP. While their resume is important, audition them the same way you would an actor. Do not be afraid to ask questions such as how do they envision your project, do they have thoughts about color, lighting, and camera movement? Do they work quickly? All of these queries are pertinent to finding the right person for your project.

When you have made the hire, communication with your cinematographer is key. Before you start shooting, go through the script scene by scene and create a plan of action. Get the most fundamental shots before pursuing the more ambitious ones, yet be flexible and to allow your DP room for improvisation and inspiration.

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Big mistake when you choose your DP based on a reel. Anybody can put together a one minute sizzle reel. Look at something they shot that has length to it.

ASSIGNMENT

Create a lookbook for your film. If you want to be analogue, go through magazines and books and tear out photos of what you're drawn to and how you want your film to feel. To go digital, consider using Google Slides, Evernote, or Pinterest. These visual references will greatly inform what you want your story to look like and be of tremendous help in describing the vision to a prospective DP.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER NINE

STORYTELLING WITH CAMERA COVERAGE

MASTERCLASS

9.

STORYTELLING WITH CAMERA COVERAGE

SUBCHAPTERS

Cinematic Camera Angles

Camera Movement

One-Take Scenes

Breaking the Fourth Wall

According to Spike, film is all about movement. Telling a story isn't just about recording the action, but *how* the images are captured. So much can be conveyed through basic camera angle. You can shoot a weak character from above so that they appear smaller. Conversely, you can shoot a strong or heroic character from below to make them appear larger than life. A volleying camera suggests rising tension. A character facing the camera suggests intimacy with the audience.

Spike's philosophy about film as movement makes sense considering some of the camera techniques he and DP Ernest Dickerson employed have become signature. When Spike was shooting *Malcolm X*, the slain leader's widow revealed her husband had a hunch there would be an attempt on his life during his speech at the Audubon Ballroom. To convey the emotion Malcolm may have felt in that moment, Dickerson suggested a double dolly shot, in which Denzel sits on a dolly and is being pulled, giving the illusion that Malcolm is in deep thought, moving through space and time as the world—and possibly his mortality—passes him by. It's risk-taking techniques like these that give a director style and distinction.

Spike is known to try different techniques in his work. For example, sometimes it's quicker and more interesting to shoot a scene with multiple actors in one take, such as what he did in *Mo' Betta Blues*, as opposed to setting up individual shots with each actor which can take the lion's share of your day. In *25th Hour*, Ed Norton's character talks to himself in the mirror, however when the camera faces him, the actor appears to be speaking directly to the audience. This is a cinematic technique called breaking the fourth wall.



The simplest way I know of to show a contrast between characters with cinematography is just placement of the camera.

DID YOU KNOW

Ektachrome is a type of Kodak color film that was developed in the 1940s and popularized because it could capture photos at higher shutter speeds than Kodachrome. It uses a simpler development process that allows photographers and smaller labs to develop it. Ektachrome featured prominently into *National Geographic* photography for years, but only rarely was used in film. Cinematographer Matthew Libatique used a special processing technique to neutralize color temperature and create more contrast. Kodak discontinued Ektachrome in 2013, but they have promised to re-introduce it in 2018.

LEARN MORE

Breaking the fourth wall is a powerful film technique that's been used throughout film history. [Revisit seminal films](#) that break the fourth wall in varying degrees.

ASSIGNMENT

Take a scene from your script and make a shot list. How can particular camera angles tell the story, or make a moment more impactful? What can you reveal about your characters and the story via camera angles? Draw a rough sketch of your shot list. You'll be that much more prepared for our next chapter: *Storyboards: Malcolm X*, where we'll be delving further into the art of storyboarding.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER TEN

STORYBOARDS: *MALCOLM X*

MASTERCLASS

10. STORYBOARDS: MALCOLM X

SUBCHAPTERS

Assassination Scene Breakdown

Storyboards can be supremely useful when directing big action sequences. Drawing out your shot list can be an organizing principle in the cacophony of producing complicated shoots. Storyboards become a precise map of what's almost certain to be a hectic shoot day. You want to get this right.

Spike first created a storyboard for the riot scene in *Do the Right Thing*. He also created one for the assassination scene in *Malcolm X*. Spike's original storyboard for this scene shows the level of detail and organization that is required to create the illusion of chaos.

“

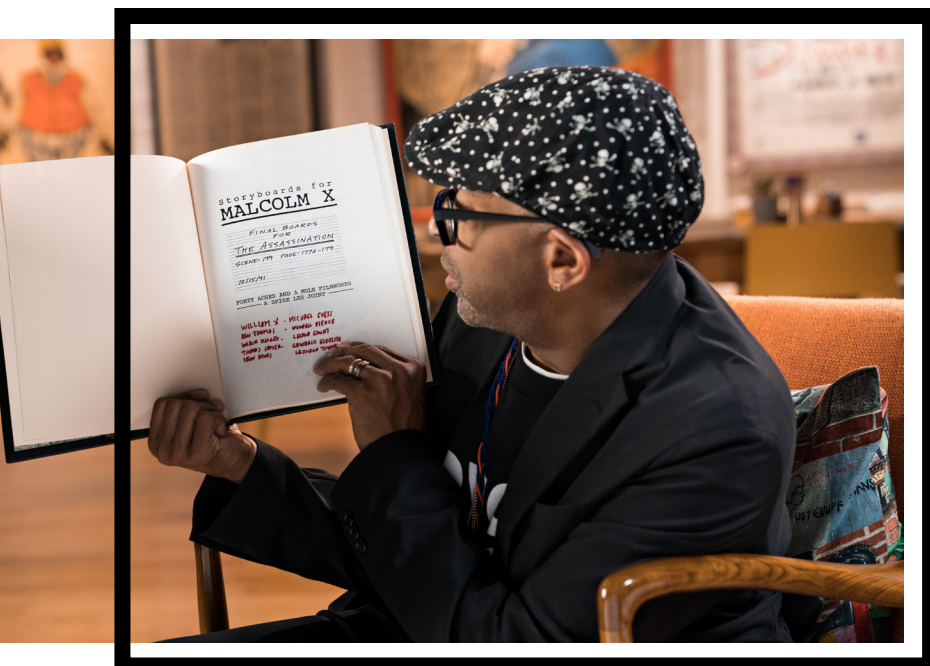
[A storyboard] is like a roadmap...it makes something that's very complicated simpler.

DID YOU KNOW...

If there are landmarks pertinent to your film, find out how to make best use of them. *Malcolm X* production designer Wynn Thomas obtained the original floor plans for the Audubon Ballroom. This document helped the crew design the set so they could get as close as possible to the real thing. The exterior shots were taken outside the actual Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, New York City.

LEARN MORE

Watch *Malcolm X* and pay particular attention to the Audubon scene where the civil rights leader—then El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz—was assassinated. Compare the storyboard and the action shot for shot, noting how Spike chose to depict this cumulative moment. How did the action build to a climax? How did he evoke emotion?



SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER ELEVEN

SPIKE'S FILM 101, PART 2

MASTERCLASS

11.

SPIKE'S FILM 101, PART 2

SUBCHAPTERS

You Have to Put in the Work
Know What's Going On
A Take Is a Sacred Moment
Fight for the Crew You Want

Make no mistake: There is an art to running a smooth set. Doing so requires a combination of professionalism, leadership, good humor, and respect for the crew on the part of the director. This sets the tone for the entire production and crew.

At the beginning of each shoot day, Spike gathers his crew—the camera person, the first AD, the key grip, gaffer, and script supervisor—to discuss the day's schedule. This way, everyone is on the same page about what needs to happen and the team can better transition from shot to shot.

Lay down the ground rules early on. For example, Spike insists upon a respectful silence during takes and even set ups, as the actors could be rehearsing.

Lastly, surround yourself with a diverse crew. An inclusive set not only ensures there will be a variety of cultures and opinions, it also means pushing the needle of progress forward in Hollywood.

ASSIGNMENT:

Write your set rules. Do you prefer a quiet set? Are there any rules you want to enforce? Make a list of what is important to you and communicate this to your cast and crew.

“

When the camera's rolling, that's really to me a sacred moment. You should hear nothing but the actors.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER TWELVE

DIRECTING ACTORS

MASTERCLASS

12.

DIRECTING ACTORS

SUBCHAPTERS

Establish Trust and Respect
Get Their Best Performance
Give Them Enough Takes
Read-Throughs and Rehearsals
Bonding With Your Cast

Spike admits that even though he knew a lot of technical information when he left film school, he had a lot to learn regarding how to communicate and work with actors. Acting is a craft and actors must be directed with sensitivity and respect. It bears reminding that being an actor is an act of vulnerability, both in the work of portraying characters and in the audition process. These artists are judged not only on their talent, but also on body shape, hair texture, features, skin tone, etc.

A director begins dialogue with his cast well before the camera starts rolling. Spike likens his role to being a coach of a sports team. That said, just as all athletes are not the same, neither are actors. The job of a director is to quickly recognize how to draw out the best performance. Sometimes that means watching an actor's past work. Another must-do before filming? Read-throughs. Have your actors read the screenplay aloud—without acting. This can help the director better know what works in the script and what doesn't. When Spike does a read through, he's listening to hear how the language sounds. Do the jokes land? Does the language seem natural? Take notes, which you will incorporate into the rewrite.

Once the cast is decided, Spike strongly recommends any conflicts of approach be handled well before the cameras start rolling; otherwise, these same issues will show up on set. Part of the dance between actor and director is to allow the actor a certain amount of space to breathe within the role, perhaps try something different with the scene than what has been asked. If you are able, give your actors as many takes to get it right as your schedule and budget will allow. Decide which scenes are worth this experimentation, while also ensuring you make your day. And when your actors are doing a good job, let them know.



You have to respect the actors...It goes a long way to know they are appreciated.

DID YOU KNOW....

During the filming of *Inside Man*, Spike screened *Dog Day Afternoon* to the cast and crew both to foster intimacy and inspire his team. Spike considers the 1975 classic, directed by Sidney Lumet, one of the greatest in the genre—so much so, he incorporated an element of the movie into *Inside Man*. (Clive Owens' pizza box says "Sal's Famous Pizzeria" from *Do the Right Thing*. The same actor who delivered the pizza in *Dog Day Afternoon* delivered it in *Inside Man*.) Watch both films and draw parallels to how both directors handled the bank heist genre, paying close attention to action, character arc, and how the director built suspense.

ASSIGNMENT

Schedule a movie night with your crew and have an informal discussion afterward. Gathering your team in a relaxing environment is not only a great bonding opportunity, but can help you, as the director, set the tone for your set.

Go into the Hub and reach out to students in the various acting MasterClasses located in your area. Organize a table read for your script and invite them to participate.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COLLABORATING AND IMPROVISING WITH ACTORS

MASTERCLASS

13.

COLLABORATING AND IMPROVISING WITH ACTORS

SUBCHAPTERS

Adapting to Script Changes:
He Got Game

Improv

Creating Real Life Situations

The best directors don't just tell people what to do. Quite the opposite. This is a job where spontaneity and intuition are just as important as following the script. A good director both commands and surrenders to the moment.

Sometimes surrender means trusting the actor and allowing them to lead. For example, in *He Got Game*, the culminating scene is a high-stakes game of one-on-one between father Jake (Denzel Washington) and son Jesus (Ray Allen). Per Spike's screenplay, Jesus is supposed to beat Jake single-handedly, 10-0. Unbeknownst to Spike, Washington—a former athlete—decided his character should not and would not lose by so wide a margin. When the cameras started rolling, the Academy Award-winning actor immediately scored four points on Allen. The son eventually wins the game 10-4, but the father made him work for every point. Spike kept the camera rolling because although Denzel was going off-script, the actor's instincts were right. The drama was heightened by the close game, which made for a better film.

It is important to remember, however, that not all actors are great at improvisation. Spike advises you find out in the rehearsal process who can do what.

The artfulness of a director also comes in how you pull a performance out of your actors. In *School Daze*, which deals with classism and colorism in the Black community, Spike wanted to avoid the camaraderie that often happens with young actors working on location films. To create the tension Spike felt he needed between the movie's two opposing groups—the Jigaboos and the Wannabees—he housed the actors in different hotels. The fair-skinned, weave-wearing Wannabees were put up in a nice hotel; the darker-skinned, natural-haired Jigaboos' lodgings were not as nice. This roll of the

“

As a director, you should find out in the rehearsal process who can improv.

dice paid off in Spike's favor, as he was able to create a divide that was palpable on screen and off.

LEARN MORE:

There's a reason Denzel Washington was able to hold his own with Ray Allen. The decorated actor once played college basketball at Fordham University in the early 1970s. [Read here](#) for ESPN's column "How Good Was He?" in which Washington's teammates discuss whether or not he had game.

So deep is Spike's love for the game, in 1997 he wrote a memoir entitled *Spike Lee: Best Seat In the House: A Basketball Memoir*. The book intertwines his love for the New York Knicks and the rise of the sport, with Spike's life story. You can find the book [here](#).

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER FOURTEEN

OPENING TITLE SEQUENCES

MASTERCLASS

14.

OPENING TITLE SEQUENCES

SUBCHAPTERS

Score and Style: *Mo' Better Blues*

Setting the Vibe: *25th Hour*

Period Made Contemporary:
BlackKkKlansman

If you know anything about a Spike Lee Joint, you know he takes his opening title sequence seriously. He knows well the importance of a film's first moments where the audience is fully present, mentally preparing for the journey upon which they are about to embark. An opening title sequence, also known as opening credits, helps set the mood you want your film to achieve. Elements such as music, color, graphics, animation, and photography offer you an opportunity to be a bit more creative and take a few more chances while foreshadowing what's to come.

In the opening credits for *Mo' Betta Blues*, a story about a jazz musician's relationship to his art and the two women he loves, the main actors appear in moody silhouettes while jazz composed by Spike's father, Bill Lee, plays in the background. The images, awash in indigo, purple, and deep green hues, purposely recall William Claxton's iconic Blue Note album covers, and immediately give the film a moody, sexy feel.

In *25th Hour*, which takes place in post-9/11 New York City, the opening credits are shots of the Twin Towers homage and art installation "Tribute In Light," wherein 88 searchlights placed within six blocks of the former World Trade Center site create twin beams shooting up to four miles in the sky. The effect is sobering, giving moviegoers an idea of the gravity to come.

For the opening of *BlackKkKlansman*, Spike went beyond title sequences to capture his audience's attention and set up the context and tone of the film. First, the film opens with the opening scene of *Gone With the Wind*—a scene that was personally impactful to Spike and his film education, and a scene that represents the heart of racism in America. This opening nod to the slave-holding South's loss of the Civil War immediately lets the audience know

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One of my favorite parts of doing my joints is the opening credits sequence. I think long and hard [about] what it's going to be.

where they're about to go: on a tour of white supremacy. The second scene in the film's opening is a fictional televised "PSA" by a racist public figure (played by Alec Baldwin), which lets the audience know that there will be humor along the way—that the film will make a mockery of the white supremacy it depicts.

DID YOU KNOW...

Spike's most iconic opening title sequence is arguably from *Do The Right Thing*. The opening begins with a saxophone playing "Lift Every Voice And Sing" (also known as the Black National Anthem) followed by Public Enemy's "Fight The Power." This choice of music signals to the audience that this story will be about justice and revolution, perhaps of different eras. A silhouetted Rosie Perez appears throughout the Public Enemy song, first posing then full out dancing in front of a movie set of Brooklyn brownstones. Spike has said *Do the Right Thing's* opening titles were inspired by the opening titles of the 1963 film *Bye Bye Birdie*, featuring Ann Margret, which you can see [here](#). You can see the full sequence for *Do the Right Thing* [here](#).

LEARN MORE

Spike Lee's titles are in many ways a throwback to the titles of the 1960s. Check out the work of Saul Bass, known for his work with Alfred Hitchcock, Otto Preminger, and Martin Scorsese, and Pablo Ferro, known for his work with Stanley Kubrick, Hal Ashby, and Gus Van Sant.

Dive into the multitude of styles that have been used for opening titles and find the ones that resonate with you. ([Art of the Title](#) is a good place to start.) Take note of the ways they set up theme or foreshadow what's to come. Is the idea simple, such as an overhead camera following a car headed to an unknown destination, accompanied by eerie music, as was the case in *The Shining*? Maybe animation and music lead the way, as in *The Pink Panther*. Let these sequences inspire you to create something that feels right for your film.



SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MUSIC IS KEY

MASTERCLASS

15. MUSIC IS KEY

SUBCHAPTERS

Respect the Collaboration With Your Composer

Turning Source Into Score

Using Music as Counterpoint

Finding Inspired Score: *He Got Game*

“There’s a girl that I once knew/Who often had a friend or two/She gave them time/Love wit and rhyme/sublime...”

“NOLA VOCALS 1” *She’s Gotta Have It*

Music is one of the first elements Spike thinks about in his films, and he uses it to memorable effect. As soon as Spike completes a script, one of his first tasks is to send it to his composers so that they may get a sense of the story. When Spike finishes editing a scene, he sends the scene out to the composers and musical directors so that the tailoring and curating of music and film is happening simultaneously.

Jazz dominates the scores for both Spike’s black-and-white classic *She’s Gotta Have It* (composed by his father Bill Lee) and *Mo’ Betta Blues* (composed by the Branford Marsalis Quartet and Terence Blanchard).

Sometimes a director uses music to juxtapose the action. This use of contrasting elements is called a “counterpoint,” when the music is the opposite of what’s happening in the scene. Spike employed this in *Jungle Fever* in the scene where John Turturro is walking down the street dressed for a date with his Black girlfriend. His friends follow behind him, ridiculing and insulting him for his choice. While Frank Sinatra’s “Hello Young Lovers” plays in the background, a brawl between the guys ensues, lending a potent emotional intensity to this key scene.



To me, a movie’s not a movie till I get the score in.

Another example of Spike’s juxtaposition of genres is the climactic scene of *He Got Game*, a fierce duel between father and son, which Spike set to a piece of classical music by Aaron Copland. Spike found the composition that he wanted to use for the scene and edited it in seamlessly, so that it plays as if it were composed for the scene, when in fact it was Spike’s inspired choice.

LEARN MORE

[Check out this interview](#) with Richard Glasser, who produced the soundtrack to films such as *Silver Linings Playbook*. He’s also a jazz pianist. Here he talks about licensing and when he believes filmmakers should think about the score.

ASSIGNMENTS

What music inspires you? Pull tracks that you love from four different genres of music—classical, jazz, hip hop, and pop, for example. Then turn on a basketball game and turn the sound off. Play each piece of music to the game and see what happens. How do the various tones work with or play counterpoint to the action on screen?

In a quiet place, read your screenplay and try to imagine a score or soundtrack to some of the most important scenes. How can music support the mood you want to achieve? Or advance the action and emotion that will happen onscreen? Start compiling a playlist for your film.

If you are interested in having original music made for your film, consider collaborating with a local artist or a MasterClass music student in the Hub to create an original song or score.

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EDITING

MASTERCLASS

16. EDITING

SUBCHAPTERS

Striking Tone and Balance in the Editing Room

Don't Overlook the Ad-libs

Involve Your Editor Early

First Screenings Are Learning Opportunities

Hire an Experienced Editor

Inter-Cutting in *BlackKkKlansman*

—7 Intercutting: Jerome Turner
Speech and Klan Initiation

—Intercutting: Kwame Ture
Speech and Black Portraiture

If writing is rewriting, then editing is surely a crucial component in shaping the story of a film. Think of it like putting together the pieces of a puzzle or chipping away at a sculpture until the true shape of the work emerges.

Spike's movies are layered and never about one single thing, what he calls a "mixtape." A good editor can ensure your main story remains the main story and doesn't get too overwhelmed by subplots.

The edit room is also where you can uncover improvised moments that were not scripted or planned, but prove to be hidden gems. Be resourceful in the edit to incorporate these surprises.

Spike works closely with his editors throughout the production process, in particular his longtime collaborator Barry Alexander Brown a.k.a. "The Cut Creator." For Spike, the editing process doesn't begin after he wraps the film. The process is happening simultaneously. Spike shows his editor the dailies (raw footage shot daily) and gives him notes on what works and does not. The editor then begins cutting the film, showing Spike completed scenes while the film is still in production. This process can be essential when preparing for an early screening. Seeing an early version of your film on the big screen can also help you better see what's missing or where to trim the fat.

Hire an experienced editor, someone who knows more than you, especially if you are an inexperienced filmmaker.

In *BlackKkKlansman*, Spike intercut between three seemingly unconnected scenes to create a stark contrast between love and hate. In one scene, a Black professor recounts the story of a lynching to a group of Black students. The other two scenes show the Klan: one shows an initiation and the



**The balance of a film
really comes together
for me in the edit room.**

other shows a group of Klansmen watch *The Birth of a Nation*. Spike ties the two worlds together by including a voyeur in each—characters looking on with horror at both the lynching and the Klan screening. But it's not enough to shoot all of these scenes. You have to work with your editor to bring it all together to tell the story you want to tell.

LEARN MORE

Read Walter Murch's *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing*, which is the most essential reading for editors and directors about the editing process. It will equip you with knowledge you need to have when you're shooting to set yourself up for success in the edit.

Read [this interview](#) with Barry Alexander Brown, Spike's long-time editor.

ASSIGNMENT

Watch films of varying styles—film noir, French New Wave, modern blockbuster, and American indie—and note the differences in the editing. Are there long takes? Quick cuts? How does the editing support the story? Are there montages and experimental sequences? Does it play with or against the film?

SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FILM AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

MASTERCLASS

17.

FILM AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

SUBCHAPTERS

American Cinema and the History of Denigration

Re-Examining the Myth of American Greatness

Spike's Cinematic Mission

Holding the Mirror to Society

Redefining the Industry

Push Back the Gatekeepers

If multiple stories do not exist, one single story could become known as the truth. When stories are told via film, there is great potential for powerful influence. Stories can control, coerce, or change a narrative. How a culture is portrayed in film can greatly influence how it is viewed by society—as well as how its citizens see themselves. In this way, the filmmaker has a great responsibility to his art and his audience.

Spike's career is a prime example of why diversity in Hollywood is important. Throughout his journey, Spike has sought to tell original, layered, nuanced stories about Black people, be they cultural heroes or everyday people. Spike's bold presence and commitment to independent movie making arguably helped set the scene for a 1990s renaissance in Black media.

Every filmmaker is reliant upon outside sources such as distribution companies or television networks to get their work seen by a wide audience. Spike calls the television network and Hollywood executives who make these decisions the “gatekeepers.” This dynamic is part of the reason diversity is so important, be it on the film crew or in the boardroom. There must be room for different perspectives and voices, so that we aren't in danger of a single story.

DID YOU KNOW....

The Birth of A Nation is a 1915 silent film by directed and co-produced by D.W. Griffith, who is often considered the father of modern cinema. The story takes place in an alternate post-Reconstruction world. White actors appeared in blackface portraying Black people as degenerates and the Klu Klux Klan are presented as heroes. To illustrate the power of cinema, President Woodrow Wilson saw the movie in a special White House screening and

“

Film is a very powerful medium. Films can help people. Films can hurt people. It's not something to play with. Images are very powerful.

described it as “like writing history in lightning.” He said, “My only regret is that it is so terribly true.” Showings of *The Birth of a Nation* resulted in riots and lynching of Black people. Screenwriter Thomas Dixon Jr. admitted this discord was by design, as he wanted to turn Northern sympathizers into Southern partisans. *The Birth of a Nation* is a mainstay in college communications courses. Spike first saw the film as a student at NYU; in response, one of his first student films—*The Answer*—is about a young Black director who was tasked to remake the unfortunate classic.

Watch Chimananda Ngozi Adichie's viral TED Talk, [“The Danger of a Single Story.”](#) in which the author speaks about the necessity of diverse stories about and within a particular culture.

Watch [I Am Not Your Negro.](#)

ASSIGNMENT

Grab your notebook and write a mission statement. Begin by answering the following questions: What do you believe your purpose is as a filmmaker? What inspires you to want to make films? What kind of stories do you want to tell? When you have finished answering these questions, read them over and arrange these thoughts into a statement of purpose. This is a living idea; let it evolve. It can be a north star for you to look to if you feel stuck or lost on your creative journey.



SPIKE LEE / CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

STORYTELLING FOR DOCUMENTARIES

MASTERCLASS

18. STORYTELLING FOR DOCUMENTARIES

SUBCHAPTERS

Four Little Girls

Personal and Intimate Interviews

Documentary as Activism

Sometimes as a director, you are enamored with or haunted by a story but you do not want to dramatize it. Such was the case with Spike's first documentary *4 Little Girls*, a story about the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama that killed four young Black girls. Spike's interest in this story was somewhat personal. He was six years old when the bombing happened, and his family had roots in Alabama, where he spent many summers down South. The story of the murder of these four little girls and their unrepentant murderers who had ties to the Klan was a conversation in every Black household in the nation.

When Spike decided to tell this story, he knew he did not want to cast politicians or klansmen. Neither did he want to recreate painful scenes. Spike believes that the grief from that devastating loss of life could not be faked. He opted instead to speak with the people—parents, friends, church members, activists—who had survived this horrific experience. No narrator. The people would speak for themselves. Spike believes that this act of bringing light and truth to tragedy via film—specifically documentaries—is absolutely a form of activism.

Spike was at the Venice Film Festival during Hurricane Katrina and—like many citizens—was dumbfounded by the American government's severely delayed response. Outrage is what spurred Spike to shoot his second documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, which explores the devastation and aftermath of the storm. He called his contact at HBO and expressed interest in doing this project. What was supposed to be a 90-minute film became a four-hour, two-part series.

“

**In my opinion,
what makes a great
documentary is
what makes a great
feature film: the story.
I don't really make
that big distinction
between the two,
that's why I do both.**

DID YOU KNOW...

The title for *When the Levees Broke* is a reference to a blues song by husband-and-wife team Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie called “When the Levee Breaks.” Recorded in 1929, the song tells the story of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Listen to the song [here](#). Led Zeppelin also famously made a cover of the song, which you can hear [here](#).

LEARN MORE

[Read “Indiewire's Ultimate Guide to Documentary Filmmaking,”](#) which covers the ins and outs of making your first documentary, mistakes to avoid, how to pitch your film, tips for shooting in extreme situations, the challenge of making a music documentary, and how to get your interview subject to open up on camera.

ASSIGNMENT:

There are a multitude of ways you can approach documentary storytelling. Watch these seminal films to see which styles resonate with you.

- *Grey Gardens* (Maysles Brothers, 1976). Pay special attention to the Maysles style of cinéma vérité—unscripted, no interviews, and no pre-determined plot. They have an established trust with the subjects that lends itself to the brazen and unfiltered footage.
- *The Decline of Western Civilization* (Penelope Spheeris, 1981). Gritty and authentic, this culturally and historically significant film places you directly in the middle of Los Angeles Punk Rock scene of the late 70s/early 80s with its deft use of performance footage.
- *Roger & Me* (Michael Moore, 1989). Michael Moore inserts himself in his epic personal take down of General Motors, establishing a hybrid style of investigative journalism and essayist documentary.
- *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994). Shot over five years with over 250 hours of footage, this film is considered one of the great works of American nonfiction cinema. Pay close attention to the film's intimacy with its subjects, and larger statements about race and class.
- *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (Werner Herzog, 1997). An incredibly creative portrait of Dieter Dengler, as he tells his own story through participating in his own re-enactments. Herzog is a master collaborator with all of his documentary subjects.
- *The Gleaners and I* (Agnes Varda, 2001). Agnes Varda has a unique style of documenting trash collectors that produces a very elegant and meditative documentary essay. Watch for simplicity of form and pacing.
- *Project Nim* (James Marsh, 2011). This heart-breaking story of an exceptional chimpanzee is told through interviews cut together with archival footage and dramatic re-creations meant to be taken as real.
- *OJ: Made in America* (Ezra Edelman, 2016). With layered and brilliant use of archival footage, Ezra Edelman takes a much covered story and creates a psychological portrait of not just O.J. Simpson but the city of Los Angeles and ultimately, America at large in the late 20th century.
- *Icarus* (Brian Fogel, 2017). Director Brian Fogel puts himself in the film and accidentally befriends and engages a major figure in the sports doping scandal, resulting in a documentary turned quasi-conspiracy thriller.
- *The Vietnam War* (Ken Burns, 2017). Through 18 hours and 10 episodes, Ken Burns illustrates some of the worst decisions in American history through his epic chronicle of the Vietnam War. Traditional in style, it's the underlying themes that strike an emotional and deeply resonant tone.

CLOSING

“I hope you understand that this is some hard sh*t to do. It takes dedication, it takes love, it takes compassion... It’s a continuing process of educating yourself, getting experience, and being the best you can be.”

—SPIKE LEE

MASTERCLASS

APPENDIX

SPIKE LEE'S ESSENTIAL FILMS FOR FILMMAKERS

FILM	DIRECTOR	YEAR
<i>Bad Lieutenant</i>	Abel Ferrara	1992
<i>Rashomon</i>	Akira Kurosawa	1950
<i>Yojimbo</i>	Akira Kurosawa	1961
<i>Ran</i>	Akira Kurosawa	1985
<i>Rear Window</i>	Alfred Hitchcock	1954
<i>Vertigo</i>	Alfred Hitchcock	1958
<i>North by Northwest</i>	Alfred Hitchcock	1959
<i>Bonnie and Clyde</i>	Arthur Penn	1967
<i>The Conformist</i>	Bernardo Bertolucci	1970
<i>Last Tango in Paris</i>	Bernardo Bertolucci	1972
<i>Ace in the Hole</i>	Billy Wilder	1951
<i>Some Like It Hot</i>	Billy Wilder	1959
<i>Killer of Sheep</i>	Charles Burnett	1977
<i>Night of the Hunter</i>	Charles Laughton	1955
<i>Raising Arizona</i>	Coen Brothers	1987
<i>The Bridge on the River Kwai</i>	David Lean	1957
<i>Lawrence of Arabia</i>	David Lean	1962
<i>On the Waterfront</i>	Elia Kazan	1954
<i>A Face in the Crowd</i>	Elia Kazan	1957
<i>Sugar Cane Alley</i>	Euzhan Palcy	1983

FILM	DIRECTOR	YEAR
<i>La Strada</i>	Federico Fellini	1954
<i>La Dolce Vita</i>	Federico Fellini	1960
<i>8 1/2</i>	Federico Fellini	1963
<i>City of God</i>	Fernando Meirelles, Kátia Lund	2002
<i>The Godfather</i>	Francis Ford Coppola	1972
<i>The Godfather: Part II</i>	Francis Ford Coppola	1974
<i>The 400 Blows</i>	François Truffaut	1959
<i>Day for Night</i>	François Truffaut	1973
<i>Patton</i>	Franklin J. Schaffner	1970
<i>Mad Max</i>	George Miller	1979
<i>The Road Warrior</i>	George Miller	1981
<i>The Battle of Algiers</i>	Gillo Pontecorvo	1966
<i>The Last Detail</i>	Hal Ashby	1973
<i>The Piano</i>	Jane Campion	1993
<i>Breathless</i>	Jean-Luc Godard	1960
<i>West Side Story</i>	Jerome Robbins, Robert Wise	1961
<i>Stranger Than Paradise</i>	Jim Jarmusch	1984
<i>The Train</i>	John Frankenheimer	1964
<i>The Maltese Falcon</i>	John Huston	1941
<i>The Treasure of the Sierra Madre</i>	John Huston	1948
<i>Fat City</i>	John Huston	1972
<i>Midnight Cowboy</i>	John Schlesinger	1969
<i>Marathon Man</i>	John Schlesinger	1969
<i>Boyz n the Hood</i>	John Singleton	1991
<i>Daughters of the Dust</i>	Julie Dash	1991

FILM	DIRECTOR	YEAR
<i>The Hurt Locker</i>	Kathryn Bigelow	2008
<i>The Seduction of Mimi</i>	Lina Wertmüller	1972
<i>Love and Anarchy</i>	Lina Wertmüller	1973
<i>Swept Away</i>	Lina Wertmüller	1974
<i>Seven Beauties</i>	Lina Wertmüller	1975
<i>Los Olvidados</i>	Luis Buñuel	1950
<i>Black Orpheus</i>	Marcel Camus	1959
<i>Home of the Brave</i>	Mark Robson	1949
<i>Mean Streets</i>	Martin Scorsese	1973
<i>Raging Bull</i>	Martin Scorsese	1980
<i>Apocalypto</i>	Mel Gibson	2006
<i>Casablanca</i>	Michael Curtiz	1942
<i>Theif</i>	Michael Mann	1981
<i>The Red Shoes</i>	Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger	1948
<i>Cooley High</i>	Michael Schultz	1975
<i>I Am Cuba</i>	Mikhail Kalatozov	1964
<i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i>	Milos Forman	1975
<i>District 9</i>	Neill Blomkamp	2009
<i>In the Heat of the Night</i>	Norman Jewison	1967
<i>Touch of Evil</i>	Orson Welles	1958
<i>Blue Collar</i>	Paul Schrader	1978
<i>White Heat</i>	Raoul Walsh	1949
<i>Is Paris Burning?</i>	René Clément	1966
<i>M*A*S*H</i>	Robert Altman	1970
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	Robert Mulligan	1962

FILM	DIRECTOR	YEAR
<i>Rome, Open City</i>	Roberto Rossellini	1945
<i>Paisan</i>	Roberto Rossellini	1946
<i>Chinatown</i>	Roman Polanski	1974
<i>Black Rain</i>	Shôhei Imamura	1989
<i>Dog Day Afternoon</i>	Sidney Lumet	1975
<i>Singin' in the Rain</i>	Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly	1952
<i>Paths of Glory</i>	Stanley Kubrick	1957
<i>Spartacus</i>	Stanley Kubrick	1960
<i>Dr. Strangelove</i>	Stanley Kubrick	1964
<i>Kung Fu Hustle</i>	Stephen Chow	2004
<i>Dirty Pretty Things</i>	Stephen Frears	2002
<i>Hoop Dreams</i>	Steve James	1984
<i>Close Encounters of the Third Kind</i>	Steven Spielberg	1977
<i>Empire of the Sun</i>	Steven Spielberg	1987
<i>Cool Hand Luke</i>	Stuart Rosenberg	1967
<i>Badlands</i>	Terrence Malick	1973
<i>Days of Heaven</i>	Terrence Malick	1978
<i>The Wizard of Oz</i>	Victor Fleming	1939
<i>An American in Paris</i>	Vincente Minnelli	1951
<i>Lust for Life</i>	Vincente Minnelli	1956
<i>Bicycle Thieves</i>	Vittorio De Sica	1948
<i>Miracle in Milan</i>	Vittorio De Sica	1951
<i>Dead End</i>	William Wyler	1937
<i>Zelig</i>	Woody Allen	1983

CREDITS

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