

Fight the Power! **The Spike Lee Reader**

FOREWORD BY Spike Lee

Janice D. Hamlet and Robin R. Means Coleman,
EDITORS



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Joins AND Jams

Spike Lee as Sellebrity Auteur

ANDREW DEWAARD

In 2003, Viacom announced it would rename its TNN cable network Spike TV. Protesting that this infringed upon his brand name, Shelton Jackson "Spike" Lee sued. Lee did, in fact, have legal grounds under the "right of publicity" that protects supposed unauthorized commercial appropriations such as these. "People don't realize that I'm a *brand*," Lee argues, "and all the goodwill that I have *invested* in it can be contaminated by 'Spike TV'" (Lee & Fuchs, 2002, p. 288). While the gesture may have been self-aggrandizing (and Lee would later drop the case), it is indicative of the strange new dimension in which Hollywood directors now find themselves. Contemporary cinematic authorship is promoted and highlighted to an unheralded degree, yet earlier arguments for auteurism (as opposition to the studio system as a means of artistic legitimation) no longer seem to apply. Conventional conceptions of film authorship fail to grasp the nuances and complexities of this new context that Lee espouses. Branding and investing are the key words used by Lee here, exemplifying the transformations that have occurred within Hollywood, thus necessitating new formulations for auteurism.

I propose the term *sellebrity auteur* as a paradoxical concept that signals the complexities and contradictions of contemporary commercial cinematic authorship. It highlights, on the one hand, the cultural-economic factors in a film's creation and the struggle between art and commerce that this process involves; on the other, it acknowledges the need for an analysis of the auteur-as-celebrity, looking at the

auteur's brand identity and celebrity cachet as they are exploited both by the auteur in order to get a film made and by the studio in its marketing system. In short, the selebrity auteur injects the consideration of commerce and celebrity into conventional theories of authorship. While the term auteur can be applied to many different authorial "voices" (producer, screenwriter, actor, cinematographer, etc.), in this instance, emphasis will be placed on the director.

Spike Lee will prove an exemplary case study for the selebrity auteur, as he occupies a unique position within Hollywood with regard to both economics and celebrity. As one of the few big-name African American directors in a system still reluctant to cede much control to minorities, Lee's career has been one struggle after another to secure funding, especially given his penchant for racially charged subject matter. His production company, 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks, is a fitting example of the way contemporary filmmakers in Hollywood must be heavily involved in the business end of film production in order to retain artistic control. Furthermore, this concern for economics is central to Lee's own advocacy for African American advancement; namely, more ownership and economic power are needed in the African American community. Lee's own increased economic power has been due in large part to his skill in branding the Spike Lee name, resulting in his transformation into a valuable commodity. From his ability to create controversy incessantly to his numerous and various commercial enterprises, Lee has exploited his celebrity in order to continue his prolific cinematic output over the years.

Before delving into Spike Lee's selebrity status, a consideration of the contemporary auteur's economic situation requires a brief foray into the economic situation of Hollywood itself. "Blockbuster hits," Thomas Schatz (1993) admits, rather reluctantly, "are, for better or worse, what the new Hollywood is all about, and thus are the necessary starting point for an analysis of contemporary cinema" (p. 10). With the enormous successes of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, the high-concept blockbuster film became Hollywood's staple product in the 1980s (Wyatt, 1994). With every major studio subsumed by a huge transnational corporation and mercilessly focused on the bottom line, movies were thought of as mere products more than ever; reliable profits and growth were sought through formulaic plotlines, intense market research, a reliance on sequels and remakes, bankable movie stars, and inoffensive topics.

In the 1990s, a middle tier developed within the industry as a result of the rise of niche marketing and the increased economic importance of film festival and award show success, exemplified by Miramax and Sundance, respectively (Biskind, 2004). In 1989, Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* "ushered in the era of the 'indie blockbuster'—films that, on a smaller scale, replicate the exploitation marketing and box-office performance of the major studio high-concept event pictures"

(Perren, 2001, p. 30). Allen J. Scott (2004) formulates a tripartite model for analyzing Hollywood's new structure: majors, independents, and the newly formed "major-independents," speciality companies such as Miramax, which focus on "quality" movies that aspire to the status of "art." In response to a range of newly discovered/developed intermediate markets, every major studio (MGM, Paramount, Sony, Fox, Universal, Disney, and Warner Brothers) now has a stable of subsidiaries (Miramax, Focus, New Line, etc.) that operate with a high degree of autonomy.

As the studio system has given way to the "package" system, most film projects are put together on a one-off basis by varying groups of key creative personnel. In this system, the Hollywood director often operates as a kind of "free agent." In order to attain funding and distribution, the director—sometimes aligning with a producer or attached star, forming the "package"—pitches a film to a major or major-independent studio. As a free agent, the director must navigate this complex terrain of art and commerce, independent and corporate, art house and mass marketing, minis and majors. Lee is a stellar example of this negotiation, having worked with independents (Island Pictures, his own production company), mini-majors (New Line, HBO, Fox Searchlight), and majors (Universal, Warner Brothers, Sony) to produce smaller films (*She's Gotta Have It*, *Crooklyn*, *Bamboozled*), indie blockbusters (*Do the Right Thing*, *Jungle Fever*, *He Got Game*), and big-budget blockbusters (*Malcolm X*, *Inside Man*). It is necessary to keep this shifting playing field in mind as we consider the contemporary auteur, as attending to economic concerns is increasingly becoming one of the many responsibilities of the auteur.

A much-debated theory ever since its development in the 1950s (for an extensive history, see Caughie, 2001), auteur theory has always been a heavily fragmented discourse circulating around a few predominant ideas. The cinematic exploration of a distinctive set of thematic concerns is typically considered one of the key elements that can "elevate" a filmmaker to the status of auteur. A personal visual style—what Andrew Sarris (1962) famously called the director's "signature"—is another. While much debate surrounds these two formal features that are taken to indicate individual authorship, the most provocative aspect of the auteur theory, in my mind, is the consideration of the auteur's relationship to the industrial structure of Hollywood production. The heavily commercialized and collaborative environment of Hollywood has always constrained the creative freedom of the auteur, and the tensions between the artist and the industry have been central in auteur theory. Fifty years after the inception of auteur theory, in an industry now dominated by summer spectacles, big box-office business, corporate conglomeration, and massive marketing manoeuvres, what are we to make of the auteur today?

Auteurism fell out of favor when its flaws and limitations were articulated, and a multitude of alternative discourses in film theory gained prominence in its place, but there has been a reconsideration of cinematic authorship in recent years. Dudley

Andrew (2000) poignantly welcomes back auteurism: "Breathe easily. *Épuration* has ended. After a dozen years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the auteur again" (p. 20). "Auteurs are far from dead," in Timothy Corrigan's (1998) view, "in fact, they may be more alive than at any other point in film history . . . within the commerce of contemporary culture, auteurism has become, as both a production and interpretive position, something quite different from what it may have been in the 1950s or 1960s" (p. 135). Hollywood is a constantly changing and evolving industry; there is no reason why considerations of authorship in Hollywood should not evolve correspondingly. By understanding its theoretical limitations and shifting industry conditions, we may reformulate the concept of the "auteur" according to these new contexts.

The primary modification of auteurism has been in terms of the reliance on Romantic and individualist notions of the author. Prompted by such grand literary revelations as Michel Foucault's (1969) "What Is an Author?" and Roland Barthes' (1968) "The Death of the Author," auteur theory has been overhauled in terms of its breadth and scope. Rather than perceiving an auteur film as some sublime expression of individual genius, it is now regarded as a *site* for the interaction of biography, institutional context, social climate, and historical moment. In this rendering, auteurism is meant to "emphasize the ways a director's work can be both personal *and* mediated by extrapersonal elements such as genre, technology, [and] studios" (Stam, 2000, p. 6; original emphasis). What began as an attempt by the French critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* to elevate the director—as opposed to the writer, traditionally held to play the central creative role in French cinema—to the status of an artist, auteurism has since evolved into a complex theory containing various interrelations.

Much of the recent critical analysis surrounding contemporary auteurship (Buckland, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Flanagan, 2004) makes use of the term *blockbuster auteur*, a designation I find lacking because of its reduction of the director to his or her generic product. Instead, I propose the more evocative term *sellebrity auteur* because it incorporates the brand identity and celebrity cachet that is now so integral to today's auteur, while foregrounding the centrality of economic imperatives. As we explore other forays into the intersection between auteurism and commerce, we will witness an evolution in the idea of the auteur, eventually arriving at the *sellebrity auteur's* unique synthesis of fame and economics.

Taking as its starting point the recent trend toward focusing on the box office success of a film as the dominant measure of its value, Jon Lewis (2003) analyzes the careers of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg in order to come to terms with contemporary auteurism. Over the last 30 years, no two filmmakers have reached a wider international audience or been considered more emblematic as "American movie-men." According to Lewis, Lucas and Spielberg exemplify the trend that

auteurs now "gain notoriety less for a signature style than for a signature product" (2003, p. 4). If a director's claim to auteur status were to be determined solely by the degree to which he or she has control over a project, then Lucas and Spielberg would be auteurs of the highest order. One method by which they have achieved control of their product, one which marks a shift in auteurism writ large, is an aggressive business strategy.

Warren Buckland (2003) continues this line of thought, arguing that authorship status in contemporary Hollywood is no longer achieved simply by mastery of the filmmaking process; the director must also control external factors such as production, financing, and distribution as well. Lucas and Spielberg are, of course, exemplars of this process, each director having constructed a veritable empire out of their commercial enterprises. Lucas's special effects facility, Industrial Light and Magic, has become a central component in the economy of Hollywood by establishing itself as the world's premier special effects company. The Lucas empire also includes his production company, Lucasfilm; his sound divisions, Skywalker Sound and the THX Group; his video-gaming company, LucasArts Entertainment; and his merchandising and licensing company, Lucas Licensing. Spielberg has been equally as successful, forming his own production company, Amblin Entertainment, in order to extend his reach into more personal projects and produce countless features and television shows. In 1994, Spielberg, along with two other media moguls, made a monumental leap forward by creating their own studio, DreamWorks SKG, the first new entrant in the major studio scene in over 60 years (in 2005, it was sold to Viacom, the parent company of Paramount Pictures).

Spike Lee's production company, 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks, while certainly not as expansive as Lucas or Spielberg's empire, is equally as impressive in terms of the control it has given Lee by enabling alternative revenue streams, as well as the black filmmaking community it has fostered. 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks is an allusion to the stillborn legislative proposal that was to give "forty acres and a mule" to each freed slave following the American Civil War, "so the name of my company is really a reminder of a broken promise" (Aftab & Lee, 2005, p. 2). With \$175,000 and a camera, Lee burst on to the filmmaking scene in 1986 with *She's Gotta Have It*. Since then, Lee has negotiated every one of his productions through 40 Acres and retained final cut on every one of his features, a feat rarely accomplished in mainstream Hollywood. Filmmaking, like farming, is a capital-intensive activity, necessitating ownership of property. With 40 Acres, Lee achieved the economic capacity necessary to compete in Hollywood.

Originally conceived as merely his personal production company, 40 Acres slowly became a burgeoning enterprise with the decision to branch out into music and merchandising after the success of Lee's early films. The success of R&B act EU's "Da Butt," and the corresponding soundtrack for *School Daze*, as well as the

anthemic status of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," commissioned for *Do the Right Thing*, prompted a new subdivision in the company: 40 Acres & a Mule Musicworks. A division of Sony, Lee's record label was able to sign artists such as Youssou N'Dour and Lonette McKee, as well as release some of his own soundtracks. On the merchandising end, Lee opened Spike's Joint, a retail boutique in Brooklyn (another outlet would later be opened in Los Angeles; both would close in 1997) to sell merchandise that bore the 40 Acres emblem, as well as products by Nike, Gap, and Levi Strauss, for whom Lee had directed commercials. When Michael Jordan donned an "X" cap during an interview following the 1991 All-Star Game, a merchandising storm was created for Spike's Joint, fuelling the popularity of *Malcolm X* at the same time.

Lee's relationship with Jordan and Nike is another lucrative joint venture. Lee's debut feature, *She's Gotta Have It*, features a central character, Mars Blackmon (played by Lee himself), who noticeably sports a pair of Nikes (even in the bedroom). Garnering the attention of a Nike creative director, a deal was made for Lee to direct a series of commercials starring Mars and Michael Jordan, which would go on to become "the template for marketing cool" (Carvell, 1997, p. 84). In *Do the Right Thing*, Lee's brand loyalty is repaid with Buggin' Out's exclamation: "you stepped on my brand new, white Air Jordans I just bought!" Simultaneously, Lee engages in blatant product placement and authentic realism, a telling example of his paradoxical role as corporate artist.

Nike is just one of the many businesses Lee has made commercials for over the years; others include Levi's, AT&T, ESPN, the *NY Times*, American Express, Taco Bell, Ben & Jerry's, Diet Coke, Snapple, Pizza Hut, and most controversially, the U.S. Navy. Defending this choice, Lee reasons that he wanted to help reverse the racist reputation of the Navy after they approached him with that concern (Aftab & Lee, 2005, p. 253). In 1999, Lee established an advertising agency, Spike/DDB, a joint venture with one of Madison Avenue's most prominent agencies, DDB Needham, with the aim of tapping into the "urban" market. With a 51 percent stake in the company, Lee has created yet another source of income for 40 Acres. "Because he earns his big-time money in commercials," explains *Variety* editor-in-chief Peter Bart, "he doesn't feel he has to work on pictures that get him a mass audience" (as cited in Thompson, 2002). Music videos are another source of this alternative income, as well as another testament to his African American focused artistry; he has worked with such notable artists as Stevie Wonder, Miles Davis, Michael Jackson, Prince, Arrested Development, A Tribe Called Quest, and Naughty by Nature.

Other unique financial situations have arisen throughout Lee's career. With *Malcolm X*, Lee was locked in a battle with Warner Brothers over a larger budget, which Lee thought necessary. When the bond company shut down production for



Figure 18.1. Denzel Washington in *Malcolm X* (1992). Courtesy of Photofest.

going over budget, Lee resolved this struggle by contributing \$2 million of his own salary and appealing to high-profile members of the black community, receiving donations from Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Tracy Chapman, and others. This story is a favorite of Lee's, repeated in many interviews. The check from Nike CEO Phil Knight that bailed Lee out when *Jim Brown: All American* went over budget is certainly less publicized.

Get on the Bus reprised the African American finance scheme, an appropriate move considering the film's subject matter: the Million Man March and black empowerment. Assembling a new list of prominent African Americans—including Johnnie Cochran, Reggie Bythewood, Wesley Snipes, Danny Glover, and Ossie Davis, incorporated as "15 Black Men"—Lee raised a production budget of \$2.5 million, and by preselling the film, paid back his investors before the film even opened. A testament to the financial imperatives of the selebrity auteur, Ossie Davis marvels at Lee's skill as a businessman: "For a man to do that—to know *how* to do that—this is equally important to any other talent that you might have as a filmmaker. . . . He is one of the few people who could have sat at the same table as Cecil B. De Mille, Samuel Goldwyn and Jack Warner" (as cited in Aftab & Lee, 2005, p. 220–221; original emphasis).

The 40 Acres enterprise is not solely about Lee's own work though; it has also fostered an entire African American filmmaking community. One of the primary

goals of 40 Acres was “to demystify the whole filmmaking process. . . . We wanted people of color (male and female) to pursue careers in film, not only in front of the camera but, even more important, behind it” (Aftab & Lee, 2005, p. 305). As the appendix listing the expansive roster (more than a hundred) of 40 Acres in Lee’s autobiography indicates, this mission has been an astounding success. A wide range of African American talent has been cultivated in many different filmmaking departments, including directors, writers, actors, and below-the-line workers. Notable names that got their start with 40 Acres include directors Ernest Dickerson and Lee Davis and actors Halle Berry, Mekhi Phifer, Martin Lawrence, and Rosie Perez. 40 Acres was also able to produce a number of African American vehicles, such as *Drop Squad* (David C. Jonson, 1994) and *Tales from the Hood* (Rusty Cundieff, 1995), as well as the debuts of 40 Acres alumni such as *The Best Man* (Malcolm D. Lee, 1999) and *3 A.M.* (Lee Davis, 2001). Lee’s many books detailing the struggles he had making his early films, from *She’s Gotta Have It* through *Malcolm X*, which include journals and production diaries, also act to “demystify” the filmmaking process. Looking back at the success of 40 Acres, one might even consider Lee himself to be distributing the acres now, equipping and empowering his followers with the necessary tools to flourish.

Returning to our look at recent considerations of auteurism and commerce, a recent trend in Hollywood has been to entrust big-budget productions with auteur or art house directors, a practice Martin Flanagan (2004) seeks to analyze in terms of the conflicting concepts of the auteur and the blockbuster. Looking at the list of box-office hits in recent years, Flanagan finds a full range of auteur identities: veterans of New Hollywood such as Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader, and Robert Altman; graduates of low-budget horror such as Sam Raimi, Peter Jackson, and Guillermo del Toro; innovators and documentarians such as Terry Zwigoff and Richard Linklater; and art house foreigners, such as Christopher Nolan and Jane Campion. Many of the largest grossing blockbuster franchises even come from auteur directors: Raimi’s *Spiderman* franchise, Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* franchise, Robert Rodriguez’s *Spy Kids* Trilogy, Steven Soderbergh’s *Ocean* franchise, and the Wachowski Brothers’ *Matrix* Trilogy. The industry has come to see auteurs as another distinctive (and marketable) element that can be added to blockbuster appeal.

While Lee typically works with relatively medium-range budgets, he has flirted with big-budget productions from time to time, notably with *Malcolm X*. Norman Jewison was originally appointed to direct the project for Warner Brothers, but Lee publicly denounced this decision, claiming only an African American could do the film justice. While Jewison did eventually pull out, one cannot help but think this was, at least in part, a marketing decision on Warner Brothers’ behalf, choosing to associate a controversial auteur with the already incendiary

Malcolm X in order to make an “event” picture capable of grabbing headlines. Lee shied away from big-budget spectacle after the exhausting struggle of *Malcolm X*, but returned to major box-office success recently by embracing genre and blockbuster impulses with *Inside Man*.

As Flanagan admits, an analysis centered on the terms “auteur” and “blockbuster” is destined to be problematic, as the meanings of both terms are constantly in flux. A corresponding theme is the recurring desire for both critical and commercial success, which was seen even in the early days of auteur theory, especially with Alfred Hitchcock. Flanagan relates this struggle to two other auteurist dichotomies. The first, originally formulated by Buckland (1998), classifies auteurs as either a “classical auteur,” the “skilled craft worker who has mastered—and indeed represents—‘the tradition’” (p. 84), or a “romantic auteur,” the “lone, creative genius who works intuitively and mysteriously outside of all traditions” (p. 85). While Lucas and Spielberg typify the classical, Francis Ford Coppola has become emblematic of the romantic. However, Coppola himself only achieved such enigmatic status after enormous financial success with his blockbuster series *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather: Part II* (1974). To consider Coppola “outside of all traditions” would be to misperceive his important economic role in American Zoetrope and the Director’s Company. Coppola’s complications aside, careful consideration of today’s economic climate in Hollywood would render any such nostalgic pining for a romantic figure “taking on the system” highly problematic.

Expanding upon this romantic/classical dichotomy, Matt Hills (2003) claims that the figure of the auteur produces both an “economy of culture,” in which the power of the auteur identity is used to market the blockbuster film, and a “culture of economy,” where the auteur works within institutional constraints in an attempt to challenge the conventions of the culture industry. Now that marketing has become as much—if not more—of an economic investment than production, the name of a director is just one of many appeals made by marketers in order to promote films and maximize audiences. Just as sequels, remakes, and presold properties are seen as more bankable to the studio executive, the director’s name has become part of the marketing equation as an assurance of quality. The extent to which marketers will exploit previous authorial successes has reached a trivial, almost empty fruition, as *Godzilla* is sold as “from the creators of *Independence Day*.”

A useful example of this “economy of culture” can be seen in Geoff King’s (2002) analysis of the ultrahigh-concept *Batman* series. While the success of *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992) was pretty much assured with its combination of big-name stars, presold comic book audience, high-budget special effects, merchandising and ancillary products, and soundtrack tie-in, Warner Brothers added a distinctive element to the two films by choosing Tim Burton as

director. Burton's dark and quirky gothic-style of filmmaking not only complemented the material, but it widened the appeal of the film to an audience who might be averse to another big-budget, over-hyped blockbuster. Tim Burton's dramatic effect can be seen not just in these films, but on the superhero comic book genre as a whole, which has taken a distinctly darker and more psychological turn since Burton. Notably, the franchise began to fail with the critically unfavored Joel Schumacher behind the camera of *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman and Robin* (1997), but was reinvigorated—critically and commercially—with British art film director Christopher Nolan at the helm of *Batman Begins* (2005).

As for the “culture of economy,” we can look at one final auteurist dichotomy, Timothy Corrigan's (1990) distinction between the “commercial auteur” and the “auteur of commerce,” which Hills used as the basis for his argument. Corrigan argues that the newfound auteur marketability marks a significant reversal: “the central change in the meaning of auteurism from the sixties to the eighties” was a “marked shift within auteurism as a way of viewing and receiving movies, rather than as a mode of production” (1990, p. 44). In this analysis of auteurism, we see the rise of New Hollywood accompanied by the conception of the auteur as a commodified property, “a *commercial* strategy for organizing audience reception . . . a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims” (1991, p. 103; italics in original). Historically, this makes perfect sense; the rise of New Hollywood in the 1960s coincided with the rise of the academic study of film, of which the auteur theory was highly regarded. The new generation of filmmakers was largely a product of film school, raised on international art cinema where an idea of the “director-as-artist” is central. These young directors were fully aware of the auteur theory, and the industry was fully conscious of exploiting it through marketing.

As a consequence, Corrigan argues, the auteur's commercial status has been elevated to that of a star, “a kind of brand-name vision that precedes and succeeds the film, the way that movie is seen and received” (1991, p. 102). Through a torrent of advertisements, trailers, and magazine profiles, the institutional and commercial agencies at work in Hollywood have converted auteurism into an “empty display of material surface” (1991, p. 106). Such an emphasis results in a preconceived interpretation of the film as an articulation of the public image of its author. The auteur film becomes nothing more than a critical tautology, to be understood and consumed without any real interaction or effort. As an example, Corrigan shows how Spielberg, despite his earnest efforts to do otherwise, will inevitably always make “a Spielberg film.”

Forced to negotiate this problematic celebrity, the “auteur-star” is constantly on the verge of being consumed by his or her emerging star status. Corrigan detects two outcomes to this trend: the commercial auteur and the auteur of commerce. The commercial auteur includes the obvious “superstar” directors, Lucas and Spielberg,

who have achieved a considerable measure of stardom as a result of creating many beloved blockbusters. A degree of high visibility is associated with the commercial auteur, perhaps best seen in the star-turned-director, such as Mel Gibson, Robert Redford, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, and Kevin Costner. This “on-screen” dimension to auteurism dates back to the days of Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles. Corrigan even includes Woody Allen, John Sayles, François Truffaut, and Bernardo Bertolucci in this designation, as all of these directors are united by a “recognition, either foisted upon them or chosen by them, that the celebrity of their agency produces and promotes texts that invariably exceed the movie itself, both before and after its release” (1991, p. 107). The grandiose image of the auteur-star is what anchors the films of these auteurs, rather than ideas, styles, themes, or modes of expression.

The auteur of commerce, on the other hand, is “a filmmaker [who] attempts to monitor or rework the industrial manipulations of the auteurist position within the commerce of the contemporary movie industry” (1991, p. 107). Corrigan chooses Coppola, Alexander Kluge, and Raoul Ruiz as his shining exemplars, formulating the auteur of commerce as a filmmaker who actively employs fissures and discrepancies in his or her work in a conscious attempt to open up a space between self-identity and auteurist-identity in order to break down the oppression of the auteur's brand name. Because films may be reduced to vehicles for directors, the auteur as brand name may threaten the film's artistic standing, moving the focus from the text to the author—Coppola's tremendous self-sacrifice of his health and finances, Kluge's fragmentation of a central, dominating auteurist agency, and Ruiz's multitude of reincarnations across cultural spaces: three different paths toward the same ends. The only way to overcome the all-encompassing weight of the branded image of the auteur, according to Corrigan, is to communicate from *within* the commerce of that image. Fittingly, Corrigan uses Lee and his casting of himself in *Do the Right Thing* as an example of the auteur of commerce using his “image and name as a critical wedge to question his own and other's authority and power” (1991, p. 51).

At the nexus of all these interrelated and correlative dichotomies—the romantic/classical, the economy of culture/culture of economy, the commercial auteur/auteur of commerce—is the contemporary director who must negotiate his or her economic situation alongside his or her star image; in other words, he or she must become a *sellebrity* auteur. The “sell,” as we have seen, is simply the economic imperative of contemporary Hollywood. The auteur has always been constrained by the industrial nature of the system. In fact, auteur theory emerges out of an explicit acknowledgment of the industrial contexts of studio filmmaking in early Hollywood. However, the ever-increasing corporate logic of Hollywood has also forced the auteur to be actively involved in the “business-end” of the business, lest

he or she be reduced to a “director-for-hire.” Part of this business venture is exploiting—and being exploited by—the celebrity angle of the equation.

The classic definition of celebrity comes from Daniel Boorstin’s (1961) critique of commercial culture, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*: “the celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness. . . . He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event” (p. 57). Talent or achievement has little to do with the fascination; it is not *doing* that is celebrated, but *being*. This designation may not appear to apply to the selebriety auteur, as his or her work remains a focal point in their popularity, but as Corrigan notes, the transformation into a star may supersede this work. To rewrite Boorstin’s formulation for our own purposes then, the selebriety auteur is a famous director for being a famous director.

Continuing this analysis of “well-knownness,” but leaving behind the heavy-handed, Frankfurt School-influenced critique, Joshua Gamson (1994) details the “negotiated celebration” in the contemporary entertainment industry. Quick to distinguish between performer/entertainer and star, Gamson designates the performer as both a *worker*, pertaining to their qualities and abilities, and a *celebrity*, in which “what is developed and sold is the capacity to command attention” (p. 58). Increasingly, this distinction is becoming apparent in the auteur as well, as Corrigan was astute to note with the auteur-star. What Corrigan fails to consider, however, is the way the auteur must personally engage in this star-making. It is not simply a matter of the auteur’s name superseding the text, or that the auteur of commerce can manipulate this image within the text, but that the auteur must also personally play the game of commanding attention. It is not just what is thrust upon the auteur, but what the auteur manufactures to have thrust upon him or herself. In an industry heavily dependent on hype and publicity, “notoriety becomes a type of capital . . . recognition by consumers as a brand, familiarity in itself. The perceived ability to attract attention, regardless of what the attention is for, can be literally cashed in” (Gamson, 1994, p. 62). For Spike Lee, typically taking on commercially unfriendly subject matter, any capital he can gain is valuable, and cashing in on his notoriety has been a particularly lucrative form of capital.

Not one to shy away from the spotlight, Lee takes a highly active role in the definition of his image. True to his namesake, Spike has crafted an identity of sharp opposition, cultivated over years of outspokenness and controversy. This is evident in just about every biography written about him in the news media. As Erich Leon Harris (2002) succinctly summarizes, the press has constructed “a persona of near-mythic dimensions for Spike Lee the man. Angry. Brilliant. Controversial. Outspoken. Maverick. Racist. These are the words one encounters over and over again when reading about Lee” (p. 127). But one should not place the onus solely on the press, despite such provocations as an October 1992 *Esquire* cover story

declaring that “Spike Lee Hates Your Cracker Ass.”

Lee himself is responsible for much of this oppositional persona, rarely passing up the opportunity to comment and criticize on current events of concern to him, from his well-publicized dispute with Quentin Tarantino over his overuse of “the n-word,” to criticisms of Eddie Murphy and Will Smith, accusations of stereotype perpetuation in African American television sitcoms and rap videos, or attacks on the inaccurate histories proposed by *Mississippi Burning*, *Amistad*, and *The Patriot*. And this is not including the many controversies created by his own films, nearly all of which have caused some degree of strife in the news media. Anti-Semitism, homophobia, race-baiting, misogyny, incitements to riot—Lee has been accused of it all, and rarely misses the chance to supply an indignant quote in return. Ironically, this antagonistic reputation that has fueled his celebrity, and thus his ability to continue producing films, is bemoaned by Lee: “it’s reaching the point where *I’m* getting reviewed, not my films” (Lee, 1990, p. 25).

In crafting and asserting this public persona, Lee has established what has come to be essential to every selebriety auteur and every celebrity for that matter: a brand name. Elaborating on Richard Dyer’s (1986) designation of stars as “property” (Dyer, 1986, p. 5), Graeme Turner (2004) argues for a conception of the star as a “celebrity-commodity,” a financial asset whose commercialization stands to make profit for a variety of interested parties. A celebrity’s public persona is an integral part of this commercial asset: “as the asset appreciates—as the celebrity’s fame spreads—so does its earning capacity” (Turner, 2004, p. 35). Turner touches on the specific importance of branding when he invokes Naomi Klein’s (2001) pivotal work, *No Logo*. A striking example of our “new branded world,” Klein attributes the introduction in 1999 of *Forbes* magazine’s “Celebrity Power 100”—which ranks celebrities according to their brand name rather than fame or fortune—as proof that “brands and stars have become the same thing” (Klein, 2001, p. 49). The selebriety auteur, then, aspires to this quality of living, breathing brand name.

Lee provides a literal example of this coalescence: his name and production company has been emblazoned on all sorts of merchandise at Spike’s Joint. The tagline that accompanies all of Lee’s films is another element to this brand name. “A Spike Lee Joint” evokes at once a sense of hip, urban populism, the idea of a joint business venture, the legacy of the juke joint, the concept of juncture, as well as a drug connotation. It has come to mean something of an assurance or a guarantee, if not of quality, then at least of attitude. “Lee’s films,” according to Marlaine Glicksman (2002), “are unmistakably Spike: direct, outspoken, no-holds-barred, tell it like it is, pointed and hard-hitting” (p. 16). Personal opinions aside, people seldom walk out of a Spike Lee film feeling like they did not “get Spike’d.” The antagonistic image he has crafted over the years, a result of his careful branding, has created this expectation.

Star power is not to be underestimated in Hollywood; as King (2002) reminds us, “stardom is generally considered the single most important factor in the commercial viability of many films” (p. 160). In the era of the package system, when most films are one-off productions, stars are the closest thing to reliable box-office potential. A recognizable brand in an already overcrowded entertainment marketplace is invaluable; it is not hard to imagine why the selebtrity auteur would want to craft his or her own star image as an assurance of economic stability and why the industry would want to encourage and exploit just such a venture.

Such brazen commercialism, a necessity for the selebtrity auteur, as we have seen, inevitably draws criticism on the grounds of “selling out.” In his essay, “No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office,” William Lyne (2000) claims that as Lee’s career has been commercialized, so has his radical political vision. Like the rise and fall of the Blaxploitation era of the early 70s, Hollywood has seized upon the potential profitability of Lee, capitalized on his sensationalism, and left “the undigestable revolutionary morsels behind” (p. 45). Lyne accuses Lee of “mak[ing] peace with the corporate power structure while maintaining a veneer of militant dissent” (p. 57). The most blatant case of this “selling out,” according to Lyne, is Lee’s handling of *Malcolm X*. By reducing Malcolm’s final years to his break with Elijah Muhammad and his trip to Mecca, Lee downplays the politically radical and transformationist side of Malcolm. Lyne draws on the Marxist work of Manning Marable, who believes that the only strategy for substantial change within black politics is “transformationism,” which calls for sweeping change in ownership, labor rights, and production relations. With lofty revolutionary goals such as these, it’s no wonder Lyne takes such a harsh stance on Lee’s career.

Despite his dismissal of much of Lee’s later work—even going as far to quote Amiri Baraka’s insult of Lee as “the quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black, petit bourgeois professional” (p. 47)—Lyne cannot help but dedicate much of his essay to the merits of *Do the Right Thing*. A “stew of economic imperialism, ethnic solidarity, and labor relations,” (p. 48) Lyne praises the film for its strong transformationist underpinning and the critical discourse it created in newspapers, magazines, and journals across the country. Yet, *Do the Right Thing* contains the same commercial imperative as Lee’s other films, perhaps even more so, as the previously mentioned Nike sneakers scene indicates. Surely, every auteur is going to have their stronger and their lesser outings, but apparently a genuine modern day classic (*Do the Right Thing*) and a series of engaging films from an African American filmmaker, deftly maneuvering through the Hollywood system, are not good enough for a “revolutionary” like Lyne.

Another unforgiving critique, Jerome Christensen’s (1991) “Spike Lee, Corporate Populist,” rebukes Lee for his corporate complicity. Like Lyne, Christensen accuses Lee of playing the “rebel” card, dramatizing his opposition to

the major studios while doing business with them all the same. In particular, Christensen takes issue with the product placement of Air Jordans in *Do the Right Thing*, along with the Mars Blackmon commercials, and the implications this has in terms of corporate art. Christensen perceives the scene of Buggin’ Out proclaiming his love for his Air Jordans as “momentarily mov[ing] the film into the inebriating hyperreality of product fetishism” (p. 591). Especially within the context of the outbreak of inner-city black youth being murdered for their sneakers, and the crime surrounding these kinds of materialist symbols, Christensen is right to point out Lee’s complicity and refusal to accept at least partial indirect responsibility. To dismiss the entire film—not to mention Lee’s career—because of this one act of corporate compliance, however, is unwarranted. Like Lyne’s Marxist idealism, Christensen’s unabashed romanticism yearns for an art form uncorrupted by capital. His heavy-handed description of Lee’s filmmaking as “the most advanced expression of the emergent genre of corporate art” (p. 589) denotes, on one hand, a disregard for cinema and art history (corporate art is not exactly “emerging”), as well as a bias against Hollywood itself. Mainstream Hollywood cinema will always contain the element of commercialism; Christensen’s critique would be more appropriately aimed at the industry as a whole rather than Lee’s own struggle with art and commerce.

Ultimately, this criticism of Lee’s “selling out” is misguided, as “selling out” is, in a sense, his goal:

Part practical and financial, part ideological and idealistic: he wants to widen the scope—the assumptions and the address—of so-called “minority” images and audiences. He wants to be able to compete, to represent, like any white corporate entity, to sell products and create art that are pitched to multiple “demographics.” (Lee & Fuchs, 2002, p. ix)

The legacy of 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks attests to this pragmatic method of African American empowerment through free-enterprise economics. In the words of Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1993), “Lee understands that his job is to get ‘paid in full’ so that he can continue producing films of Black cultural resistance” (p. 175). In a highly commercial industry, Lee not only uses commercial means for his own ends, building an impressive career out of his many various forms of “joints,” he criticizes and reappropriates this very same commercialism, at times “jamming” the system from within.

In the minefield of economics and celebrity that is contemporary Hollywood, the selebtrity auteur is a necessarily paradoxical conception that helps account for the many seemingly contradictory elements at play. Upon closer inspection, the intersection of art and commerce—whether independent versus corporate, art house versus mass marketing, or mini versus major—reveals itself to be a dialectic-

cal paradox in cohesion, not collision. The most visible proof of this phenomenon would be in the way some of these oppositional terms have literally become conjoined, such as niche marketing, indie blockbuster, and the mini-major. Economically, we see box-office reception tied to critical reception, as well as ownership concerns tied to artistic control. With regards to the auteur, we see rigid boundaries beginning to blur: blockbuster and art house, romantic and classical, economy of culture and culture of economy, celebrity and artist. The sellebrity auteur, as exemplified by Spike Lee, demonstrates that ideas about authorial genius are located not just in the films themselves, but in the way the auteur directs—economically and reputationally—the movie of his or her life.

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