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Feminist Film Criticism

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Savior of the Female Voice

In the black community there is often talk about reparations, allowing the white oppressor redemption, but is redemption ever enough? The societal structure of America rarely gives black people a second chance to redeem themselves. African American culture is built around this stigma of succeeding and beating the odds of struggle and poverty while rising above others unscathed and perfect. Spike Lee is a prime example of this character type for young black filmmakers. An Atlanta University Center graduate that has become a legend of black cinema and a trailblazer in the telling of black stories. Creating movies like *She's Gotta Have It*, a female-led protagonist story about sex, relationships, and societal female standards, catapulted Lee into a household name as risk-taker and a social-commentator. He can do no wrong to most black men, yet as many theorists have proven, he has a "woman problem"(Tillet). Lee has received negative feedback for his debut film *She's Gotta Have It* since the movie was released in 1986. Nevertheless, in 2017, after the film's series reboot was released, he was being praised for his "Feminist Breakthrough", an act of redemption. Why is that? While the new reboot of 'She's Gotta Have It' portrays a more feminist perspective and plot, the movies cinematic gaze is still male-driven and anti-feminist through his perception of heterosexual and queer relationships.

In the film 'She's Gotta Have It', Jamie is never exclusively with Nola. When he is in a fight with Nola about her polyamorous relationships in the movie, he gets out of bed with

another woman before he rapes her. Jamie appears as angry and upset with her saying things like "Leave me alone Nola" (She's Gotta Have It 01:07:41) and "Once a freak, always a freak" (She's Gotta Have It 01:09:05). Is he a freak for sleeping with another woman before sleeping with Nola? Are Nola's sexual relationships wrong because she is a woman? Spike Lee's cinematic gaze portrays women like sexual objects and men like victims of female sexual liberation.

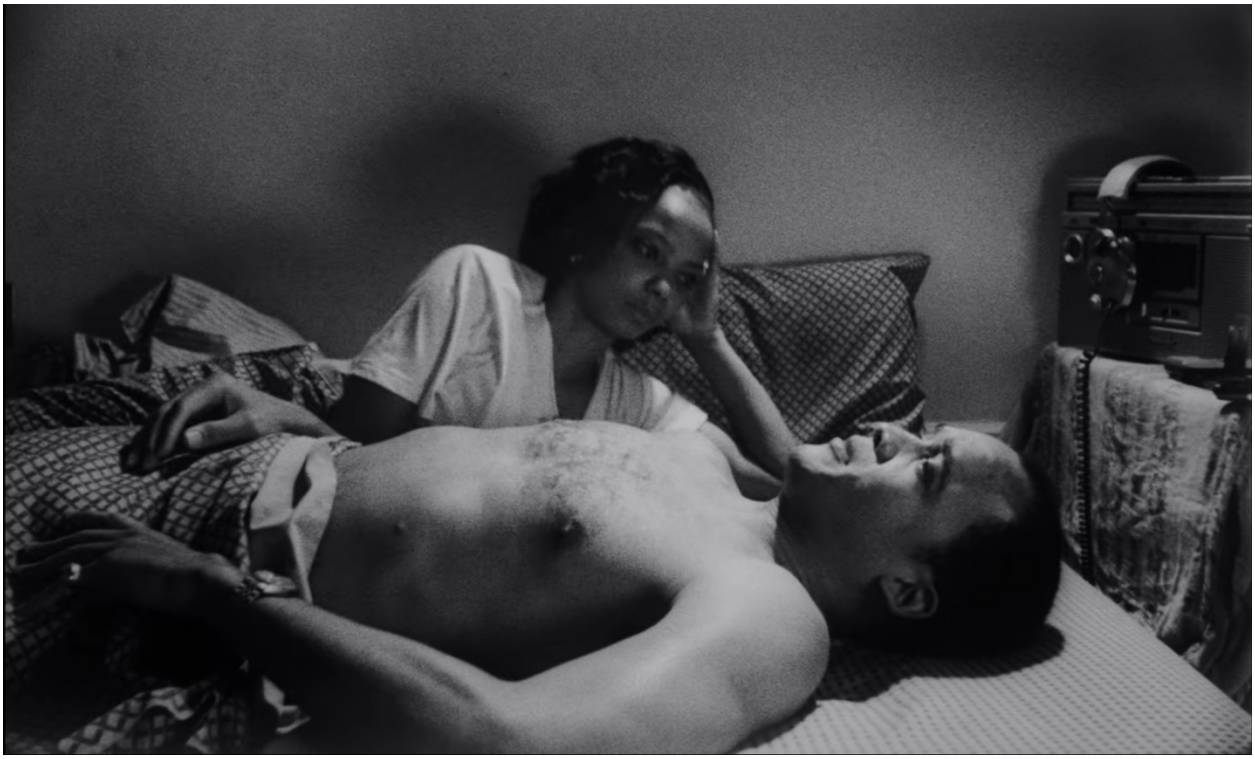

Figure 2: Jamie lays in the bed looking at the ceiling with despair as another woman lies beside him. She looks at him the same way Jamie looks at Nola.

The way he frames the story, Jamie is so heartbroken that Nola drives him into the bed of another woman. The idea that one woman's needs should overpower those of her partner is too complex a thought for Lee as well as other men, shown through the character of Jamie. Mulvey states in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, "The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the

spectator" (Mulvey 63). Lee captures the story sympathetically and pitifully because that is how he, and his target male audience, view the situation, a pitiful shame of the female sexual identity.

Not only does 'She's Gotta Have It' reek of male-focused cinematic portrayal, but the story also negatively presents black women and their oppositional gaze. Opal Gilstrap is one of the most problematic characters created by Lee. In the original feature, she is shown as a backup for Nola's heterosexual affairs. She is not given much of a backstory other than her sexual attraction to straight women, and Jamie feels threatened by her presence. He speaks to Nola about Opal, saying things like "What's up with you and Opal?" and "I still don't like her". The character of Opal, played by Raye Dowell, lacks depth and perceives lesbian women as terrorists waiting in the shadows to take straight women away from their male suitors. Bell hook writes in the 'Oppositional Gaze: The Black Female Spectator', "Centrally, those black female spectators who attest to the oppositionality of their gaze deconstruct theories of female spectatorship that have relied heavily on the assumption that, woman can only mimic man's relation to language, that is assume a position defined by the penis-phallus as the supreme arbiter of lack."

Figure 3: Opal and Jamie face each other, staring each other in the eyes. In somewhat of a fighting stance, they stand tense in a kitchen. (She's Gotta Have It 20:17)

This perception of lesbian women mirrors the insecurities of men, not women. As the two give each other combative looks, the tea kettle begins to ring, foreshadowing high tension. Opal stands across from Jamie, staring at him. He is standing with his back facing Nola like he is guarding her, protecting her from Opal's lesbianism. It portrays lesbian women as these masculine "penis-lacking" superiors that straight women should be wary of. This negative stereotype makes audiences believe that lesbianism and/or queerness is a choice that women have been tricked into choosing, which is heterosexual male propaganda and appropriates the perspective of the ‘oppositional gaze’.

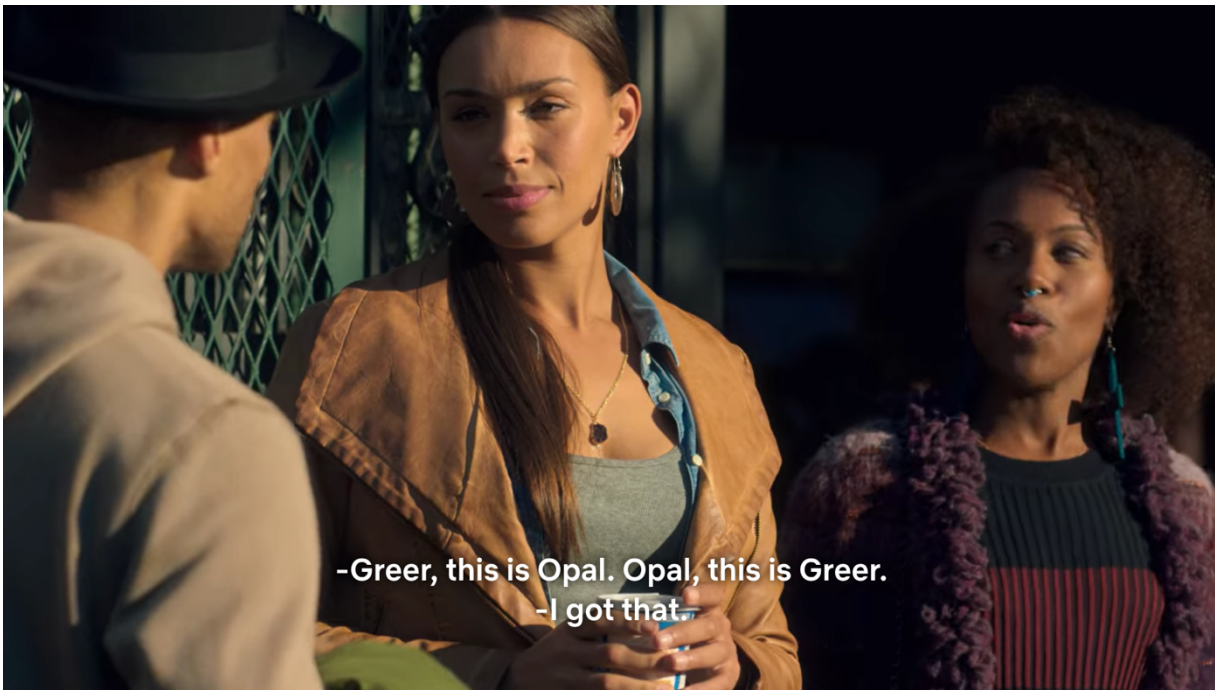

Figure 4: Opal stands next to Greer, looking at him with despise. She is standing between Nola and Greer, acting as a barricade between Nola and her men. (She's Gotta Have It S1, E4, 22:42)

Spike Lee, the director of both the movie and the series, continues to frame Opal as this man-hating lesbian conqueror in 2017. When she is tired of her polyamorous relationship with men, Nola falls back into a situation-ship with Opal Gilstrap, mother and horticulturalists. While the character was given more back story and perceived as more feminine, Lee's perception stays the same. She is the antithesis of Nola's sexuality (as perceived by the men in her life) and a threat to her male suitors. The story unfolds as if not only is Nola so insatiable that she is sexually promiscuous with men, but she also sleeps with women. This views lesbianism and gay culture as substitutes for heterosexuality rather than a sexuality in its own right.

She's Gotta Have It: the series follows the same principal cast of Nola, Jamie, Greer, Mars, Clorinda, and Opal, as well as a few new characters in a modern gentrified Fort Greene Brooklyn. An ode to Lee's neighborhood, many of his shots in the film and the series mirror one

another. He presents Brooklyn as a magnificent urban jungle filled with beautiful black faces, community, and family. While his camera shots of the setting are similar, very few of his frames portraying the story in the series have differed from the original film. He begins the series with the She's Gotta Have It signature of one-person narrative zoom shots, introducing Nola and then her male suitors, all explaining their perspective of who Nola is to them. As the series begins, the male protagonist tries to label Nola and yet never seem to reflect on themselves under Lee's direction. Jamie, a possessive married man, Greer, a narcissistic and insecurity-projecting photographer, and Mars, a broke young aspiring rapper, all seem to believe they have a say in how Nola leads her life because of their sexual relationship with her. This selfish nature is engraved deep into the 'male gaze' and the female portrayal in the film. Spike Lee takes complex characters and molds them to benefit his male-dominated view of the world. For example, Jamie, Nola's mature and grounded conquest, is written to be poetic and romantic. Perceived as a sensitive man, the way Lee captures him, the audience is led to sympathize with him.

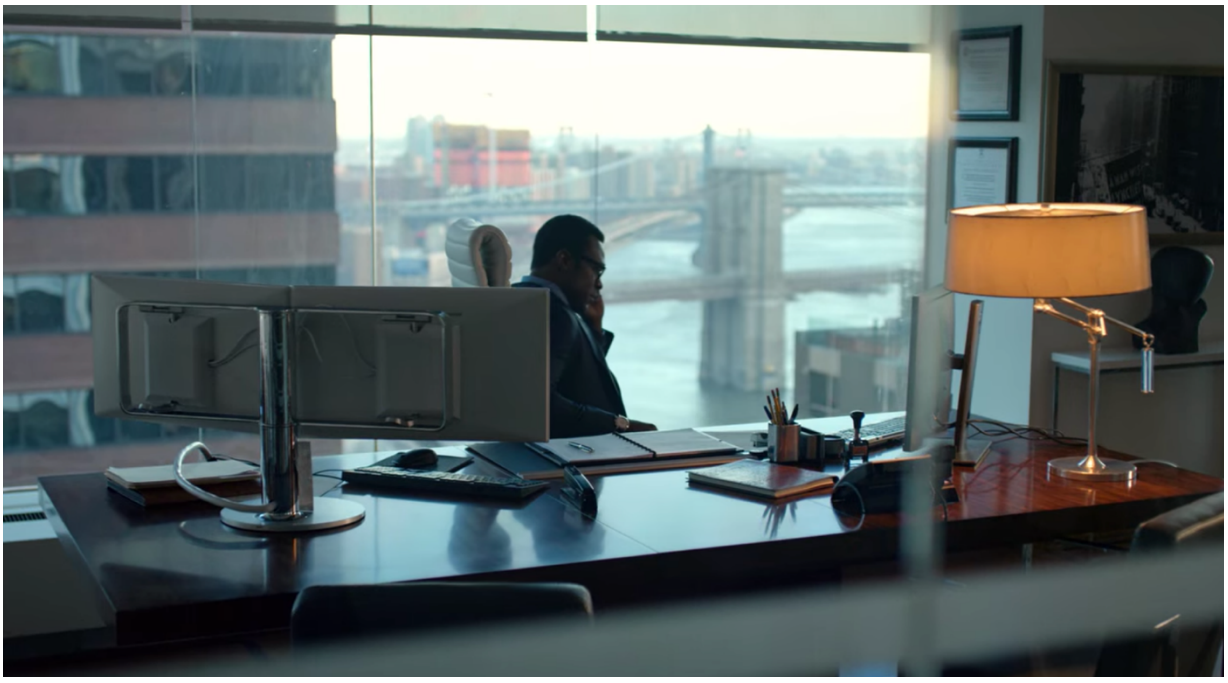

Figure 1: Jamie sits on the phone waiting for Nola to pick up, with an open notebook and files on his desk, foreshadowing she is distracting him from his work. His inability to function without Nola. This perception of a male hysterical and determined to get into contact with Nola while sitting in a dimly lit room sets a depressive scene. The shot frames Jamie as singular and alone in the center, as if he is distant and left astray. (She's Gotta Have It, S1, E1, 24:53)

While to the bare eye, Jamie is just a man who is madly in love with Nola, under the feminist lens, he represents the shackles of the 'male gaze'. In both the movie and the series, Jamie constantly critiques Nola's polyamorous sex life throughout their relationship. He wants her to settle down with him and only him, simply because that is what he wants, negating what works for Nola. Jamie cannot confine Nola into the fantasy of a woman that he wants her to be, which is driving him crazy. He feels like he is losing her to other men and her "abnormal" sexuality. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura states, "In the highly developed Hollywood cinema it was through these codes that the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack of fantasy, came near to finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty its play on his formative obsessions"(Mulvey). An alienated subject is one who has been cast off and left alone. Jamie has been isolated by his mentally created reality of his relationship with Nola and she has just broken his fantasy of her. Male obsession is constantly portrayed in Spike Lee's cinematic direction in *She's Gotta Have It*. He frames Jamie as this man in despair who wants to love Nola exclusively, yet she keeps breaking his heart. The reality is Jamie is upset because Nola is not satisfying his fantasy of her. He wants her to be head over heels in love with him and only him despite his ties to another woman, this is what drives his obsession. While this image makes Jamie look sad, it is only a

portrait of his possession. This male-centered perspective contradicts the images Lee shows on screen.

The reboot of *She's Gotta Have It* has very few new cinematic perceptions, but the actual difference between the film and the series is the story being told and the storytellers behind it. In Salamishah Tillet's article for the New York Times, "A New 'She's Gotta Have It': Spike Lee's Feminist Breakthrough", she uncovers the female voices behind the scenes of the new series. She writes, "And with television came a writer's room, one that Mr. Lee filled with African-American female artists and writers, including his wife, Tonya Lewis Lee, whom Mr. Lee credited for conceiving the film as a series" (Tillet). In the movie, Nola is portrayed as this woman whose life is controlled by the depictions of her lovers, while in the series, she is a strong woman who, while flawed, is in control of her life. In the series, we see Nola working on her art; something Lee heavily skipped over in the movie. The character of Nola says phrases like "All right, you know the deal, it's time to go. I have another piece to start" (She's Gotta Have It S1, E1,14:20). She is written as an independent working woman who, while sexual, is focused and not dazed by her sexual partners. While to the distracted viewer this script change can be seen as feminist, Lee didn't change how he created and framed the characters. A female writer’s room made these characters more palatable and relatable to the female experience on paper. The words the characters speak have changed, but the way they are filmed mirrors the original 1986 film. The reboot of this work by Lee has made this dramatic change into a more liberal, sex-positive, feminist story because there were more female voices behind the scenes. No one can tell a woman's story like a woman, and that theory is proven in how the new show was received. However, Lee’s tale is still focused on the male relationships and sexuality of Nola Darling, and decades later still frames her as a female anomaly.

Spike Lee is a cinematic genius who has turned so many black faces and stories into global phenomena. He is a voice for the black community in the white-dominated film world, and his work cannot be depreciated. However, one's contributions and status do not excuse the need for criticism. In a society that is forever changing, it is honorable that he gave black women the chance to make their voices heard and portrayed correctly, but he, as a director, cannot get rid of his male gaze. His gaze has not shifted, nor has it changed; he has just learned the importance of inclusion in storytelling.

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