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## THE BOX

February 1–February 29, 2008



Photo: Charlie Varley/courtesy HBO

## Wexner Prize Screening Spike Lee *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, 2006*

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Parts 1 and 2: February 1–14

Parts 3 and 4: February 15–29

“Most people think that it was Katrina that brought about the devastation to New Orleans. But it was a breaching of the levees that put 80 percent of the city under water. It was not the hurricane.”—Spike Lee

“Requiem” is a term drawn from Roman Catholic liturgy, referring to a mass held for the deceased or a musical composition produced for that occasion. Originally conceived by Spike Lee and HBO as a two-hour documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, became twice that long as the enormity of the disaster pressed itself onto Lee and his collaborators. The death of substantial portions of one of America’s mythic cities and of countless citizens whose presence had sustained the joyous spirit of that place represented a series of communal and intimate tragedies demanding more time and more depth than the typical documentary form could accommodate, and requiring a tone at least in some measure elegiac. Hence, a requiem.

Lee happened to be at the Venice Film Festival during Hurricane Katrina, and, watching it unfold on television, he grasped instinctively the horrific significance of the catastrophe—human, ecological, urban—that virtually the entire world was watching unfold in real time. Over the next year he and his team would make eight trips to the Gulf Coast to try to comprehend the causes of the tragedy in New Orleans and to bear witness to the toll it had taken on survivors.

Lee himself is a felt, but unobtrusive, presence throughout the film, an off-screen interlocutor. Although he makes abundant use of archival television and amateur footage of the disaster, Lee takes pains to clarify that what devastated New Orleans was not the hurricane itself, but the compromised system of levees, directly resulting in the floods wiping entire neighborhoods—largely African American and socioeconomically disadvantaged ones—from the face of the earth. It’s the one-two punch of an obsolescent levee system and the brutally incompetent response of those entrusted to “manage” the resulting emergency that justifies questioning how much of this “natural” disaster was in fact due to systemic failure on the political level, most pointedly in FEMA’s criminal dereliction of duty.

Lee had partnered with HBO Documentary Films before, on *4 Little Girls* (1998) and *Jim Brown: All-American* (2002), but his mastery of fact-based filmmaking is given epic treatment in *When the Levees Broke*. Fearlessly plain-speaking in his fiction films, Lee here offers the stage for others to speak as bluntly, not only via commentators sketching context for the disaster, but mainly from the scores of New Orleans citizens whose lives have forever been marked by the nightmare they lived through, even as their loved ones were left to perish.

It’s a testament to Lee’s empathy, anger, and forbearance that he succeeds in making a disaster incomprehensible in its savagery into an almost comprehensible occurrence. Those are among the gifts that inform his vocation as a filmmaker—an alertness to unspeakable ironies running alongside the tact of knowing when to sit and just listen, an insistence on speaking unpopular truths coexisting with an abiding appreciation of native lyricism and wit. Beyond being Katrina’s designated mourner, he has as strong a claim as anyone working today to be acknowledged as America’s filmmaker.

Bill Horrigan  
Director of Media Arts

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### Spike Lee

*When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, 2006*  
video, 255 mins.

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*When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. A Spike Lee Film presented by HBO Documentary Films and 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks. Directed and produced by Spike Lee. Producer and supervising editor: Sam Pollard. Cinematography: Cliff Charles. Edited by Geeta Gandbhiri and Nancy Novack. Original music by Terence Blanchard. Line producer: Butch Thompson. For HBO: Producer: Jacqueline Glover. Executive Producer: Sheila Nevins. 255 mins. 2006.

Thanks to Bridget DeMouy and Sharon Werner at HBO for facilitating this screening.

The DVD home version of *When the Levees Broke* contains on its third disk *Next Movement: Act V*, an 105-minute epilogue featuring new interviews and insights that further chronicle the hardships endured by New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina.

With CNN special correspondent Soledad O’Brien, Lee returned to New Orleans in January 2007 and gave eleven students digital cameras so they could record their lives in the wake of Katrina. Those stories ran periodically on CNN last year under the title *Children of the Storm*.

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