

If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise, dir. Spike Lee. HBO, 2010

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Spike Lee's documentary film, *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* (2010), returns to New Orleans five years after Hurricane Katrina. It revisits and expands upon the story Lee began to tell in his epic 2006 film, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. Like Lee's first attempt to get to grips with Katrina's disastrous aftermath, this latter film similarly spans four hours of largely interview footage, illustrating that the sometimes all-too-familiar talking heads format can nonetheless constitute a triumph in storytelling. As *If God is Willing* demonstrates, the ongoing post-storm fallout is a story that needs to be told.

Like many documentaries made on the occasion of the five-year anniversary of Katrina, *If God is Willing* was initially envisaged as a tale of rebirth, one that was bolstered by the New Orleans Saints Super Bowl victory in February, and seriously compromised by the catastrophic explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in April that killed 11 people and led to an unprecedented oil spill which threatens the devastation of the environment and livelihoods across the Gulf Coast. Yet even before Lee was compelled to incorporate new footage documenting the effects of the BP oil spill, his film bore witness to a catalogue of post-Katrina injustices and failings: the systematic demolition of public housing and the consequent crisis in affordable housing in the city; the closure of Charity Hospital and the consequent lack of primary health care in a city that has seen rising death rates among people with chronic conditions and is in the midst of what a number of commentators describe as a veritable mental health emergency; the breakdown of trust between residents and a police department whose reputation for corruption and brutality was showcased by Katrina, while crime rates spiral out of control.

The film thus uncovers a picture consistent with Naomi Klein's characterization of post-Katrina New Orleans as a site of the 'shock' tactics of disaster

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capitalism. In this vein the storm opened up a series of ‘opportunities’ whereby the authorities were able to support the agendas of developers over and above the city’s often displaced residents, and oversee the effective dismantling of a public infrastructure that had long supported the existence of poor and predominantly black communities in the city. As many of the film’s interviewees point out, this controversial and deeply destructive agenda arguably constitutes ‘ethnic cleansing’ and threatens the very communities – some of the most close-knit in the United States - that have nurtured the musical and religious cultures for which New Orleans is famous. By focusing on what emerges in the film’s lexicon as the ‘gangsterism’ of a wealthy elite, *If God is Willing* offers a corrective to a strand of narrative in *When the Levees Broke* that, though never silent on the question of racism, was often too keen to stress that the victims of Katrina were ‘viable, tax-paying citizens’ in moves that sometimes seemed to pave over the story of racialized poverty that the storm so eloquently told.

Like the 2006 film, *If God is Willing* remains fascinatingly haunted by tensions between the national and international coordinates of Katrina. The 2010 film echoes the outrage expressed in *When the Levees Broke* at the mislabelling of storm survivors ‘refugees’, by condemning the way in which BP’s clean-up operation resembled a foreign ‘occupation’ - thus similarly alienating the disaster victims from their rightful identities and entitlements as Americans. And yet *If God is Willing* also draws attention to a number of highly suggestive parallels between post-Katrina New Orleans and the destruction wrought on its sister city, Port-au-Prince, in the wake of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The race and class dynamics that have exacerbated both disasters are highlighted in both films to illustrate a disconnection between Louisiana, particularly New Orleans, and the rest of the United States. Indeed, one commentator in *When the Levees Broke* compares the ‘occupation’ of Louisiana by federal forces in the storm’s aftermath to the US-led invasion of Iraq, suggesting a national estrangement comparable to the alienating effects of foreign occupation.

Part of the richness of Lee’s earlier film is the string of unresolved tensions that animate its diverse conversations, tensions that are nevertheless undergirded by a shared anger directed at the Bush administration – whose criminally inept response to Katrina undoubtedly sealed its downfall. *If God is Willing*, in contrast, lacks a clear target. While the most reviled figures in the Bush administration are resurrected as villains, the narrative is complicated by the fact that Obama had been in office just

over a year at the time that most of the film was shot, and was heading up the administration that dealt with an oil spill soon dubbed by the media ‘Obama’s Katrina’. The film seems to indicate that the jury is still out on the nation’s first African American president – he is praised for his response to the Haiti earthquake and criticized for not getting angry enough at BP. The film’s frustration at not finding a clear villain becomes apparent in the name-calling sequence – where BP’s initials are shouted into myriad combinations including ‘British Parasites’, ‘Belligerent Plunderers’ and ‘Bad People’ – that, as fans of Lee’s films will recognize, clearly echoes the well-known ‘racial slur’ scene that appears in *Do The Right Thing* (1989). As with this 1989 film, while the temptation is to condemn what appears to be ‘the power’ – in this case both Big Oil and an apparently complicit federal government - it is the inability to capture the sheer complexity of power relationships, those cross-currents that create the conditions of possibility for the forces of exploitation, that in part constitutes powerlessness.

The challenge of *If God is Willing* is to convey a sense of urgency around the ensuing social disaster as the imagery of the apparently ‘natural’ disaster – of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita - recede from memory. That Lee included in this later film more of the gimmicks that have become the signature of his film-making is perhaps indicative of limitations in this regard, an inevitable lack of the sense of immediacy that lent *When the Levees Broke* such intensity. Yet it is a tribute to Lee’s commitment that he has expanded and deepened popular understandings of a story of resilience that refuses to be whitewashed into yet another shallow vindication of the ‘American Dream’.