

## ***Spike Lee Re-Edits HBO Sept. 11 Series That Features Conspiracists***

An episode of the eight-hour documentary series has drawn criticism for giving a platform to people who have long peddled debunked claims about what caused the towers to collapse.

**By Julia Jacobs and Reggie Ugwu**

Published Aug. 25, 2021 Updated Sept. 5, 2021

Facing mounting criticism for spotlighting conspiracy theorists in his new HBO documentary series about the Sept. 11 attacks on New York, the filmmaker Spike Lee said Wednesday that he was re-editing the final episode.

Mr. Lee's HBO series, "NYC Epicenters 9/11-2021½," explores the effect of the terrorist attacks and the coronavirus pandemic on New York City. The final episode, which is scheduled to air on the 20th anniversary of the attacks, prominently featured members of the conspiracy group Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, who push the debunked idea that the towers of the World Trade Center were brought down by a controlled demolition, not by terrorists who flew jetliners into the Twin Towers. Their inclusion in the documentary series, which was made available for preview by members of the media, has been widely criticized in recent days.

In a note to the media that was posted Wednesday on an HBO platform that provides early access to television shows and films, Mr. Lee wrote: "I'm Back In The Editing Room And Looking At The Eighth And Final Chapter Of NYC EPICENTERS 9/11→2021½. I Respectfully Ask You To Hold Your Judgment Until You See The FINAL CUT."

In the version of the episode provided to the media, Mr. Lee also included the perspectives of scientists who investigated the attacks and who refute the conspiracy theorists' claims, including S. Shyam Sunder, who led a yearslong investigation into the attacks for the National Institute of Standards and Technology. But critics complained that the episode seemed to balance the perspectives of the conspiracy theorists and experts who deeply studied the issue, even appearing at times to side with the conspiracy theorists.



In a recent interview with The New York Times, Lee defended the inclusion of conspiracy theorists, saying he still had questions about what caused the buildings to collapse. HBO

At one point, after Mr. Sunder asks Mr. Lee whether his explanation of events has sufficiently answered his questions, Mr. Lee, breaking into laughter, responds, “Well, not really.”

Jeremy Stahl, an editor at Slate, condemned Lee and HBO’s handling of the subject. “In terms of conveying facts, this is a bit like presenting Covid-19 vaccine skeptics in a debate alongside Anthony Fauci, or Holocaust deniers alongside the Simon Wiesenthal Center, or a clique of climate change skeptics alongside the authors of the United Nations IPCC report,” he wrote.

In social media posts, Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth cheered their inclusion in the series, writing, “Get ready for Episode 4 on September 11, 2021!”

In a recent interview with The New York Times, Mr. Lee had defended the inclusion of members of the conspiracy group, said that he still had questions about what caused the buildings to collapse and added that he hoped “Congress holds a hearing, a congressional hearing about 9/11.”

Pushing for further investigations of Sept. 11 has been a longtime goal of the so-called “truther” movement. The movement, which used the internet as an organizing tool and rallied behind low-budget web films like “Loose Change,” has never had much political success. But it did succeed in sowing doubt about the official Sept. 11 narrative. A 2016 study by Chapman University found that more than half of Americans believed that the government had deliberately concealed information about the attacks.

The success of 9/11 conspiracy theories also paved the way for more recent internet-based misinformation campaigns, such as QAnon and the anti-vaccine movement, many of which adapted the tools and techniques that had been used by Sept. 11 conspiracists years earlier.

Mr. Lee seemed to cast doubt on the official explanation of the collapse of the buildings, including 7 World Trade Center, which investigators determined was brought down by fire. They concluded that heat from the fire caused girders in the steel floor to expand, and steel beams underneath the floors that provided lateral support for the tower’s structural columns began to buckle or put pressure against the vertical structural columns.

“The amount of heat that it takes to make steel melt, that temperature’s not reached,” Mr. Lee told The Times, echoing a popular conspiracy theory. “And then the juxtaposition of the way Building 7 fell to the ground — when you put it next to other building collapses that were demolitions, it’s like you’re looking at the same thing. But people going to make up their own mind. My approach is put the information in the movie and let people decide for themselves. I respect the intelligence of the audience.”

Mr. Lee’s series received a boost from Mayor Bill de Blasio, who featured Mr. Lee at a news conference last week, announcing that parts of it would be screened before its official release as part of NYC Homecoming Week, a cultural festival intended to celebrate the city’s progress as it tries to emerge from the pandemic.

“What he has created — absolutely unbelievable,” Mr. de Blasio said at the news conference, “and it’s about us and it’s a time to appreciate who we are.”

It was not clear if other episodes would be re-edited as well. In the third episode, Mr. Lee asks Curtis Beatty, a former flight attendant with United Airlines, about Flight 93, which was hijacked but never reached its intended target because passengers and crew members tried to retake the plane and it ended up crashing in Pennsylvania: “Do you believe that the flight crew and the passengers crashed the plane? Or was it shot down?”

“I believe it was shot down,” Mr. Beatty says.

The condemnation of parts of the series was swift but limited because the final episode had not been available to the public; even officials at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum had yet to see it. In a statement, a spokeswoman for the museum, Lee S. Cochran, said the institution was “focused on the facts.”

“We acknowledge the existence of conspiracy theories and theorists as a phenomenon of the post-9/11 world,” she said, “but we categorically reject such claims as incorrect and invalid.”

Kevin Roose contributed reporting.