

# AMERICAN HISTORY X

by

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*American History X. Directed by Tony Kaye. Written by David McKenna. Cinematography by Tony Kaye.*

*Music by Anne Dudley. Distributed by New Line Cinema, 1998.*

Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton), a bright Venice, CA youth, becomes the leader of a local skinhead gang under the tutelage of white supremacist Cameron Alexander (Stacy Keach). Derek became a racist as a result of a racist home environment and because his fireman father was murdered while protecting blacks. After a basketball game to decide turf rules, the losing blacks come to steal Derek's car. Derek brutally kills two of them and is sentenced to three years in prison during which time he undergoes a transformation of his beliefs. Meanwhile, his younger brother Danny (Edward Furlong), who idolizes him, tries to fill his shoes and falls under Alexander's racist thrall. On his release, Derek tell the tale of his conversion to Danny, hoping he will give up his racist ways: when he found the neo-Nazis in prison quickly gave up politics for profits, he lost respect for them and made enemies of them; a black coworker (Guy Torry) prevented his murder; his black high school principal, Bob Sweeney (Avery Brooks) visits and supports him emotionally after the neo-Nazis raped him. Sadly, blacks murder Danny just after he decides to change his life. (Rated R)

*American History X* is an honest film, a heartfelt effort to explore the effects of racial and religious hatred on an individual and his family. In this respect, it is intense, often riveting. It doesn't pull punches – the violence is both gut-wrenching and heart-breaking. It takes its subject seriously, often showing its complexity. Director Tony Kaye clearly shows, for instance, that racism speaks a variety of languages – from the voice of the gutter to the pronouncements of the intellectual. It doesn't dismiss “the racist” as a dimwit or a dupe; despite showing internal philosophical disagreement and obvious logical flaws, it respects him (or her) as a human being. Sometimes compelling and always interesting, it can easily be compared to Spike Lee's

*Do the Right Thing* as a serious, thoughtful investigation of race. Yet I have great reservations.

The details in the life of working class and highly intelligent Derek are convincing. Much of Derek's intensity is the result of the fine work of actor Edward Norton. Yet Derek's initiation into racism by his father is unconvincing. The portrayal of a single dinner table conversation is simply not enough. Like all indoctrination, to become fully integrated into an individual's character, requires not a single incident, but a pattern of hatred. Given director Kaye's technical prowess, a montage spanning years would have been more effective. And this is typical of *American History X*: some material is mediocre, some things are done very well, and other things insult the audience (a gun with over twenty bullets in it, for instance).

The film begins with small waves rolling gently onto the sands of Venice Beach early in the morning. These are not the crashing waves that would attract surfers, rather they are unremarkable yet very persistent. These are the waves of racism lapping at our country. And this racism, says *American History X*, is eroding our nation just like the waves are eroding our Western coastline . . . slowly, inexorably and inevitably. And no one seems to notice. The film immediately plunges us into the world of neo-Nazi youth – and we sit up and notice. But the messages we get about the problem are mixed, some brilliant – notably in the use of symbolism – and some confused, especially on close inspection.

In one very impressive symbolic move, for instance, the director omits make-up from an actor rather than adding it. Stacy Keach, who plays the racist

leader Alexander, was born with a hair-lip speech impediment that was surgically corrected. In most of his films, the remaining scar is covered with make-up. Not here. The symbolic value of that scar speaks volumes about the character.

Scars have a long filmic and symbolic history. Film simply adopted a symbolic history of the meaning of deformity stretching back to the Greeks, who believed that external perfection reflected internal perfection – thus their beautiful sculptures. To sculpt the gods, for instance, no single human model was adequate, so they modeled an arm from one person, a neck from another, and so on, to achieve the simulacrum of perfection. Of course, the opposite was true also: external flaws reflect internal ones. (During Romantic periods this was reversed, hence characters like the Elephant Man and the Hunchback of Notre Dame.) My favorite film example is from *The Searchers* where the murdering, kidnapping, raping, ravaging, savage Apache villain is named . . . Scar.

Cameron Alexander's scar is on his lip, thus indicating his vocal process is flawed. In this case this is not meant in the physical sense, but in the verbal, in what he actually says. I cannot think of a better way to symbolize a bile-spewing racist than by a scar on his lip. I cannot but wonder whether Kaye selected Keach for the role on this basis or cleverly took advantage once he had hired the actor.

Largely because of the powerful use of symbolism, this is a powerful film; at times it achieves an intensity that defies description. And, much to its credit, it recognizes that there are no simple answers to the problems of racial and

ethnic hatred. It has the courage to show a society at its worst, acting-out bigotry and hatred and its consequences. It pulls no punches. Yet I fear some unintended messages have found their way into *American History X*.

Derek, and his Svengali Cameron, are compelling in their racist arguments using half-truths, statistics and outright propaganda to convince a bunch of not-so-bright kids – frustrated, impressionable and insecure – that all their problems, past, present and future, will be solved if they sell their souls to the devil of racism. And like Faust before them, they find the temptation too great. It is easy for the audience to empathize with Danny’s attraction to Derek – a powerful, in-charge figure in a world of losers and wimps. The film thus couches its racist arguments in both rhetoric and physicality. But once established, *American History X* has difficulty tearing down the idol it (apparently unintentionally) built too well.

The biggest problem is that there is no rebuttal to the racist rhetoric. Faced with anti-Semitism, the high school English teacher cowers, puts his tail between his legs and slinks out without a word of rejoinder, much less a reponse. The high school principal, a wonderful example of a successful and morally responsible black, never articulates a counter-argument to Cameron’s ideas, despite his two doctoral degrees. If vocal opposition to racism is to occur, then where is it to come from if not from these two groups? *American History X* provides an odd answer, if it is an answer at all.

Derek’s prison co-worker in the laundry is the man who finally brings him around. (Of course, working in a laundry is a nice symbolic touch – a place where the soiled – like Derek – is made clean.) Derek works side-by-side with

the man, mutely ignoring him for almost two years. The co-worker chatters on, treats Derek as he would anyone else. Derek loses faith in his fellow neo-Nazi prisoners when they quickly sell out their ideology in exchange for a little profit by dealing in narcotics, buying from the Mexicans and selling to the whites. After they rape him, Derek has nowhere to turn.

But the discussion with his black co-worker that convinces Derek of the error racism is one about sex and sports. While these topics indeed get Derek in touch with the humanity of another human being, not dependent on skin color, this conversation does not constitute a counter-argument to racism. This is doubly true since most of the previous racist propaganda is couched in intellectual terms and thus requires an intellectual, or at least a reasoned response.

The need of a counter-argument becomes even more apparent when we realize that it is repeatedly pointed out that both Derek and Danny are smart kids, A-students in high school. It is apparently not mere coincidence that they are the only ones in the film who reform. Obviously, we need attractive central characters the audience can identify with – in this case attractive monsters. By identifying with them, we identify with their change. But this film isn't addressed to those who believe in neo-Nazi fascism. Preaching to the converted is the usual term to describe this misdirected enterprise. And what about the multitude of youths that are left on Venice Beach, stewing hate fueled by drugs, beer, and heavy metal? What have we to say to them?

It disturbs me that one possible interpretation of the message of this film might be that the racism portrayed is correct, only its means are not. The film

seems to vehemently decry the *violence* in a tone far more shrill than it condemns the racism behind the violence.

Another thing that disturbs me about *American History X* is the (again probably unintended) racism inherent in the film's plot details. At the film's beginning, Derek challenges a group of blacks to a basketball game to decide a turf war – a non-violent solution to a potentially explosive situation. The blacks use subterfuge and violence in an attempt to cheat, while the whites (neo-Nazis all) play honestly. The whites win (of course), but the blacks cannot accept a peaceful solution and opt for a criminal response – to steal Derek's car. The messages about the innate ethical values of the two groups are unavoidable.

This racist view of the difference between the black and white communities is echoed at the end of the film. Danny, with Derek's help, changes his mind about racism. Both have left the skinhead gang at great emotional cost and under possible physical threat from their ex- fellow gang members. Thus, at the end of the film, two white boys mend their ways. However, the blacks do not. The blacks are still intent on revenge against the whites and (apparently) cannot change their ways – one shoots and kills Danny in the high-school bathroom (another well-chosen symbolic locale – Danny dies slumped in a urinal).

What conclusions are we left with? Blacks are beyond hope and (as always) whites are superior? I realize that Danny's shooting is necessary to make a dramatic point at the end of the film, but I feel that perhaps the filmmakers didn't consider the implications of this (and several other) aspects of the

messages the film sends. Racism is a difficult and dangerous topic. To take it on at all is a great and worthy challenge. However, not to read the story in all its subtextual possibilities is irresponsible both to the audience and the medium. While I am sure the filmmakers intended to make a film that decries the dangers of racism and the skinhead neo-Nazi movement in America, the subtextual flaws not only weaken their arguments, but may actually work in the opposite direction.

*American History X* stresses that one's actions, whether a skinhead or not, have consequences that we cannot quickly fathom. Derek's hate of others comes back to haunt the family he loves and believes he is protecting like a dark wheel of karma. And the film itself portrays a losing battle on this front, for it takes two good men – the school principal and the nameless laundry worker in prison – to change one man from bad to good. By contrast, a single evil man, like Alexander, can influence dozens. In a world so subsumed in hate, there are simply not enough good men to go around.

*American History X*'s technical aspects are as complex as its politics. The past is filmed in black-and-white while the present is seen in color. The problem here is that the black-and-white past has a patina of nostalgia, the images are richer and thus more attractive. This gives still further importance to the black-and-white skinhead Derek – strong, powerful, impressive – in preference to the color-filmed Derek – deferential, small and relatively weak while good hearted. While watching a color episode, we wait for the black-and-white to come back, more impressive, more powerful.



This is further complicated by the fact that the film revels in the very violence it condemns. Director/cinematographer Kaye's razzle-dazzle technique gives the violence a fever pitch, an animal magnetism. By investing such episodes as the unbelievably brutal murder of one of the blacks or the destruction of a Korean grocery store with such care and energy, we get unconscious and unintended messages about the attraction of violence and an insidiously mixed message about the destructive forces of racism.

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