MALCOLM X [1992]

by

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We follow Malcolm X (Denzel Washington) through four phases of his life. First, he is a pleasure-seeking, swing-dancing youth in Boston. Then he comes to Harlem, where he gets involved with gangsters and his criminal career concludes with prison. Inside, he meets Baines (Albert Hall) who converts him to Elijah Muhammad's (Al Freeman, Jr.) version of Islam and Black Nationalism. On his release from prison, he becomes a successful disciple of Elijah and an important leader in the church. Because of the jealousy of others, he is ejected from the church. He retracts many of Elijah's more violent tenets which he has espoused till now and forms his own Black Nationalist movement. His former friends, fearing his growing power, assassinate him.

It is by design that my plot summary is less detailed than usual. I want to avoid what most of the other writers have done, that is, talk about Malcolm X the man rather than *Malcolm X* the film. What I have seen addressed are questions like: Was Malcolm a racist? Was he sexist? Was he an anti-Semite? and so on. Others have written about Spike Lee: Is he racist? Is he sexist? Is he an anti-Semite? and so on. Perhaps because of the potentially explosive issues the film addresses and the risk of alienating the audiences of large commercial ventures like newspapers or magazines, it is safer to talk about personalities. Surprisingly few writers have said anything about *Malcolm X* the film and how it differs from other films that treat similar topics. That is what I want to address here.

Biographical films are typically valorizing. They also seem to need a touch of tragedy or madness. Perhaps this is why we have so many films about Abraham Lincoln and so few about George Washington. Perhaps this is also why we have a film about Malcolm X and not about Thurgood Marshall, a man equally deserving of valorization. However, his story would not make good film: man grows up, becomes brilliant laywer, become brilliant judge, raises his family and dies.

In recent months we have had several films that have displayed the warts of their subject in full view and then ended by rescuing the subject for our admiration: *Chaplin* [1992], *Hoffa* [1992], and *Malcolm X*. Last year, we had *Bugsey* [1991]. Biographical films come in spurts; perhaps the country has a need to valorize its tarnished heroes periodically in order to feel good about itself once again. Perhaps our current crop coincides with George Bush's attempts to self-valorize as his exit performance. Whatever the broader implications of *Malcolm X*, it is obvious that its immediate address is to the African American community. The length of the film is necessary – to make a big hero requires a big film in the tradition of *Lawrence of Arabia* [1962]. The physical process of

sitting through this mammoth film, which moves slowly but is never boring, is important to the story telling process. The film is an obvious attempt – and probably a very successful one – at myth making.

Director Spike Lee has managed to solve several problems that previous films of this type – biographical and/or revolutionary – have not. (He plays lots of clever tricks, like giving each phase of Malcolm's life an appropriate color scheme, but here I'm talking about something much bigger.) Whether one likes *Malcolm X* or not, whether one agrees with what *Malcolm X* is saying or not, Lee's accomplishment remains a fact which has to be dealt with. Not being a historian, I don't feel terribly comfortable trying to figure out the significance and implications of Spike Lee's tinkering with history. For instance, Lee substitutes the outsider, Baines, for what was historically Malcolm's own brother. I can see that the change relieves pressure of threat to the integrity of the family unit, something that is, apparently, very important to Lee since he puts so much stress on it. This type of analysis is best left, I feel, to historians. However, what we can deal with here is Spike Lee's structural inventions and how they contribute to the reading of the film.

One of the major problems with films from the political Left – and I use this term very loosely to describe all films that speak against the establishment and conservative ideologies – is that most films from the Left are simply not seen. And there is a very good reason for this: all too often, they aren't very interesting. They tend to be either preachy or boring. While claiming to speak to the American masses, these films rarely do so. After a week of working in, what many of these films claim to be boring, tedious, and unrewarding jobs, the last thing a worker wants is to watch some intellectual lecture claiming to be entertainment. They want to be amused, diverted, and for very good reasons. This desire to be entertained, of course, is nothing new. For thousands of years, the primary purpose of storytelling was to entertain – it was only a secondary purpose to preach or propagandize (depending on whether you agree or disagree with the messages). People typically want, and deserve, a few hours of relief and escape from their lives. They want to have some fun on a Saturday night. They don't want to be reminded of the structural constraints their society imposes on them. They leave the preaching for Sunday morning, where the church of their choice typically reinforces the white, male, middle-class ethic in which they are trapped. They don't want preaching from their movies. But, unfortunately, films from the Left haven't gotten this message . . . yet.

In the past, the majority of the films from the Left have taken two forms: documentaries and radical texts. Documentaries are typically rejected by the public because they are too close to reality and, for the most part, lack any entertainment value. Most theaters won't book them because they are bound to be what Hollywood calls duds. They are relegated to PBS and thus are assured an audience of mostly white, upper-middle class viewers who already agree with the viewpoint being expressed but who are willing to do very little about it but agonize – usually by watching more documentaries on PBS.

The radical text films are a more complex story. Most film makers not in the Hollywood mainstream seem to need a "theoretical foundation" from which to work (Hollywood "just" likes to tell stories). Perhaps they are so fearful of being entrapped by mainstream storytelling that they need to substitute some other, equally rigid structure for the Hollywood one. Being university educated, they mostly turn to the university structure for their theoretical foundation. (This disqualifies them out of hand if they believe academic structures are any less ossified than Hollywood.)

Typical of the theoreticians they have gathered around is Louis Althusser and his disciples. The ways his theories have been adopted by film makers and critics from the Left result in a distrust of the text of a film and thereby a rejection of the central figure – the hero – about whom the narrative is structured. They also reject closure – the conclusion that returns the viewer to some previous state and makes him or her comfortable about leaving the theater. Rather than criticizing the political ideology of the individual as hero, they reject it. Since most people are unused to watching this type of story structure, they quite understandably reject these films and stay away in droves.

Another interesting aspect of this theoretical foundation for film making is that it is very, very safe. The only people who will ever see these films are other academics. Since the film makers and the critical structure that supports them are primarily housed in the academic world, usually in the English or Film Departments, they are perfectly safe from any contaminating contact with the reality of the typical American. In my area, Los Angeles, the three centers of Marxist film theory today are the Universities of California at San Diego and Irvine and the California Institute of the Arts. The astronomical tuition in these institutions assures that only the upper-middle and upper class, mostly white, can attend. And the resident film theoreticians and their film making students typically go on making films that are seen only at in-house film festivals.

Let's compare two films, one independent film from the Left and one typically conservative Hollywood film, that treat the same subject: *The Big Chill* [1983] and *Return of the Secaucus 7* [1980]. In the latter film, we watch a group of ex-activists from the lost golden era of the sixties get together for conversation, games, fighting, and lovemaking; but in the end, not much happens to them. The film rejects heroism by having no central character. The film making technique is so discontinuous that the lives of the characters seem directionless. *The Big Chill*, by contrast, shows a similar group growing out of their past "errors" and into a self-interested, upwardly mobile outlook on life. The film is dynamic and exciting; it invites us to get involved with the characters, especially the hero who sets everyone else right and brings them back to life. I'm sure you will not be surprised to learn that *Chill* was far more popular with movie-going audiences than *Seven*.

Despite what the theoreticians of the Left would want us to think, Hollywood is not monolithic. It does address issues of concern to the Left, but perhaps not in the way the Left would like. On the other hand, thousands upon thousands more people see these "popular" films than the obscure art films from independent film makers. Thus, while the messages may not be as strong or as radical, they probably have a far greater educating

effect on the American public. A good example is *The China Syndrome* [1979]. While the text centers around a single individual and thus deals with (in this case "her") ego, and it offers a satisfying if obviously false (if one reads the newspapers) closure, it probably educated more people about the corruption of the nuclear power industry and the dangers of nuclear power than any dozen documentaries on PBS.

Another interesting film that had revolutionary overtones *and* defied the typical Hollywood story telling structure was Warren Beatty's *Reds* [1981]. It retains the typical Hollywood device of a romance between an attractive man and woman, positioning the man as the hero of the film. But it also undercuts tradition by inserting "documentary" interviews that comment on and deepen our understanding of what is going on in the plotline. The combination of romance/hero and documentary modes gives greater believability to the film and thereby better educates the public about two American revolutionary figures, John Reed and Louise Bryant, and helps us see the Russian Revolution from a radically different point of view than that commonly accepted by the establishment.

Now, along comes Spike Lee and *Malcolm X*. His timing is good. While the country as a whole swung to the Right during the 1980s, major portions of the Hollywood establishment swung the opposite way. By the late 80s, there was fertile, if limited, ground in Hollywood for a radical assault by independent film makers. Lee successfully accomplished this with *She's Got to Have It* [1986].

Of Lee's contemporaries, mostly "outsiders," some have "sold out" and become part of the Hollywood establishment, but others have found a way to make what appear to be Hollywood films, but have added their own touch that allows them to actually undermine many of Hollywood's most sacred tenets. One way to do this is to alter the basic structure of the story telling process as does *Malcolm X*.

The feeling I get from this film reminds me very much of a young, 14-year-old friend who was going through an adolescent stage of expressing anger and hostility in a thinly disguised form. He would make insulting statements and immediately retract them, claiming they were only jokes. "You really look bad today . . . just kidding." This has become so common that teenagers, I'm told, simply say or write the initials, "J.K."

In many ways *Malcolm X* is a J.K. film! In terms of the political rhetoric the film presents, we have essentially two Malcolms: the first under the influence of Elijah Muhammad, and the other Malcolm after his break from that organization. The first Malcolm says some pretty nasty things, things obviously intended to recognize the festering hate in much of the African American community and at the same time inflame the whites watching the film.

If these were the only things said in the film, it would be condemned and would not gather a large audience either white or, I suspect, Black. However, the political day is saved by using the device of having Malcolm retract all these things after his break with the Muslim Nation. It's like the "just kidding" part of the adolescent expression of anger.

This is a brilliant structural device for it allows Lee to have his proverbial cake and eat it too. By putting the radical statements in young Malcolm's mouth and the olive branch in an older Malcolm's hand, Spike Lee has very cleverly gotten his point across without the need to defend it; he has made his views known without having to face the consequences. This anger, put forth so brutally and retracted so meekly, pervades the film.

If you have any doubts, look at the key scene that so clearly unlocks the film's attitude: the "lemon pie" scene. The young Malcolm is working as a waiter on a train. To retain his job and his income, he must sacrifice his dignity and play the role the white man expects of him. When a customer asks for a piece of pie, we see Malcolm smash the pie into his face – not once, but twice. We then see him politely serve the pie to the man, and we realize that the pie-in-the-face was his fantasy (i.e., just kidding!), a desire unacted upon. This scene, I believe, summarizes the whole film's attitude: the desire to push angry and radical rhetoric in the face of the viewer, but knowing the real world (of Hollywood film making especially), the impulse cannot be acted upon openly.

In this way, the messages to the African American community are many and mixed. The messages against the use of drugs are pretty obvious: everyone that Malcolm knew who didn't get off drugs wound up either dead, or worse. But other messages are more complex, especially those regarding the role of men in the family. For instance, Malcolm is absent from his family because he must work. Is the absent father being justified? But later Malcolm feels guilty about his absences and resolves to be with his family more. However, the end of the film, after his assassination, poses the biggest problem. He is absent from the family permanently; the permanently absent father is the experience of many families today, but most often not for the same reasons. Is the film then hinting that the absent father is not absent because of irresponsibility – as the white majority culture seems to imply so incessantly – but for other reasons, typically economic, and he is really being martyred by the dominant, white-controlled economic conditions?

While I can never put myself in the place of the African American audience watching this film, I use the following fantasy as an attempt. Imagine that America lost the Revolutionary War and has been under the boot of George III and his tyrannical heirs ever since. Cries of taxation without representation, equal access to material wealth, reduction of the disparities of privilege, elimination of indentured servitude, and debtor's prisons have all gone unanswered for centuries. Still chafing under the yolk of a foreign domination that humiliated and executed George Washington, we need a hero to respect, to fantasize about, to help us restructure our personal lives, to become a focal point for the beginnings of both internal (psychological) and external (political and social) reorganization. This is what Spike Lee has attempted with *Malcolm X*. Whether he has succeeded with this risky and potentially dangerous film, and whether that success will breed more hate or will heal, remains to be seen.

Malcolm X - Written and directed by Spike Lee, Screenplay by Arnold Peel and Spike Lee from a book by Alex Haley, Production Design by Wynn Thomas. Distributed by Warner Bros., 1992.