

Academic Film Review:

Malcolm X

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In 1992 “Malcolm X” became Spike Lee’s sixth movie. Based on the 1965 autobiography co-written by Malcolm and Roots creator Alex Haley, it is 3 hours and 21-minute blockbuster featuring charismatic, execution by Denzel Washington. The film “Malcolm X” travels through time and spans the continent as it takes the viewers to Nebraska, Boston, and New York. It then takes the audience from jail cells to inside the discipline of the Black Muslims. In Months before the movie "Malcolm X" released in theaters, Director Spike Lee, actor Denzel Washington, and Malcolm X's widow, said that they hoped that the feature film would be more than just a commercial success. They considered both the enduring difficulty of telling black stories in Hollywood and the inherent complexities of reenacting the life of such a figure whom many white Americans consider a divisive person. However, they were hopeful that it would change misimpressions of Malcolm X that initially halted movie production in Hollywood and created an arduous path to the big screen.

The idea of depicting Malcolm X in film started in 1968. Worth approved a screenplay from writer James Baldwin, who later teamed up with Arnold Perl, a screenwriter. However, the movie was tapped to be an expensive undertaking; so, although Perl wrote another script because of misconceptions of Malcolm X, Hollywood did not think of this as a movie that would be a box office success. Perl died, and Baldwin adapted the screenplay from the 1972 book "One Day When I Was Lost."¹ As the years went on people's roles and involvement changed, and the idea of Norman Jewison as the director of the film came up. Despite this notion, the idea of a white man directing a film about Malcolm X became a big deal, not only in Hollywood but also in the black community. Many people did not believe that Jewison interpretation of an African

¹ Gates, "Just Whose 'Malcolm' Is It, Anyway?" The New York Times, May 30, 1992, accessed October 08, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/31/movies/film-just-whose-malcolm-is-it-anyway.html?pagewanted=all>.

American figure such as Malcolm X would be characterized appropriately by a white man. Because of the backlash surrounding the possibility of a white director, Warner Brothers decided to finance the film with Spike Lee as the director.

Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" honors an evolution the of life that started in anguish, and hit rock bottom on the streets and in prison, before Malcolm Little evolved into Malcolm X. Born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, Malcolm X later emerged as a prominent historical and religious figure throughout one of the most pivotal times in African American history in the United States of America.² The movie begins with the opening credits and a rally in the background. 40 Acres and a Mule Productions is displayed across the screen, followed by the American flag burning into the shape of the letter X. As the chanting and the rally continue, the audience hears the voice of Denzel Washington, who is portraying Malcolm X, speaking as video footage from the 1991 Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police officers' flashes across the screen. The picture that Lee painted in the opening scene is the imagery that he is known for in many of his movies, such as "Do the Right Thing." Lee is known for cinematography that is abstract but also touches on multiple hot-button issues without making the issues the central theme of the movie.³ As such, Spike Lee's adaptation of "Malcolm X" addresses the subject of race, just as the autobiography does.

After the film's opening narrative begins, it jumps back to World War II-era Boston; in the neighborhood of Roxbury. Stores such as the Woolworth Company are in this scene. Woolworth was a retail company opened in the 1800's and was the pioneer of the five and dime

² Malcolm X, Alex Haley, and M. S. Handler, *The autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York (N.Y.): Grove Press, 1965).

³ "Spike Lee," *Biography.com*, February 22, 2016, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://www.biography.com/people/spike-lee-9377207>.

stores.⁴ Malcolm's friend, "Shorty," and Malcolm are in a local barbershop, and "Shorty" is straightening Little's hair to emulate hairstyles worn by Caucasian men during that time. Keeping in tempo with the era the character "Shorty" and Malcolm Little go to the nightclub with their zoot suits on. Zoot suits were men suits that were common in the 1940's; they were exaggerated in style and included high waist trousers.⁵ At the nightclub, Malcolm dances with an African American lady but chooses a Caucasian woman at the end of the night. The director uses illustrations such as this to point out how Malcolm desires to fit into society.

Following this scene, there is another flashback of an event that happened with his mother and the Ku Klux Klan concerning his father, Earl Little. The movie depicts Malcolm's mother confronted by the Ku Klux Klansmen when they surrounded the family's house in Nebraska looking for Malcolm's father. Although it was said to be a racial conflict between Malcolm X father and the KKK, according to an interview Malcolm's mother gave to one of the original writers, Perry, that specific incident may have never taken place. While both the autobiography and the movie describe Earl Little as a political militant who was martyred by white racists, research reveals that Malcolm X father was a Baptist minister born in Georgia, and he and his wife Louise were members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Earl Little served as the president of the Omaha Nebraska U.N.I.A. Division at one point. If the movie depicted Earl Little accurately, this could explain his involvement with racial conflict in his area. Earl Little died in 1931, and in the movie speculation and mystery

4 Lauren Weber, *In Cheap We Trust* (Stamford, CT: JHSLFC, 2010).

5 Bob Batchelor, *American pop: popular culture decade by decade* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009).

surrounding his death. His wife was said to have been admitted into a mental institution, while their eight kids went to foster homes.⁶

As the scene changes, Malcolm is working as a server on a train, listening to a man that they called the “Brown Boomer” win a fight. Joe Louis was an African American professional boxer who held the world heavyweight championship from 1937 to 1949, with the nickname of the “Brown Boomer.”⁷ Malcolm travels to Harlem where the celebration of Louis’ win is taking place, dressed in his zoot suit; however, zoot suits are not in style in Harlem, and the audience can feel the character's embarrassment and anger as he realizes that he does not fit in. The movie then turns its attention on Malcolm's life of crime as a drug user, womanizer and numbers runner after meeting a West Indian man named Archie. Little is soon run out of town, and Malcolm returns to Boston. His life of crime seems to have escalated when he arrived back in Boston; where Malcolm, "Shorty" and their girlfriends began to commit robberies which landed Malcolm and Shorty in Jail. On February of 1946 Malcolm Little was sentenced to jail, and although the film does not give details of his age, research suggests that it is possible that he was around the age of 20. Malcolm would not be eligible for parole until May 29, 1951. When May 29, 1951, rolled around he was denied parole at that time possible because it was not Malcolm's first arrest. According to the FBI, his first arrest happened on November 30, 1944, for larceny in Roxbury and for carrying firearms in Roxbury on January 15, 1946, which the film left out.⁸

6 PBS, People & Events: Earl and Louise Little, last modified 2000. Accessed July 1, 2016, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/garvey/peopleevents/p_little.html

7 "Joe Louis," Biography.com, April 28, 2017, accessed October 15, 2017, <https://www.biography.com/people/joe-louis-9386989>.

8 FBI “Malcolm Little.” FBI Records: Malcolm Little. Accessed October 1, 2017. <https://vault.fbi.gov/malcolm-little- malcolm-x/malcolm- little-malcolm- x-hq- file-01-of-27/view>.

While in jail Malcolm met Baines a member of the Nation of Islam and became a Muslim, and this is where the movie gets interesting. After serving more than six years, in 1952 Malcolm was released from prison and went to meet with Elijah Muhammad and continued with the Nation of Islam sector. It is there that X met and married a Muslim nurse named Betty Shabazz, played by Angela Bassett. The director illustrates the authority and popularity that Malcolm X has gained as a rising leader in multiple ways. One of the ways which the audience experiences the authority of the character is at some point X's need for a security team as he sat in restaurants and walked down the streets. In addition to that, there is a scene where X peacefully spearheads a march on a Harlem police station and hospital after an African American man, which the movie called brother Johnson, was injured by police. The success of the march assists in advancing X to the position of Islam's national spokesperson. Malcolm's influence continues to grow, and people within The Nation of Islam began to become jealous, and upset. On November 22, 1963, after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm spoke to the public, and The Nation of Islam suspended him because they did not appreciate what he said.⁹

During Malcolm's suspension, he went on his Hajj; the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims are expected to make at least once during their lifetime. He lands in the Mecca and travels to Egypt by camels, roughly 800 miles.¹⁰ Throughout his spiritual awakening, Malcolm recognizes that all ethnic groups should be able to live together in peace, unlike lies that he had been taught early on in his faith by The Nation of Islam. Malcolm had been teaching African Americans that they should hate the "white man." X realized upon returning from his pilgrimage that his teachings must change. He created a new Islamic organization; The Organization for

⁹ Norman Rosenberg, *Liberty, equality, power: a history of the American people* (Australia: Wadsworth, 2015).

¹⁰ "Hajj for Kids," *Multicultural Kid Blogs*, , accessed October 10, 2017, <http://multiculturalkidblogs.com/hajj-for-kids/>.

African-American Unity. The OAAU spread the message of love and acceptance rooted in the Qur'an, but the changes that Malcolm X wanted to make made the Nation of Islam feel as though they had lost Malcolm to his own ideas. Near the end of the film members of the Nation of Islam prepared to act against Malcolm, which leads to several death threats towards him and his family. The film gives strong implications that attacks and threats on his life came from the Nation of Islam, but it also offered another source of threats as well. While on Malcolm's trip to Mecca and Africa surveillance equipment was placed in his hotel rooms, so the film hints that white operatives or government officials may have been involved in Malcolm X's death as well. Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965, and the only man that admitted to his involvement in the death of Malcolm X, Thomas Hagan, has never named anyone else or stated that any group hired him to be involved in X's death.¹¹ Therefore, both theories presented by the movie have never been proven.

Many questioned the filmmakers' duty to the historical record because of some of the creative liberties that Lee took in many scenes, and because there were places that the autobiography has different accounts of the events than the movie. For example, the scene mentioned prior with his mother and the KKK. Also in one scene in the film, Malcolm watched the race riots in Selma, Alabama and the Newark, New Jersey Riots. Bloody Sunday is the name that the Selma Alabama riots received which actually occurred on Sunday, March 7, 1965. There was a scheduled protest of six hundred marchers who planned to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge but was stopped by police and violently beaten. In 1967 the Newark Riots happened between July 12th and July 17th.¹² Both events took place after Malcolm X's assassination.

11 Wayne Drash, "Malcolm X killer freed after 44 years," CNN, April 28, 2010, , accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/04/26/malcolmx.killer/index.html>.

12 Charles Andrew Gallagher and Cameron D. Lippard, *Race and racism in the United States: an encyclopedia of the American mosaic* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, 2014).

The mixing of fact and fiction, especially in the setting of describing original events of the present time, was used by Lee just as it had been in similar movies created in that decade. "Malcolm X" came in the wake of such classic stories such as Richard Attenborough's "Gandhi," Alan Parker's "Mississippi Burning," and Oliver Stone's "J.F.K.." Like those directors, Spike Lee used the elements of history selectively to create a specific story and shunned events that were at odds with the character that he wanted to depict in the film. Spike Lee possibly omitted some things and highlighted others because of his political views and his responsibility to feature issues that affected the culture of the black community at the time of filming. The scenes that were focal points, the music was chosen for the soundtrack, as well as the lighting, were all used to draw the audience in that much more, and convey the subtlest messages without using words. During the flashback scenes concerning Malcolm and his family, the shots were softer shades, giving a more mature look to the scene. The scenes of Malcolm as a younger man in Chicago had camera angles that were wide and allowed the audience to view the scene all at once, which made the scene more vibrant and exciting. Music lures the audience in, allowing them to journey with the characters at the low and highs of their specific emotions. The film uses various music from classic 20s music to hip-hop from the 90s to set the tone of the scenes. Spike Lee, was quoted as saying of the "Malcolm X" soundtrack, "We have attempted to re-create that music, that sound - the distinct sound of the African-American experience." Then he added, "The songs gathered here, from Big Joe Turner's "Roll 'Em Pete" to Arrested Development's rap anthem, "Revolution", all in some way reflect what it means to live, breathe, die and love, as the descendants of slaves."¹³

13 LLC Revolvly, ""Malcolm X (soundtrack)" on Revolvly.com," Revolvly, accessed October 15, 2017, <https://www.revolvly.com/main/index.php?s=Malcolm X %28soundtrack%29>.

Many scenes help to show the culture of the black communities, the struggle to acquire decent living conditions for their families. Moreover, the effect of slavery, racism, and segregation on the black communities but also the effect that it has had on the black community's minds. The filmmaker used a few opening scenes to highlight this. One scene is that of him and his friend "Shorty" getting their hair straightened to imitate a Caucasian man's hair. Another scene is Malcolm Little choosing the white lady instead of the black lady in the nightclub. In these scenes, they depict a black man trying desperately to fit into a culture as if what they have isn't good enough. Finally, with the scene going from Boston to Harlem where Malcolm Little's outfit is outdated, it reveals that although he has tried, he does not fit in. One could surmise that the writer was pointing out the parallel of African Americans and their relationship with America. The fact that many African Americans as a people have tried desperately to fit into a system that was not created for Black Americans, and it makes it difficult for one to find exactly how and where they fit in; especially in a time where many did not see them as equals. This is a theme emphasized in both in the autobiography and film.

What is seen in Spike Lee's Malcolm X is a break from the traditional cinema of its time which was a film of some historical facts, biography and political commentary with the intention of cultivating social consciousness. Spike Lee did what many directors would not have been bold enough to do. He pushed boundaries and dared to produce controversy and shock the audience. The film is a must see! The picture that Spike Lee paints of Malcolm X is that of a courageous leader, one who was oppressed by a system but made different choices in his life to become better. The movie Malcolm X is proof that people are not what happened to them in their childhood and they are not the mistakes of their past. This film is one of the reasons that there was a renewal of interest in Malcolm X in the early 1990s, particularly within the Hip-hop

community. In 1992 the book sales of the Malcolm X autobiography went up by 300 percent, and hip-hop groups such as Public Enemy embraced Malcolm X as an icon and a symbol of hope in the black community. His image was displayed in hundreds of thousands of homes, offices, and schools, as well as on T-shirts and jackets.¹⁴ Additionally, this film won an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Motion Picture in 1994. Denzel Washington and other actors also received awards for their performances in this film, and it solidified Lee as a director.

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¹⁴ William W. Sales, *From civil rights to Black liberation: Malcolm X and the Organization of Afro-American Unity* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994).

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