

Challenges & Compromises in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

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□—This study looks at Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* as an important text in understanding Afrocentric perspectives that challenge the ideological stereotypes of mainstream Hollywood film. *Malcolm X* intervenes between Lee, the filmmaker, and the powerful media industry and is emblematic of the larger discussion of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic views in media culture. This film is not only an interesting case study but a significant part of an ongoing cultural discourse that is as relevant now as when *Malcolm X* lived. The relevance of this essay lies in its contribution to the discussion of media perspectives with a focus on furthering media literacy. It aids the viewer in understanding the social discourse surrounding a mediated racist ideology and the ongoing cultural work of social equality in the United States. This research finds that in the continuing struggle over media representation, Lee's film is an instrument of media politics, controversy, and commercialization.

SINCE the media are sites of struggle over power and meaning in our culture, media communication research is often concerned with racial representations in film and television (Hall, 1980). Gray (1989) argues that the "constant quest for legitimacy and the need to quell and displace fears at the same time as it calls them forth are part of the complex ideological work that takes place in [media] representations of race" (p. 378). This essay elucidates issues and conflicts involved with struggling media perspectives by examin-

ing director Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), a text that has been both hailed as offering a black perspective counter to the racist portrayals of African Americans in film and criticized for being too conventional and commercial (Bogle, 1996; Boyd, 1994; Dyson, 1995; Ebert, 1992; hooks, 1996). *Malcolm X* presents a view of African Americans that diverges from and challenges the racist views that have been a foundation of cinema from the earliest days of filmmaking (Bogle, 1996; Diawara, 1988; Hall, 1981; Rhodes, 1993). "This struggle," states Rhodes (1993), "between the transmission of racist ideology and dogma, and the efforts of oppressed groups to claim control over their own image, is part of the legacy of the American mass media" (p. 185). The relevance of this research lies in its contribution to the discussion of media perspectives with a focus on furthering media literacy. It

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aids the viewer in understanding the social discourse surrounding a mediated racist ideology and the ongoing cultural work of social equality in the United States. In the battle over media portrayals, *Malcolm X* is an instrument of media politics, controversy and commercialization.

Furthermore, Condit and Lucaites (1993) point out that in the 1980s the leadership of the struggle to define “the American dream of equality” was joined by “public intellectuals, including scholars and filmmakers” (p. 180). Lee’s *Malcolm X*, although not appearing until 1992, is an interesting part of this struggle. Lee presents a cinematic version of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, framing it between a prologue and epilogue that situates the life story within the current struggle for equality in the United States and the broader international struggle.

In discussing media representations, the polysemic nature of texts allows for wide ranging readings (Hall, 1980), and this essay does not suggest that its views are the only interpretations of the film. However, Kellner (1995) argues, “there are limits to the openness . . . of any text . . . and textual analysis can explicate the parameters of possible readings” (p. 11). Therefore, there are preferred readings that are useful in discussing *Malcolm X* in terms of the struggle over media representations.

Specifically, *Malcolm X* can demonstrate three aspects of the struggle over representations in the media. First, it characterizes how Lee struggled with his distributor, Warner Bros., to make *Malcolm X* and was forced to borrow money from prominent African Americans in order to finish the film. Secondly, Lee’s presentation of African American characters is, in general, divergent from traditionally racist por-

trayals. Finally, Lee’s film was ultimately released within the mainstream Hollywood establishment and was not as radical, controversial, or challenging to that system as some critics would have preferred (Bogle, 1996; Dyson, 1995; hooks, 1996). This essay does not judge whether *Malcolm X* is controversial enough but, instead, shows how *Malcolm X* is an exemplary cultural artifact that illuminates the struggle over representation in the media.

Hall (1981) explains that “the media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated” (p. 35). Lee’s *Malcolm X* communicates his perspective, one that he considers strongly informed by black cultural politics. The questions of ethnic/racial, gendered and class based views of the world are significant inquiries, and there are, at any one time, many views struggling for attention. However, looking at the media and critically arguing that specific views are both presented and challenged simultaneously is possible. *Malcolm X* is one such site of struggle.

Lee and Warner Bros.

Kellner (1995) suggests the views presented in entertainment programs are often the result of the organizational structure of the media. Hollywood filmmaking, as popular culture, can be the site of struggle between the views of the filmmakers and the demands of the film industry. The plight of the filmmaker’s fight against a system that cares little for an auteurist vision and too much for the profitability of a product is the stuff of countless Hollywood legends and is an issue with which artistic creators struggle in nearly every form

of popular art. However, the filmmaker is only one part of the film industry organization. This system controls the production, distribution, and exhibition of a film; many people and interests must be brought together to make a Hollywood film. In short, the creative conflict inherent to filmmaking should not be simplified to a lone visionary versus a profit-driven conglomerate. The system needs the filmmaker's creative product in order to exist, and the filmmaker, in most cases, needs the system for financing and distribution.

Filmmaking as a collaborative effort requires the combined talents and resources of producers, writers, directors, talent, a host of technical crew members, and other personnel. This creative side of cinema is itself only one part of the organization. Other industry representatives are needed for a film to receive the funding, advertising, and distribution that it requires to be completed and exhibited.

Movies are distributed by major distribution companies. Many of these organizations are the remnants of the major studios of Hollywood's Golden Age of filmmaking (e.g., MGM, Paramount, and Warner Bros.). However, with changes in corporate ownership, it makes more sense to refer to these distributors as parts of large conglomerates. Understandably, the distribution company is crucial to the overall financial success of the film and, therefore, has substantial influence on the making and release of the film. Thus, the filmmaker is often financially dependent on the distributor. Sharkey (1989) sees this creator/organizational relationship as precarious, "the alliance between filmmaker and film-marketer is uneasy and often a source of conflict under the best of circumstances. But

when the film is perceived as a black film, the unease can become gut-wrenching angst" (p. 25) as race and ethnicity make the relationship even more problematic.

From this vantage point, the relationship between Lee and his distributor, Warner Bros., part of Time-Warner Inc., bears investigation. Lee struggled with Warner Bros. for the necessary budget to make the film as he envisioned. However, Warner Bros. was never receptive to Lee's vision. Lee, quoted in Wiley (1992), explains:

Warner Bros. and I never saw eye to eye on the scope of this film. They don't know who Malcolm X is. The film ends with Nelson Mandela in Soweto, and they're like, "What does Nelson Mandela have to do with Malcolm X?" (p. 96)

Warner Bros. disagreed with Lee concerning the content and length of the film. Lee wanted additional funds to finish the film as he had planned. As Lee fought with executives at Warner Bros. the Los Angeles riots broke out, an event that seemed to highlight the importance of Lee's vision for his film as part of a public discourse on equality. Wiley (1992) explains:

On Thursday, April 30, [1992] as sections of [Los Angeles] burned across national television, Spike Lee screened *Malcolm X* again at the Warner's lot, telling those assembled in the screening room, "this movie is needed now more than ever." (p. 128)

Lee believed that his film would make an important contribution to the ongoing discourse concerning equality for African Americans.

Yet, Lee was unable to convince Warner Bros. to supply the additional funding. Lee believed he needed the money to make his film a testament to the life of Malcolm X. Ultimately, Lee

had to go outside of his financial relationship with Warner Bros. to gain the extra funding. Prominent African Americans gave Lee the money to finish the film, thus providing the funds that allowed Lee to finish the film according to his vision. Lee's film had been denounced by Warner Bros. but championed by renowned African Americans. Therefore, Lee's movie entered the public discourse concerning equality in the United States and the media's representation of African Americans as he had designed.

Fear of a Black Perspective?

The concept of ideological hegemony suggests reasons for a dominant system of meanings and values which might be challenged by an African American perspective radically different from a more traditional media view (Gitlin, 1980; Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1981; 1982; Lears, 1983; Rapping, 1987; Stabile, 1995). In other words, ideological hegemony helps us understand how racial representations are made and naturalized through the symbolic process of communication (Carey, 1989; Gray, 1989; Hall, 1982). However, suggesting that the media, as a unified body, act to promote or suppress particular views is naive. The struggle is ongoing. Not all films made by all African Americans represent a unified or wholly agreed upon view. Likewise, arguing that any one film could have enough impact to become a serious threat to mainstream representations is equally naive. As Lears (1983) explains:

cultural hegemony is not maintained mechanically or conspiratorially. A dominant culture is not a static "superstructure" but a continual process. The boundaries of common-sense "reality" are constantly shifting

as the social structure changes shape . . . this cultural "progress" is messy business, generating social and psychological conflicts that remain unresolved. (p. 5)

However, Lee's *Malcolm X* did make an impression and impacted the discourse on equality and representation (Boyd, 1994). Ross (1990) argues that Lee is "the first black American filmmaker to define the structure and content of a Hollywood-financed film entirely on his own terms" (p. 29). Thus, Lee's films have received enough attention from the public and critics to suggest that they are in the forefront of the debate.

This attention suggests the importance of Lee's *oeuvre* in general and *Malcolm X* in particular. Another indicator of its importance is its contribution to a renewed interest in Malcolm X and his message, what McCarty (1992) calls the "X" phenomenon. The "X" phenomenon speaks to the popularity of clothing bearing Malcolm X's image, messages (particularly his "by whatever means necessary" stance) and the now iconic "X." Similarly, his life and message are the topics of classes and debates as well as the biographical subject of documentaries and scholarly works. Bogle (1996) explains that following Lee's film "a renewed interest in Malcolm X swept through the black community and elevated him to the status of *mass* political/cultural icon" (p. 351). Therefore, using *Malcolm X* as an exemplary text in this discussion is justified.

Racist stereotypes of African Americans in movies ranges from the beginnings of cinema in films such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), *The Confederate Spy* (1910), *For Massa's Sake* (1911), *The Birth of A Nation* (1915), through the sound era in films such as *The Ghost Talks* (1929), *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934), *Gone*

With the Wind (1939), and has continued into the contemporary era with controversial films such as *The Color Purple* (1985) and 1988's *Mississippi Burning* (Bogle, 1996; Bobo, 1988; Brinson, 1995; Hall, 1981). Indeed Hall (1981) argues that the "traces" of the media's historic negative stereotypes of African Americans still exist (p. 41). West (1994) points out that Malcolm X believed that African Americans "must no longer view themselves through white lenses" (p. 137). Malcolm X wanted African Americans to reject the white stereotypes and to concentrate instead on a positive view of themselves. Malcolm X feared that as long as African Americans viewed themselves through a white American perspective they would be unable to achieve their goals of equality.

Public figures and intellectuals have remarked upon the importance of Lee's perspective. Van Peebles (1991), an African American filmmaker celebrated the release of Spike Lee's fifth feature film, *Jungle Fever*, because he had been:

grieving over us African Americans in the entertainment/communication media (especially filmmaking wise) [for] not having any significant say in the way we were being portrayed, and not being able to project OUR OWN images ourselves, OUR OWN interpretations of reality. (A crucial link in maintaining our heritage, and a key element to our present and future survival as a People). (p. 6)

Rhodes (1993) explains the legacy of the media is a "struggle between the transmission of racist ideology and dogma, and the efforts of oppressed groups to claim control over their own image" (p. 185). From this historical perspective, the racist patterns of the past replicate themselves through each generation of media producers. Rhodes (1993) concludes, "today, the cultural

products of African Americans . . . are routinely appropriated and commodified . . . while the originators struggle for an autonomous voice" (p. 189). Therefore, contemporary Hollywood films continue to both perpetuate racist stereotypes and to appropriate the work and talent of African Americans without providing a means for black Americans to represent themselves.

Lee is concerned about the portrayal of African Americans in film. Ebert (1992) explains, "Spike Lee is not only one of the best directors in America, but one of the most important, because he addresses the central subject of race. He doesn't use sentimentality or political clichés, but shows how his characters live and why" (p. 10). Lee feels there is an urgent demand—"there is a desperate need in the market place for black product. Black people are dying to see themselves portrayed realistically. Nobody is doing that type of film" (Lee quoted in Sharkey, 1989, p. 25). Tate (1989) echoes that sentiment: "to a whole lot of black folk Spike is . . . a cause celebre . . . the only filmmaker with access to the Hollywood distribution system who puts real African American people on screen" (p. 80). Furthermore, Lee does not avoid controversial material in his films and often incorporates other black voices that also speak to racial inequality. Rodman (1994) gives one example from popular music:

"Fight the Power" is nothing less than a call to arms, made by the most outspoken and militant rap group in contemporary popular music, against the ideas, institutions, and practices that maintain the political, social, economic, and cultural inequalities between whites and Blacks in the [United States] today. The song served as the centerpiece of *Do The Right Thing* (1989), Spike Lee's critically acclaimed film depicting twenty-four hours of racial tension in a

predominantly Black Brooklyn neighborhood. (p. 468)

Zook (1992) explains that “rap . . . forms part of a larger conduit of culturally specific . . . intercommunication among blacks. It is ‘cross-medial’ in the sense that the various media such as television, music, film, and video speak to and through one another” (p. 261). Therefore, these examples show how Lee has been able to present representations of African Americans that challenge the traditional negative stereotypes.

Many whites might find these challenges threatening. Rose (1994) suggests that these perceived threats may create a fear of a black perspective that radically challenges the conventional media portrayals of African Americans. In other words, strong black voices and perspectives in rap music, films, and hip hop culture may cause a fear of a black media culture. Perhaps this type of fear is analogous to the fear many had of Malcolm X and what he represented. West (1994) explains one possible reason for this fear, “Malcolm X . . . looked ferocious white racism in the eye . . . and lived long enough to tell American the truth about this glaring hypocrisy in a bold and defiant manner” (p. 151). However, large conglomerates routinely benefit financially from the creative products of “radical” black perspectives (e. g., the financial success of the popular music genre Gangsta Rap). This evidence points to Lee as a filmmaker with a desire to present a radical black perspective. Yet, he receives criticism from African Americans who feel his perspective is too compromising. Therefore, an analysis of *Malcolm X* is required to investigate Lee’s cinematic perspective.

Afrocentric Perspective in *Malcolm X*

Lee’s film adds its voice to the possibilities for enlarging the discussion from which an “American dream of equality” might be forged (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). Likewise, the film also enters into the struggle over portrayals and perspectives of African Americans in the United States, particularly Afrocentric world views. As Gray (1993) explains:

Afrocentric perspectives and nationalistic constructions of identity are increasingly attractive to various sectors of the Black community. For an increasing number of Blacks these perspectives serve as compelling guides for action, as utopian visions of possibility, and as ways of making sense of the world and their experience of it. (p. 365)

In the social constructivist tradition, James (1994) resolves “the construction of personal identity . . . is a dialectic between the self and the culture in which it evolves” (p. 43). That culture involves many socializing individuals and institutions including the mass media. A lack of positive representations of African Americans and the excessive use of stereotypes in the mass media has long concerned the African American community.

Afrocentric perspectives vary (Asante, 1988; 1993; Dyson, 1993; West, 1994) but there is little doubt that Malcolm X’s adherence to black nationalism was a separatist Afrocentric belief that he held until his split with the Nation of Islam. A large part of the film *Malcolm X* takes place during his time as a separatist and, therefore, represents his separatist beliefs. After his break with the Nation of Islam his subsequent view, although no longer separatist, can still be seen as Afrocentric.

tric in its rejection of a Eurocentric view of African Americans.

Terrill (2000) argues that Malcolm X defined his new Afrocentric position in *The Rochester Address* speech given less than a week before his assassination. Terrill (2000) explains:

Malcolm is not advocating separatism. . . . He does not want his audience to abandon their claim to the rights and privileges of full American citizenship, and this is an important difference between much of his rhetoric while a minister of the Nation of Islam and that during his last year. Malcolm's focus here is on helping his audience to develop alternative visions of their problems within the [American] scene. (p. 72)

Therefore, Terrill (2000) argues that Malcolm conceives of a space in-between separatism from white America and assimilation with white America. "The most productive site of potential emancipation then," contends Terrill, "would be at the border between these two scenes, where Malcolm and his audience might avoid the limitations and exploit the benefits of both" (2000, p. 74). The film *Malcolm X* also follows this reasoning. The ending of the life-narrative combined with the prologue and epilogue successfully places Malcolm X in-between black nationalism and assimilation, and this is the most advantageous and appealing position. Terrill points out, "Malcolm's rhetoric continues to resonate [because] . . . many African Americans may find themselves in a position similar to that which he occupied and see his rhetoric as offering a viable model for confronting that situation" (p. 79). Therefore, both Malcolm X and Lee's film present an Afrocentric perspective that works the borders between separatism and assimilation in order to benefit from both.

Malcolm X and *Malcolm X*

The movie is a visually compelling, three hour adaptation of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm X (1965) once said he believed people would better understand his message if they could understand his life experiences. This type of understanding is a focal point of Lee's film. Malcolm X's life is depicted from his very early memories to his assassination in the Audubon Ballroom from his perspective. The subjectivity of this film makes it an important tool in representing Malcolm X because he gives his reasons for his actions and words. Malcolm X believed his messages were often misunderstood because they were misinterpreted by a racist media. Spike Lee's cinematic treatment presents the events of Malcolm X's life from a sympathetic perspective based on Malcolm X's autobiography.

The Early Life of Malcolm Little

The filmic narrative is constituted to tell both the story of Malcolm X's life and to demonstrate visually his perspective. This juxtaposition of images and events visually makes these connections. The retelling of Malcolm X's life begins with his adolescence; his childhood is revealed in flashbacks interspersed throughout the film. In this manner, we experience his father's murder by Klansmen who opposed his separatist preaching, the subsequent breakup of his family by the state, and his placement in a foster home. We see that Malcolm Little attended an all-white school where he had the highest grades and was elected class president. We are shown Malcolm fulfilling his part of the white American Dream: working hard, getting an education, and doing his best. This exposition

underscores Malcolm X's later belief in the falseness of the "American Dream" for African Americans. Instead of being able to continue with his dream of becoming a lawyer, the audience is shown Malcolm Little being told by his white teacher that a lawyer is an unrealistic goal because he is black. The teacher suggests he should become a carpenter instead. His teacher tells him to remember that nothing succeeds like success, but bigotry denies Little his chance to succeed. These segments visually highlight the reasons for Malcolm X's early separatist beliefs. The audience is shown that white intolerance allows blacks to become laborers but not lawyers.

One particularly telling scene is a flashback to Malcolm X's early childhood. At his family's home in Lansing, Michigan, members of the KKK have come in the night to frighten his father, Earl, and stop his preaching of Marcus Garvey's separatist message. The Klan members torch the Little's home, and the family must flee and confront their mounted attackers. The white leader states, "Boy, good thing we're good Christians. Nigger, it's time for you to leave town. Boy, next time you're a dead nigger." Earl Little does not cower or show fear, but instead takes out a pistol and says "I ain't a boy. I'm a man, and a real man don't hide behind no bedsheets." Earl shoots above their heads, sending them riding off. His wife, Louise, remarks that she knows he could have killed them, but Earl responds that his only wish was to frighten them away. In the script for the movie, this scene ends with a stage direction which states "young Malcolm stares at his father . . . no doubt drawing on the great courage displayed" (Lee & Wiley, 1992, p. 213). Likewise, the audience is afforded the opportunity to read this encounter with

similar feelings. This scene stands in stark contrast to scenes in films such as Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, in which the KKK is shown as protecting innocent whites from marauding blacks. In *Malcolm X* the Klan is a cowardly congregation of whites hiding behind sheets. Earl is the good father, a brave and moral man, and unafraid to stand up for his family and himself.

Malcolm Little's Criminal Life

Malcolm X's life as a criminal shows the destructiveness of the lifestyle, the damaging effects of drug use in the African American community, as well as the destructiveness of gambling on the fragile economy of the urban ghetto. The words of Malcolm X speak to the audience, "we were all victims of the American social order." These scenes illustrate Malcolm's hatred for the white social order he saw forcing African Americans into lives of crime and drug abuse.

During this period Malcolm Little joins with a successful criminal known as West Indian Archie. These scenes are an injunction against the white socio-economic system that forced African Americans into a life of crime. Lee voices Malcolm X's words over a scene of Malcolm Little as he escapes New York and travels to Boston after a confrontation with Archie, "cats that might have probed space or cured cancer—(Hell, Archie might have been a mathematical genius)—all victims of whitey's social order." In this way a criminal existence is not suggested as a desirable lifestyle; yet, it does portray black outlaws as intelligent people. They seem forced into a life of lawlessness because they have been denied the opportunity to succeed in mainstream

society. This perspective differs from the stereotypical black criminal of many media portrayals. As Rose (1994) points out, the media often construct young black Americans as dangerous. This "Gangsta" stereotype is prevalent in films, television dramas, and reality based police programs that repeatedly show African Americans as drug dealing, ruthless, and violent criminals but not as people forced into lives of crime by a bigoted social system.

Malcolm Little's Prison Conversion

Malcolm Little is arrested and harshly sentenced for his crimes. The sentencing is shown as a result of racism as two white accomplices get much lighter sentences for the same offense. The prison segment's focus is Malcolm's conversion to the Nation of Islam by another inmate, Baines. In the beginning, Malcolm is shown as a hard case prisoner who is put in solitary confinement for more than 20 days because he refused to say his identification number when ordered by a white guard. The punishment is inhumanly harsh. Slowly, Malcolm is broken by the emotional and physical stress of being locked in a small box. These scenes show the white guards as brutal torturers and further the movie's theme of racial injustice.

Malcolm's conversion to the teachings of the Nation of Islam is revealed in conjunction with his realization that many of the problems of the African American community are a result of the "slave mentality," the belief that white Americans are naturally superior to African Americans. After his conversion, Malcolm X writes Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, stating that he is dedicating his life to telling the white devil the

truth to his face—a rejection of the "slave mentality" and an embracing of black nationalism.

Baines is the key figure in Malcolm's conversion. He approaches Malcolm because he believes that he will be receptive to the religious teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm Little is converted and changes his name to Malcolm X, thus rejecting any white surnames. The last scenes of the prison segment show Malcolm X, studying, teaching, and writing. He demonstrates his skilled mastery of language. His decorum and appearance have taken on a dignified air. Lee has set the action for Minister Malcolm X to become a strong, self-assured, intelligent, political activist in the United States.

Minister Malcolm X

After his release from prison, Malcolm becomes a minister of the Nation of Islam. "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock landed on us"—this section of the film opens as Malcolm X speaks to a group as a minister of the Nation of Islam. It tracks his activities and speeches as he sets up several temples throughout the country and is named the Minister of Information for the Nation of Islam. Malcolm's popularity grows as he brings his message to the people in many speeches and appearances.

Eventually, however, he is forced out of the Nation of Islam. As Wiley (1992) explains, the ousting was possibly because of his popularity and his own ego. Malcolm X was asking questions about Elijah's personal life and was appalled with the answers. Malcolm also made a controversial remark in response to a question about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy after Elijah had ordered that

no one should comment on the popular president's death. As Malcolm X recalls:

The title of my speech was "God's Judgment of White America." It was on the theme . . . of "as you sow, so shall you reap," or how the hypocritical American white man was reaping what he had sowed . . . [In] the question and answer period . . . I said what I honestly felt—that it was . . . a case of "the chickens coming home to roost." (1965, p. 301)

As a result of this remark Elijah silenced Malcolm X for ninety days, but Malcolm felt that this sanction was only the beginning of the trouble between him and the Nation of Islam. For example, one of Malcolm's brothers, Philbert, was made to read a public statement denouncing him, and many felt that the leadership wanted Malcolm killed (Bagwell, 1993). All this led Malcolm to believe that the Nation was trying to stop his ministry. Malcolm explains, "I knew when I was being set up" (1965, p. 302). In fact, Malcolm stated, "I'm probably a dead man already" (Bagwell, 1993). As Wiley (1992) concludes the result of all these factors were that Elijah silenced Malcolm X and "may have secretly called for his murder" (p. 92).

This segment of the film also portrays a change in his beliefs concerning racial brotherhood and the broader Civil Rights movement. The change is primarily due to Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca where he witnessed Muslims of all colors worshiping together. These depictions suggest that Malcolm X had changed by no longer accepting a separatist belief. Therefore, the film re-frames him as a leader ready to join the broader Civil Rights movement.

Throughout this section Malcolm X, his followers, and assistants are shown as intelligent, morally upright, disci-

plined, and able to lead the fight against racism in the United States. This portrayal is carried out by means of the narrative, the use of Malcolm X's speeches and the intercutting of actual footage with the dramatic material. Moreover, the film presents Malcolm X's speeches to drive home the point that white America is still responsible for many of the problems faced by African Americans. To illustrate, we hear his words: "you can't even get drugs in Harlem without the white man's permission. You can't get prostitution in Harlem without the white man's permission. You can't get gambling in Harlem without the white man's permission," voiced over scenes of these crimes.

In one of the film's most stirring scenes, the nonviolent use of strength is displayed as Malcolm and a group of temple members go to a police precinct to investigate the condition of a man who had been beaten by the police. Malcolm finds the man in need of medical assistance and orders the police to call an ambulance. The police are fearful that the incident will incite a riot, but Malcolm proves that he is peaceful and has control over the well disciplined men by marching his men to the hospital and stationing them outside until he is assured that the man will receive proper care.

Much of the power of this segment results from the effective use of Malcolm X's speeches voiced over images that verify his words. As he discusses the crimes of white America on the African American community, scenes of well dressed white men with black prostitutes are shown. As scenes of white violence against African Americans are shown in a montage, his words defend his stance, "this isn't black supremacy this is black intelligence."

Over the television footage of the police violence in Birmingham, Alabama, he says, "black people in this country have been the victims of violence at the hands of the American white man for 400 years." Over the television coverage of the church bombing in Alabama, he explains, "the right to defend ourselves is not teaching us to hate the white man he [Muhammad] is teaching us to love ourselves." The portrayal of African Americans in this section is one of intelligent, resourceful, self-assured, men and women actively working against a racist white society in pursuit of the equality guaranteed by the United States Constitution. These portrayals are in opposition to the stereotypes of African Americans as ignorant and lawless—negative portrayals that have been personified in characters such as Prissy, as ignorant servant, in *Gone With the Wind* to more recent films that portray young black men as gang members such as *Menace II Society* (1993) and 1992's *South Central* (Bogle, 1996; McKelly, 1998). As Gray (1989) explains, "ideologically, representations of under class failure still appeal and contribute to the notion of the black poor as menacing and threatening, especially to members of the white middle class" (p. 385). Therefore, Lee's film does present a stark contrast to Hollywood's stereotypes by showing these men and women as hardworking, intelligent, and dedicated to nonviolent social reform.

The Movie's Prologue & Epilogue

The final moments of *Malcolm X* are an epilogue designed to clearly connect Malcolm X to the mainstream Civil Rights movement and its respected members particularly Nelson Mandela. The epilogue begins with a

montage of Black Power demonstrations as Malcolm's eulogy is read. Some of the important present day leaders of the international Civil Rights movement are shown in a statement of solidarity with Malcolm X.

Likewise, the film opens with the videotaped footage of the Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police and the sound of a crowd chanting "we want justice!" as background to the words of Malcolm X accusing white America of four centuries of crime against African Americans. This scene establishes the overall theme of the film. The audience is confronted with graphic visuals and stirring audio that the fight for Civil Rights is not over in America. As Rodney King is beaten in slow motion, the words of Malcolm X proclaim, "we've never seen democracy; all we've seen is hypocrisy. We don't see any American Dream; we've experienced only the American nightmare." This prologue visually argues that African Americans are still the victims of white violence and an unjustly biased system.

The prologue and epilogue work to link the past events in the film to the present day. They show the importance of Malcolm X's ideas, work, and words to the ongoing struggle for equality in the United States. They also provide a means for present day audiences to identify with Malcolm X and his struggles. The message of the film is not just one of an interesting historical case study, but one of an ongoing discourse that is as relevant now as it was when Malcolm X lived.

Backlash: Criticism of Lee's *Malcolm X*

As demonstrated, Lee's film offers a media construction of African Americans that is often in opposition to tradi-

tional racist Hollywood stereotypes. Further, it presents a view of white society that is more critical than common media portrayals. It is an important cultural event that allows for a black perspective that challenges a dominant view that has been racist throughout the cultural history of American film (Hall, 1981; Rhodes, 1993). Yet, Lee's film has also suffered criticism for being too politically safe, mainstream, and commercial. These criticisms demonstrate that it does not stand as a completely defiant challenge to the Hollywood system. Dyson (1995) explains that even though Lee is "often been perceived in the white media as a hothead filmmaker and racial firebrand, [he] became in the eyes of many the vehicle for the mass production and dilution of *Malcolm X* as an acceptable, easily packaged, and even chic commodity" (p. 132). Similarly, Bogle (1996) points out that it is ironic that "rebel filmmaker" Lee chose "a fiery unconventional leader . . . [for] his most conventional film . . . [and that] Lee's detractors . . . criticized him for failing to make a political film" (p. 353). These opposing views are precisely the reason for looking at *Malcolm X* as a text to gain insight into media culture portrayals. Dyson (1995) explains:

Although Lee's *Malcolm* is more subdued, even softer, than many had wished—possessed less by strident rage than by hard-won wisdom—he survives the Hollywood machinery and remains a provocative, valuable figure. Still, Lee's *Malcolm* speaks rhetoric that is a far cry from the volatile, incendiary talk that the police and government feared would be spewed by *Malcolm*'s character and that would incite riots in theaters on opening night. (p. 141)

Indeed, hooks (1996) suggests that Lee does not make a serious move away from the mainstream until his *Girl 6*

(1996, four years after *Malcolm X*). Literally, hooks (1996) states, "up to a point he has played the game and made it, doing more feature films than any other black director to date . . . *Girl 6* is his gesture of resistance. . . . Working against the requirements of Hollywood" (p. 18). As these critics point out, Lee's film parcels *Malcolm X* as a less volatile, less radical figure and in doing so makes him more acceptable for a mainstream commercial film.

Malcolm X is a conventional film in many ways. Bogle (1996) explains the film makes moves toward a commercialization of *Malcolm X* and his message as Lee avoids some of *Malcolm X*'s more polemic comments. The result is, in many ways, a popular mainstream type film rather than radical counter-filmmaking. This point is also made by Dyson (1995) who explains that Lee's film attempts to sell *Malcolm X* and the *X* phenomenon demonstrates that Lee did, indeed, succeed in bringing *Malcolm X* to the attention of a new generation of Americans. Of course, as Grey (1989) reveals, the meaning of a text is not fixed and viewers understand them and will use them in different ways. However, because the media terrain is contested, "the representations of race and racial interaction . . . reveal both the elements of the dominant racial ideology as well as the limits to that ideology" (Gray, 1989, p. 377). Therefore, Lee's film is able to both challenge Hollywood's racist ideological legacy and remain a viable commercial movie.

Therefore, Lee's *Malcolm X* is considered both a film that offers a divergent view and a challenge to existing media portrayals of black experience and the life of *Malcolm X* and a film that operates within and according to a mainstream Hollywood system. Because of

these disparate views, *Malcolm X* is a valuable text for insight into media culture and its ideological work.

Furthermore, Rapping (1987) points out that change transpires because hegemony "allows for new, divergent attitudes to become legitimate and for limited changes in social practice and belief to occur" (p. 14). From this position, a filmic text such as *Malcolm X* can shed needed insight into the "social and psychological conflicts that remain unresolved" because of the "messy business" of "cultural 'progress'" (Lears, 1983, p. 5). The relevance of this work lies in its contribution to the discussion of media perspectives with

a focus on improving media literacy by aiding the viewer in understanding the social discourse surrounding a mediated racist ideology and the ongoing cultural work of social equality in the United States. The study of society and the media must include texts that elucidate the importance of divergent views because "dominant power relations of race, class, and gender, and sexual preference are reproduced . . . in popular film and television" (Sholle, 1994, p. 16). In the continuing struggle over media representation, Lee's motion picture is an instrument of media politics, controversy, and commercialization.

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