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The Trouble With X

Spike Lee's long-anticipated *Malcolm X* is now shaping the remainder of the climate of Malcolmmania that his advance marketing and merchandising campaign helped create in the first place. Before the movie's fifteen minutes run out, it's worth considering what all this means, because Lee's vision of Malcolm X and the larger Malcolm iconology surrounding it reveal significant issues in contemporary black politics.

The film highlights in a particularly striking way five key problems that have gotten progressively worse since the civil-rights era: 1) an ahistorical and ultimately quietistic way of thinking about politics; 2) a cloudiness about purpose and a related tendency to rely simplistically on race as the central category of political and historical analysis; 3) a reluctance to confront and analyze intraracial conflict; 4) a romantic notion of leadership, and 5) powerful tendencies to reduce politics to catharsis or theater.

The problems with history begin even before *X* starts. The trailer used in the television promotion for the film lingers on a dance-hall scene in which Denzel Washington as Malcolm and others are dancing animatedly. Their exuberance seems the natural response to the music accompanying the scene—the hot, saxophone-driven R&B of Junior Walker and the All Stars. The trouble with this Pepsi-ad-style reverie, though, is that the dance occurs in the 1940s, and the music is from 1965.

Trailers, of course, are meant to be evocative rather than literal, and Lee probably can't be held responsible for this one anyway. Nevertheless, the trailer is a metaphor for the way the past figures into Lee's vision. Throughout the film, time periods are marked by images of fashion and music. The 1940s were when people wore zoot suits and did the jitterbug; the 1960s were as much about the Motown sound as about attacks on civil-rights workers.

Moreover, the film's narrative is foreshortened in a curiously inverted way. The more it approaches Malcolm's rise to prominence as a public figure, the more compressed it becomes. What a colleague of mine referred to as the *Guys and Dolls* segment—Malcolm's "Detroit Red" phase—takes up more than the first third of the film. This is followed by roughly half an hour on his time in prison and con-

version to the Nation of Islam, leaving not much more than ninety minutes for his rise within the Nation, courtship and marriage, disillusionment with Elijah Muhammad, his censure and departure from the organization, international travel, return and effort to establish an independent base for himself, and his assassination. And even in this segment, Lee concentrates on the earlier events. As a result, the last two years of Malcolm's life—in which he consolidated his role as a national figure—fly by as a blur.

The effect for those unfamiliar with the story must be dizzying. Things happen; then other things happen. For those who do know the story, the effect is more like watching assembly-line production. Each scene is rounded off and tied up to prepare for the next. This effect—a standard characteristic of Lee's films—is exacerbated by a third-person rendition of Malcolm's original first-person account that leaves no space for reflection or commentary.

Lee gives us a picture of black life in the Roxbury and Harlem of the 1940s that seems like a Steven Spielberg production of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*—bright and colorful, with lots of well-choreographed night life and no texture, no sense of the structures of daily life or the larger political-economic context that constrained the ways people could choose to live. One might write off all of this as the compulsory banality of commercial film-making. More telling, though, is the way Lee handles the latter part of Malcolm's life.

X's Malcolm reveres Elijah Muhammad as a father, for reasons we never quite get, except that, through the Messenger, Malcolm found a new way to reckon and pursue self-esteem. When Lee's Malcolm becomes disillusioned, it's all connected with outraged moral probity: The Messenger was a hypocrite who fathered children out of wedlock. The film glosses over the more consequential issues like the Nation's explicit insistence on political quietism, Muhammad's back-door dealings with the Ku Klux Klan, or even the organization's commercial agenda.

Similarly (though noting at this point that a Spike Lee film is sexist is like saying that water is wet or Pat Buchanan is not a nice guy), *X* sanitizes and appears even to endorse the Nation's reactionary separate-spheres ideology. Betty Shabazz's appearance presents a perfect opportunity for examination and comment. She identifies

herself as an instructor in the Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class (MGT/GCC), the purveyor of the institutional catechism of gender subordination—for example, the proscription on women going out unchaperoned or driving cars. Lee doesn't pursue it, no doubt in part because the MGT/GCC line seems commonsensical to him.

This sanitized version of the Nation—and Malcolm's simplified relationship to it—reaches astounding extremes. Louis X (later Farrakhan) does not appear in the film at all, though he was Malcolm's understudy and successor and, most significantly, the author of an article in *Muhammad Speaks*, the Nation's newspaper, marking Malcolm for death only weeks before the assassination. Ironically, Lee takes pains in his self-consciously reverential story about Malcolm to avoid associating his murder with any real people. Instead of the real Farrakhan we have a "composite" fiction who (maybe) stands in for some unspecified group of jealous ministers. Even Elijah Muhammad catches a supernatural break from Lee, who depicts the Messenger as increasingly ill and out of it, virtually on his death bed, a full ten years before he died, thus deflecting responsibility for the lethal climate that formed around the image of Malcolm as a traitor to the Nation.

Some observers have suggested that Lee's treatment of the Nation may reflect worries about possible legal action from Farrakhan, or fear of a more visceral reaction. And the Fruit of Islam did, after all, do security work on the film. But there's something deeper going on as well.

Perhaps the most striking thing about *X* is how it slides over the source of Malcolm's prominence as a figure in American life—his running critique of the civil-rights movement and its leadership. Lee rushes past the tension, depicting it primarily in a couple of passing, oblique images: A lingering shot shows the NAACP's Roy Wilkins in a still photo from the 1963 March on Washington, part of a photo montage accompanied by an excerpt from one of Malcolm's speeches; a disgusted and scornful Malcolm watches television coverage of white outrages in the South. To recognize the former you'd have to know the particular history of the era already, and it's a safe bet that only a very tiny percentage of filmgoers have a clue that it was Wilkins in the photo, or what his relationship was to Malcolm X. And since we never have any sense of Malcolm's politics beyond such platitudes as

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the idea that black people should stand up for themselves, we can have no clue whether the disgust in his gaze at the TV is meant for the white perpetrators, the prophets of passive resistance, or both, much less *what* his specific criticisms were.

Spike Lee has given us a Malcolm X with no particular content. This Malcolm can't tell us anything about the time in which he lived because he's not really linked to it in any deep way. He's a hero, and heroes live in allegory, not history. Lee's Malcolm points to a fundamental error of the high-toned Malcolmania that exhorts us to "learn from" Malcolm: We can't learn anything from a heroic allegory except "timeless wisdom," and timeless wisdom is just platitudes.

Malcolm X isn't a significant figure in post-World War II America because he overcame personal hardship, racism, criminality, and prison. He's important because he posed an explicit and powerful critique of the conventional public discourse about racial stratification in America at that time. His critique was of arguable coherence and in no way fully worked out, but it captured, galvanized, and gave voice and language to sentiments

felt broadly among black Americans confronting the same social realities.

It's interesting in this respect that Lee leaps from the assassination to the present. Perhaps Malcolm's greatest impact came in the five years after his death, in the black power movement, in autonomous black opposition to the Vietnam war (embodied in Fannie Lou Hamer's classic quip, "No Vietnamese ever called me 'nigger,'"") and in the larger critique of racialized American imperialism, as well as in the community control movement, welfare rights and tenants' rights organizing, organizing among blacks in the military, the Black Panther Party, and countless local mobilizations that led to black electoral power. All of this is washed out of Lee's tale of personal growth and the creation of a "role model" for our time. The effect is to depoliticize a historical figure whose claim on public attention was his political insurgency.

The quick cut at the end to South Africa performs a similarly evasive function. Going directly from the United States in the mid-1960s to racial oppression in South Africa today is a common enough move in black American political discourse, but it is a cheap and wrong-

headed one. Its main effect is to feed an illusion that Afro-Americans' subordination can be apprehended through a simple language of racial domination and addressed adequately through strategies emphasizing racial solidarity. But what about a world in which black people—happily or under duress—control the institutional apparatus that manages black dispossession and subordination? How should we respond to a situation in which inequality is administered under the leadership of black mayors and city managers, black housing authority, welfare department, and community-development directors, black school superintendents? What expectations should we have of them?

In this environment, one which is also an expression of Malcolm's legacy, the limitations of an exclusively race-based politics should be obvious. We need an analysis of institutions of public authority and their role in shaping an inequalitarian social order. We need a practically grounded critique of the roles played by the stratum of minority public officials that has risen, since Malcolm's death, from the successes of civil rights and black-power agitation.

Lee's move at the end of *X* forecloses all this discussion. Instead, *X* gives us an all-too-banal American convention—the generic saga of personal redemption and greatness. For all Lee's posturing as an outsider, this is quintessential Hollywood stuff. It has and deserves the mass culture industry's *nihil obstat*. Worse than its banality, however, is what it makes of politics. By not engaging Malcolm meaningfully with the issues of his time, *X* reproduces the common view of black Americans' political activity as a procession of Great Men (and now, occasionally, Great Women).

Not only is this view false—and especially so for the period of Malcolm's prominence—but it also reflects an idea of politics that is antidemocratic and quietistic. Great Leaders don't make movements. Insofar as they aren't just the work of clever publicists, they are in most important respects holograms created by movements. Understanding politics as a story of Great Leaders produces nostalgia and celebration, not mobilization and action. And how will we know when one comes along anyway? How should we tell a real one from a fraud? A good one from a bad one?

The discourse of black leadership reflected in *X* isn't concerned with such questions because it's not even concerned with politics. Like Afrocentricity, it's much more an expression of self-improvement ideology than anything else, a racialized form of self-gratification and image management, a rationalization of black *petit bourgeois* class privilege. We need and deserve better than this, not for Malcolm but for us. ■