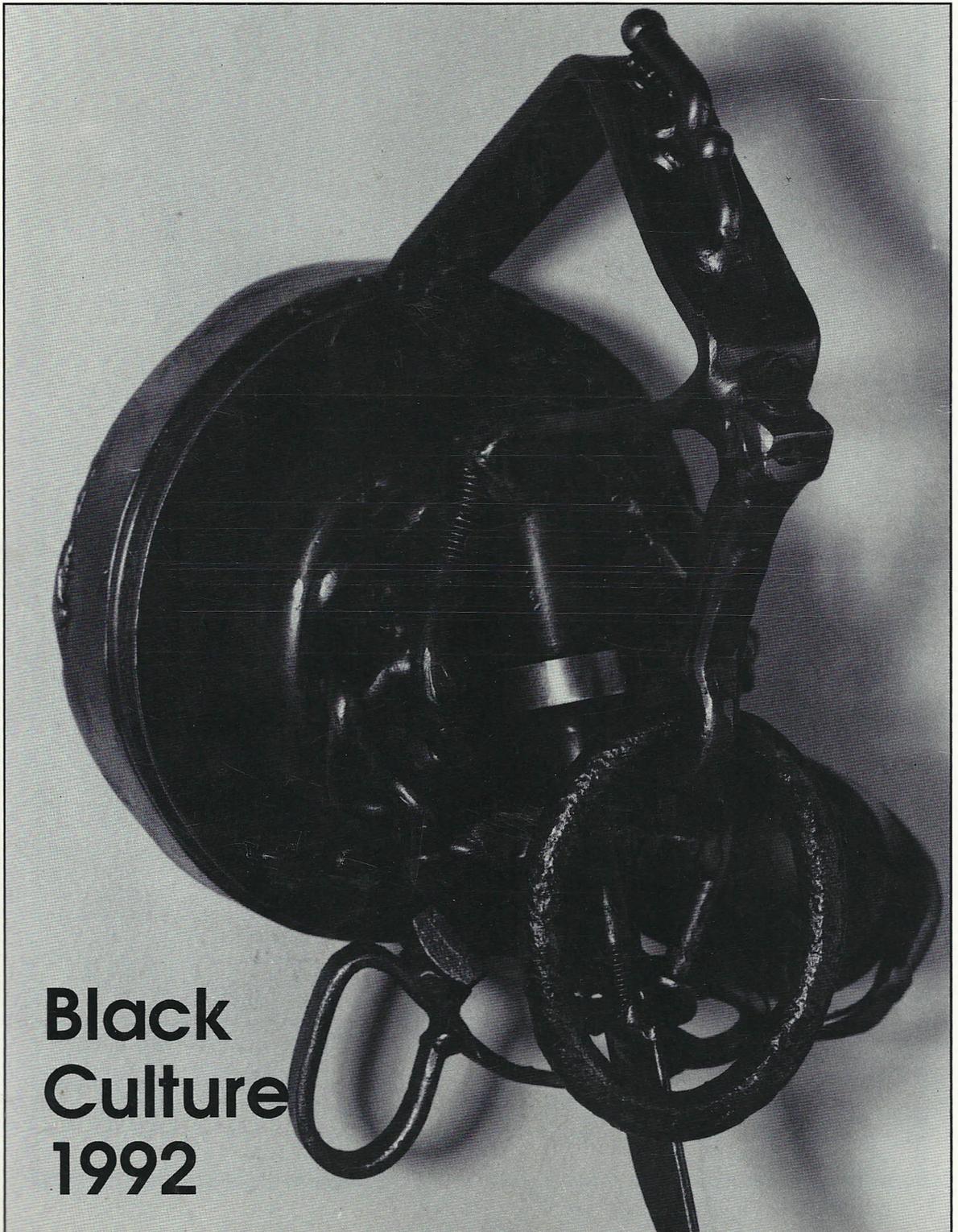


THE BLACKSCHOLAR



**Black
Culture
1992**

THE MALCOLM GHOST IN THE MEDIA MACHINE

by Clyde Taylor

Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* is a prodigious accomplishment. That, even his harshest critics should acknowledge, at least on some important levels. It is the first successful big budget Black-subject film made by a Black director, shattering the glass ceiling under which Blacks have been expected to hit home runs with toothpick money. With this stroke, Spike should get some of the industry respect given directors whose budgets equal their reputations, and quell the objections from studios and best-selling Black authors that a Black director cannot handle a "big" project.

More important, Spike's movie has crippled the resistance to Malcolm's thought and significance in the mediated American mind. Spike has also decently acquitted himself of the burden of educating young people who knew this icon as Malcolm Ten. What scores of determined Black film students set out to do in the 70s has this once been done — to document Black history for a population thought to be indifferent to reading. The uproar of pre-release publicity around the film has meanwhile helped boost the sales of the *Autobiography* from 50,000 a couple of years ago to one million over the last year.

But the core of *X*'s achievement, with Denzel Washington as Malcolm's credible facsimile, is to raise the terrible brilliance of Malcolm's spirit from our re-memory. It is a compelling realization of a major 20th century life on the screen. The re-creation of Malcolm's speeches is a source of celebration, a triumph of technical imagination. Those wonderful speeches. The Joker contending with Batman might better have demanded, "Get me those wonderful speeches!"

X recovers the spoken word as liberatory weapon against those who deride them as pale substitutes for action. Reprised here, they

again elicit the response due to perfected art, most sharply penetrating where they most nervously amuse. It's time they are brought into school curricula as models of eloquence and insight.

The movie also fashions a part nostalgic, part enlightening backdrop of African American cultural history. It carries Malcolm, who lived at the height of his times in each of his many phases, through satisfyingly remembered glimpses of the being-there of Black times, the sense of those moments awakened through soulful musical memories, or through recharged recollections of times past such as Brother Baines' teaching on the Jackie Robinson phenomenon. The movie is sprinkled with sweet kisses of intuition, like Coltrane's tender, elegaic *Alabama* playing under footage of the civil rights battle of Birmingham.

Doubtless some critics will disavow the importance of *X* under the guise of inconsequential aesthetic flaws, of which there are many. But I want to examine it from another point of contact. *Malcolm X* is easily the most explosive intersection to date between Black consciousness and the movie industry at its most expensive and sophisticated popular level. And, since that consciousness is a vital 20th century player, a significant part of the Second Enlightenment, elaborating a more inclusive humanism than the racist variety set up by the Euro-Enlightenment philosophers of the 18th century, we need to scan this intersection thoughtfully.

The constraints on *X* as a reflection of Black consciousness start with the Tar Baby of its biopic format. The movie was gifted with an autobiography that begs for a three part epical treatment. Can Spike be blamed if Malcolm lived his life in upper case, self-prophetizing dramatic form? However, these generous op-

portunities are wedded to seductions. One of the first is genre itself.

Up till now, one of the radical merits of Spike's movies has been their refusal of genres. For genres are gatekeepers of mental colonies. They have a way of recapturing the most resistant images back into the known and familiar narrative ruts of dominant ideology. When Spike says his next movie is going to be very small, we can feel a relief to be free of pre-determined expressive modes. Like all bio-pics, *X* carries the weight of obligatory moments, but also the more daunting question of which symbolic obligations to fulfill.

The Hollywood bio-pic tends to be typological, (in the sense that the Bible is read typologically when the events of the Old Testament are ciphered as prefigurations of the climactic New Testament). The sacrifice of Christ or Eucharist are seen as revealing the "true" meaning of the Paschal Lamb, from the point of view of some Christian hermeneutists. Or David, as shepherd who undergoes temptations but also becomes the receiver of great spiritual wisdom, and who also is the ancestor of Christ, is read as the foreshadowing of the Messiah.

Whether *X* is typologically interpretable by the life of Christ, it is more certainly so in the vein of Hollywood bio-pic. If *X* had been a musical comedy (not too weird an idea for Hollywood's imagining), the orchestration of scenes that lead up to the nervous moments in the Audubon Ballroom would have been prelude to a triumphant performance, capped by accolades from those who had doubted the hero's prowess and those who had stuck by him through hard times. The inspiring final sequence recapping documentary footage of the real Malcolm together with the Nelson Mandela cameo would be a montage of flashback cameos from the hero's past. So weighty is the burden of this movie-telling tradition that we can feel its heavy breathing in every scene.

On another plane, producing both opportunities and dead ends, the typology in *X* follows a kind of grand narrative of African American experience — the *ur-text*, the story that all culturally sanctioned stories are drawn to as a model; of a struggle from slavery to freedom, from oppression to liberatory resis-

tance. Within that engulfing frame, this movie also runs typological changes on the Negro to Black conversion experience.

Here, the demands of First Cinema tradition lay another trap. Spike is drawn into the system's privileging of individualism, firmly resisted in most of his earlier movies. heroizing Malcolm's extraordinary N to B conversion and simultaneously neglecting his one most singular historical contribution, the provocation of N to B conversion among African Americans, a transformation unrivalled in African American history. N to B conversion was already part of Nation of Islam ideology and strategy, but Malcolm had no peers in electrifying its latent energies among his contemporaries as well as embodying it in himself.

But the individualistic Hollywood focus loses some of the resonance of this achievement. *X* limits its subject the *Bird* limits Charlie Parker, not suggesting the intellectual labor, the thought and planning, nor the historical and world-wide significance of the celebrated performative genius. What is lacking is not fuller roles for sidekicks, but some suggestion of the seasoning influence Malcolm had on a generation of non-Muslim Black consciousness warriors, the Jimmy Baldwins, Maya Angelous, Toni Cade Bambaras, and hundreds of others he rapped with intimately and fruitfully. It's a clever move to cast Bobby Seale as a street preacher, but it might be more important to connect the historical Bobby Seale and his partners with the spread of Malcolm's ideas.

The needs of bio-pic obscure the needs of historical narrative. We get the tightly woven story of Malcolm's problems with the Nation of Islam, but too little of his impact on the nation of African Americans, on the U.S. nation and the world. The paradox is that the individualistic drive of the bio-pic often suggests that the hero did it all himself, but the same drive in *X* neglects the fact that when it comes to thrusting Black consciousness to a new level, he really *did* almost do it all by himself. This is one instance where less is less.

A certain flatness in the movie can be felt where one expects it to continue rising and accumulating in drama. I would locate that flatness, reluctantly, at the point where Malcolm's relation to Betty becomes focal along with the anti-Malcolm intrigues in the

Nation. The obvious pressure here is to balance the gender representation and to prepare an understanding of Malcolm's assassination. The narrative of the intrigue is compelling, and for once a female character, Betty, has something meaningful to do: Wake Malcolm to the dangers around him. Yet, this narrative impedes the narrative of the Consciousness which materializes without much psychological dramatization.

The question is whose or what destiny is being confirmed by which narrative structure? Malcolm's death is wedded typologically to the life and death of his father, but to what end? To confirm the persistence of racist violence? This is an understandable but possibly misleading and defeatist lesson. Malcolm's death and the significance of his life was far different than his father's, courageous though the father's might have been. Things *do* change, can change, is one of the major fiery contributions to Black consciousness made by Malcolm's own testimony and example. Not only can people change, they can make change.

The spirit of Malcolm's beautiful, evolving consciousness rattles around like a ghost in the machinery of conventional representation. The fuller exposition of Malcolm's thought in the third, post-Mecca phase is a loss that could easily have been recouped from the zoot suit era, which might have been abbreviated through use of montages. Such treatment might have driven home the necessary point that his surrender of the White-devil theory coincided with a widening and deepening of his radical resistance to oppression anywhere, and particularly in the U.S. But, Malcolm's spiritual and political transformation after Mecca, which is the point of time from which his earlier voice-over commentary emerges, the stance from which the whole drama should be viewed, is short-circuited by the narration of the menace that would take his life.

At this point we reach another ghostly encounter with symbolic ambiguity between Black consciousness and Black prophetic tradition, both of which claimed Malcolm's imagination. Rather than serving as a vibrant spiritual force behind the grand narrative of African American expression, the prophetic tradition hobbles along. For example, there is

overemphasis on finding redemption in suffering as opposed to codifying strategic and analytical successes that can be the base for further advances without the aid of prophetic conjuration. For, just as the prophetic tradition can evoke "hope," sometimes indiscriminately, it can also nurture fatalism.

Prophecy in this tradition always leads to more prophecy, with the inclination to force every contingency into some foretold narrative pattern, when the point is not to prophesize history but to change. The tension with Black consciousness comes at the fork between prophecy and the development of socio-historic realism, with slave mentality as the negative base, at least since the Malcolm era.

The legacies of prophetism should not be oversimplified. Some of the most revelatory works of Black imagination, such as *Invisible Man*, *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Beloved*, *Temple of My Familiar* successfully fuse the prophetic and historical dimensions of the African imagination.

In the movie, Malcolm's movement along the consciousness trajectory is mostly taken for granted, while the fated progression toward the Audubon Ballroom is carefully foregrounded and dramatized. This would be consistent with the prophetic tradition's emphasis on celebration and lament, heroism and martyrdom, each half of these dualities axiomatically tied to the other. One can easily imagine a version of the movie that ended before the Audubon Ballroom, or where that awful moment was pre-empted of its significance as climax by coming earlier, or even at the beginning.

There is a place in the movie, of course, where Black consciousness is not taken for granted, namely in those galvanizing speeches. Another bias of the prophetic tradition is toward oratory over conversation. We never see Malcolm *talk*. His autobiography demonstrates that he was a great conversationalist. The closest we come to conversation from Malcolm is through voice-overs commenting on his earlier years. These stop once he becomes a Muslim, as though his interior mental process was then complete. The voice-overs sketch the Malcolm who would drop into Alex Haley's Greenwich Village apartment, tired and unstagy, talk into the tape recorder, and just let his feelings out.

I feel the absence of a Haley figure or someone whom we could see or hear the mature Malcolm talking out his understanding from his maturest life-view. (Malcolm died shortly before the book came out). We got precious little of that from the movie version of Stephen Biko's life, less from *Bird* and not enough from *Malcolm*. Hollywood may call it good film dramatics, emphasizing actions over words, but I call it silencing.

So, the challenge of making *X* could be seen as a contest between three texts: The typology of Hollywood's bio-pic scenario, the grand narrative of the Black prophetic tradition, and the text of evolving Black consciousness. (The hazard of the prophetic tradition in the movies is cooptability, by re-direction toward the cozy destinies reserved for Black experience in Hollywood's genre of historical Black representation.)

When the danger of cooptation is not averted, the Black hero dies with Gospel or spirituals on the soundtrack, almost as atonement for his anti-White-supremacy apostasy in the earlier years. This reading is not signalled by Lee's scripting or direction, but rather by the narrative that leaves openings for those viewers who, simply from habit, yield to the power of genre expectation over the evidence of scenes before their eyes.

Among the achievements of Spike's wonderful movie, we should remember, is sparing us a different treatment as depicted in work by director, Norman Jewison. From the example of Jewison's earlier White on Black features, *In the Heat of the Night* and *A Soldier's Story*, we can begin to see some of the ways the grand narrative of African American prophetic tradition might be wedded to a prototypical Hollywood Black narrative, with a net loss of social intelligence. In *A Soldier's Story*, (based on Charlie Fuller's play and script), Jewison directs Denzel Washington as a Malcolm-like character driven by hate to murder. Internalizing guilt, Black troops march happily off to war and officers, Black and White, wait with warm anticipation for social integration to come over the horizon.

In the hands of those who foster Hollywood's preferred vision of Black destiny, messianic symbolics are welcome. In the messianic reading, Malcolm's individual transformation can be viewed as archetype for the transforma-

tion of the race. Laura, the young girl who becomes a prostitute would be this text's Mary Magdalene. Would Malcolm's death become a sacrifice — redeeming the character of African Americans as a people? (Hollywood loves the idea that Black people need to be redeemed, witness *Glory*.) And, the closing montage would signify a "he is risen" apotheosis. Perhaps these approaches were like so much sediment in the scripts Spike inherited from Arnold Perl and Jimmy Bladwin. Given that each narrative pattern implies a way of reading, and therefore of shaping history, the suggestion of messianism in the movie may lie behind the question of a young Black viewer, "Why did you let him be killed?". One must hope the narrative of *X* will also produce other questions, such as how do we learn ways of advancing social justice from Malcolm's heroic life and tragic death?

It is a relief that we can consider these questions from the comfort of a successful rendering of Malcolm's life. I have been tempted to think that the spirit of Malcolm was too tough to be repressed by the U.S. imagery machine; that the autobiography he left behind, and his speeches argue his mastery of the media even in death. But that glibly underestimates the resourcefulness of Hollywood in subverting liberatory Black thought.

Charting this subliminal contest beneath the movie, not only helps us consider, sympathetically, the unruly discursive energies Lee had to wrestle with, but also to preview the problems of future encounters between these narrative tracks. Spike predicts future bio-pics of Sojourner Truth and Toussaint L'Ouverture, a prospect I find uninviting, harboring as it does the possibility of prophetic solace as compared, for instance, to the processual dialectics of *Do the Right Thing*. The uninstructive, feel-good historical dramas given us through PBS since the 70s suggest what we can look forward to. Considering what we have been given and what we might get in the future, it might make more sense to fight for Spike Lee to control some of these historical movies next time around.

When the subject is charged with historical intensity like this one, or *JFK*, fictional narrative intersects with real historical discourses in which much is at stake. To deny reflection on

this intersection is to prohibit our possession of our historical imaginations.

So it is good to remember that this need not be the only Malcolm X movie. Woodie King, Jr., in fact, made a feature in the late 1970s on Malcolm's last days. And, Blackside Inc., the company that made *Eyes on the Prize*, (which for me sets a high example in the recovery of Black history), is completing a four-hour documentary on Malcolm. In the coming years where Black representation on the screen will play a larger role than ever before in shaping the national dialogue, we will have need to listen carefully to determine which spirits are given voice or repressed through the narrative paradigms that stand ready to claim them.

Malcolm X

Directed by Spike Lee; screenplay by Arnold Perl and Mr. Lee, based on the book "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" as told to Alex Haley; director of photography, Ernest Dickerson; edited by Barry Alexander Brown; music by Terence Blanchard; production designer, Wynn Thomas; produced by Marvin Worth, Mr. Lee, Monty Ross, Jon Kilik and Preston Holmes; released by Warner Brothers. Running time: 199 minutes. This film is rated PG-13.

- Malcolm X Denzel Washington
- Betty Shabazz Angela Bassett
- Elijah Muhammad Al Freeman Jr.
- West Indian Archie Delroy Lindo
- Baines Albert Hall
- Shorty Spike Lee
- Laura Theresa Randle
- Sophia Kate Vernon
- Louise Little Lonette McKee
- Earl Little Tommy Hollis
- Brother Earl James McDaniel
- Sidney Ernest Thompson
- Benjamin 2X Jean LaMarre
- Speaker No. 1 Bobby Seale
- Speaker No. 2 Al Sharpton
- Chaplain Gill Christopher Plummer
- Miss Dunne Karen Allen
- Captain Green Peter Boyle
- Judge William Kunstler

Subscribe to
THEBLACKSCHOLAR

Vol 22, No. 3 \$6.00

THEBLACKSCHOLAR



Afro-American Studies in the Twenty-First Century

Featuring
The Wisconsin Conference on Afro-American Studies

April 18 - 21, 1991

University of Wisconsin Madison

Individuals — \$30.00 yr.
Institutions — \$50.00 yr.

Enclosed is \$ _____.
Start my sub today.

PREPAYMENT IS REQUIRED

Send check or money order with your order.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip Code _____ / _____

Black Scholar Subscriptions
THEBLACKSCHOLAR
P.O. Box 2869
Oakland, CA 94609