

Todd Boyd, "Popular Culture and Political Empowerment: The Americanization and Death of Malcolm X," *Cineaste* 19 (Mar 1993).

Photographs of both martyred Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. have long adorned the walls of ghetto and working class African-American homes. Eventually, I came to regard this standard triptych as emblematic of both the strengths and weaknesses of Sixties liberalism. The image of Malcolm X was conspicuous by its absence; the marginal status of this increasingly influential leader remained a constant for many years.

The recent release of Spike Lee's Malcolm X makes amends for the previous neglect of Malcolm's revolutionary message, although Lee's film, and the media circus which accompanied it, proved problematic. It might be said that Malcolm X was resurrected only to die a second death induced by cultural and media prostitution.

Lee's film attempts to pay Malcolm the same kind of respect that was once reserved for King and the Kennedys. In essence, Malcolm X endeavors to refurbish Malcolm's memory and legitimize him as a true American. As the film opens, we are shown an enlarged image of the American flag--a not so subtle allusion to Patton--and listen to Denzel Washington's uncanny impersonation of Malcolm's oratory. Eventually, the edges of this enormous flag begin to burn slowly, ultimately giving way to the by now familiar images of Rodney King's brutal beating. When the sequence ends, the flag has burned into the likeness of an 'X.'

This red, white, and blue 'X' foreshadows the film's ingenious narrative strategy: a protracted apologia for Malcolm's inclusion within the pantheon of American political heroes. This 'Americanization' of Malcolm X is achieved by depicting his political and spiritual growth in a manner that resembles a cinematic equivalent of the Stations of the Cross. In the film's early sequences, the character of Malcolm Little is presented with a certain amount of ironic sympathy. Although this pre-political Malcolm strays from the path of righteousness, he is shown as continually evolving. Malcolm's transformation from street hustler to respected political leader is conveyed through a series of visual and aural motifs. Lee's camera captures Malcolm's changing tastes in clothing, from the gaudy zoot suits favored by the 'country' Malcolm to the more dignified apparel he dons after meeting his West Indian friend, Archie. In the film's later sequences, another crucial epiphany is signaled by the appearance of Malcolm's newly grown beard: this seemingly inconsequential change heralds the protagonist's break with the Nation of Islam and the formation of a new stage in his political and religious evolution. Finally, Malcolm's journey from thief to martyr is evoked with the inclusion of Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" on the soundtrack as the hero hurries to New York's Audubon Ballroom, the site of his tragic assassination.

It soon becomes apparent that Lee regards Malcolm's prison conversion crisis as the film's dramatic apogee, the central event in the life of a saint. Lee's effective use of voice-over gives the audience access to Malcolm's thoughts and doubts, while the Honorable Elijah Muhammad emerges as his savior, the man with the ability to purge him of dope-fiend pain.

Despite the ostensibly militant trappings of Malcolm's newfound theology, the film clearly embraces some of the most potent myths of American culture. Malcolm's ability to 'pull himself up by his own bootstraps' fits neatly into the ideology of upward mobility, and, paradoxically, Malcolm emerges as more 'American' than the elite Kennedys or the middle class, well-educated Martin Luther King, Jr. Given the ubiquitous 'X' on film posters, baseball caps, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia, it would be difficult to define the film's collaboration with this process of commodification as anything other than truly 'American.'

The resurfacing of Malcolm X as an icon of political resistance can be traced to the growing importance of hip-hop and rap subcultures. When rappers became weary of repetitive 'dick grabbing,' they rediscovered Black Nationalist politics. Since rap's 'hard core' has always been an arena of male angst, Ossie Davis's eulogy extolling Malcolm's exemplary 'black manhood' satisfied rap's hunger for powerful role models.

Throughout rap's brief history, Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Ice Cube, among others, repeatedly invoked Malcolm and his image in order to reinforce their opposition to American racism. While the Reagan Administration put racial tensions on the back burner and elevated Clarence Thomas and Thomas Sowell to positions of power, Malcolm's rage found contemporary expressions in the impassioned rants of African-American rap artists. Ice Cube's third album, *The Predator*, offered an informed response to the rebellion of

April 1992 that followed in the wake of the disastrous Rodney King verdict. Ice Cube's chant, "April 29th/More Power to the People/And we might just see a sequel," contains tangible echoes of Malcolm's famous "Message to the Grassroots" speech. In that speech, Malcolm proclaimed that "revolution was based on land," and concluded that bloodshed was the only means for realizing revolutionary goals. Although the 'revolution' of South Central Los Angeles did not reward the insurgents with any land, it did reflect Malcolm's insistence that America's violent racial past would continue to insure a present of violent retribution.

The current black cultural scene, with its ritual invocation of the image of Malcolm X, contrasts sharply with the black cultural agenda of the Sixties. At that time, 'cultural production' and political struggle were seen as indivisible. H. Rap Brown described the militant skirmishes of this period as a "dress rehearsal" for an imminent revolution and the cultural wing of the Black Power movement, whether embodied by the Marxist-inspired dramaturgy of Amiri Baraka or the musical commentary of Gil Scott-Heron, was seen as inextricable from the struggle against white supremacy. Unfortunately, in recent years, popular culture has remained the black community's only source of political empowerment.

Although Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* hopes to give Malcolm's legacy a prominent place within America's historical memory, the film suffers from a common tendency to recycle history into pure spectacle empty of meaningful political or intellectual content. Lee refuses to address Malcolm's transformation from an archetypal 'race man' to an internationalist and pan-Africanist. The film merely honors Malcolm as a humanist, and this incomplete portrait of a complex man sets the stage for his enshrinement as a true 'American.' While the barrage of television advertisements for the film reminded viewers of Malcolm's aphorism--"We didn't land on Plymouth rock, Plymouth rock landed on us!"--it is now evident that *Malcolm X* has landed somewhere between Madison Avenue and Hollywood.

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