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RUNNING HEAD: Cinematic Jujitsu

Cinematic Jujitsu: Resisting White Hegemony through the American Dream in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

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Abstract

Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* (1992) presented Malcolm X's life story using the narrative framework of the American Dream myth central to liberal ideology. Working from Gramsci's notion of common sense in the process of hegemony, I explain how Lee appealed to this mythic structure underlying American popular culture to give a platform to Malcolm X's controversial ideas. By adopting a common sense narrative to tell Malcolm X's life story, this movie functioned as a form of cinematic jujitsu that invited critical consciousness about the contradictions between liberal ideology and the life experiences of racially excluded groups. Other formal devices in Lee's film incorporated Malcolm X's rhetoric within the common sense of mainstream politics and connected Malcolm X to more contemporary racial struggles. This analysis suggests that common sense framings of controversial figures may provide a limited space to challenge institutionalized forms of racism within popular culture.

Cinematic Jujitsu: Resisting White Hegemony through the American Dream in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*

"We don't see the American Dream. All we see is the American nightmare."

(Malcolm X, 1964)

Malcolm X garnered national attention during the early 1960s for his fiery condemnation of the United States' exploitation and repression of African-Americans. Drawing attention to structural barriers to blacks' advancement throughout the U.S., Malcolm X shunned more mainstream civil rights rhetoric and posed a rhetorical challenge to institutionalized forms of racism in the United States (Condit and Lucaites 1993; Houck, 1993; Lucaites and Condit, 1990; Novak, 2006; Terrill, 2000; and Terrill, 2001). Consequently, he garnered both contempt and devotion from individuals seeking racial justice. Perhaps Malcolm X's greatest contributions lay in his insistence that blacks assert the meaning of blackness, national identity, and political equality for themselves. An assassins' bullet cut the radical black leader's contributions to racial justice short on February 21, 1965. Despite his untimely death, Malcolm X's memory has persisted in popular culture. Several biographies, films, and even a 1998 postage stamp have depicted Malcolm X (Yousman, 2001). While several depictions have challenged Malcolm X's credibility, others have incorporated Malcolm X's image into mainstream politics. Others still have praised Malcolm for exposing the racism of American society.

Spike Lee's Hollywood biopic *Malcolm X* (1992) is positioned centrally within the range of texts that have commemorated the radical black leader. Lee's film, as a rhetorical document itself, stands in contrast to the radical persona Malcolm X created for himself through his public address. In this paper, I interpret Lee's film as a site for the inclusion of some of Malcolm X's radical rhetoric within mainstream popular culture. *Malcolm X* earned 9 million dollars in the

box office during its first week in theatres, and grossed 48 million dollars in the United States ("Business Data"). By comparison, other films of Lee's career, *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Jungle Fever* (1991) grossed 28 million and 32 million, respectively.[1] Arbiters of mainstream media applauded *Malcolm X*. In 1993, Denzel Washington was nominated for an Academy Award and Golden Globe Award for best actor in a leading role. The MTV movie awards gave Denzel Washington the award for best male performance in a film in 1992 and nominated *Malcolm X* for Best Movie that year ("Awards," 1992). In 2005, Warner Brothers released a special edition DVD of the film including a 30 minute documentary about Lee's process in directing the film. This recent edition of the film attests to its ongoing presence in popular culture.

Echoing public attention to the memory of Malcolm X himself, Lee's film prompted strong criticism and commendation from both scholars and the popular press. Critics with the highest regard for the film described it as a "confident, superbly crafted picture" (Ringel, 1992, p. E1) and as "just short of a masterwork" (Lipper, 1992, p. 7B). Writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Guthmann (1992) concluded that *Malcolm X* was "clearly the movie of the year" (p. E1). By contrast, black studies scholars have noted that Lee's detractors criticized him for making a politically safe film, for commercializing Malcolm X's memory, and for avoiding some of the more controversial aspects of Malcolm X's life story (Bogle, 1995; Dyson, 1995). As Dyson (1995) notes, several events in Malcolm X's history, including his more polemical statements supporting black separatism, are excluded from the film (p. 135). Taking a somewhat different perspective, hooks (1996) argues that in providing a more complex depiction of black masculinity, the film conformed to the sexist conventions of the Hollywood movie industry.

The controversy surrounding Lee's depiction of Malcolm X points to the rhetorical dimensions of popular depictions of controversial figures and events from the past. As public memory scholars have noted, such portrayals are inevitably partial and limited by the scope of individuals who construct them (Hasian 2001; Hoerl, 2007; Sturken, 1997; and Zelizer 1995). Likewise, constructions of the past are frequently created for instrumental purposes. Lee's *Malcolm X* is closely based on Malcolm X's autobiography co-authored by Alex Haley (1973). Benson (1974) points out that the autobiography was designed to restore credibility to the black leader by describing how his life experiences shaped his political beliefs. During his lifetime, the mainstream press perpetuated a negative public image of Malcolm X by characterizing him as a violent extremist (Powell and Amundson, 2002). Thus, both the autobiography and Lee's film reflect efforts to provide a more nuanced and sympathetic understanding of the radical black leader and his critique of mainstream institutions in the United States. Media scholar Winn (2001) concludes that the film was the product of negotiation between the mainstream Hollywood industry and filmmakers seeking to challenge racist depictions of black experience. As Winn asserts, the film "both challenge(d) Hollywood's racist ideological legacy and remain(ed) a viable commercial movie" (p. 463). Dyson (1995) concurs that Lee's choices ultimately presented a sensible and vigorous treatment of Malcolm's words, thoughts and ideas. Thus, Lee's film reflects inevitable constraints Hollywood filmmakers face when they portray traditionally subordinated groups and controversial historical figures (McMullen and Solomon, 1994).

By exploring how Lee's portrayal of Malcolm X negotiated the interests of those committed to anti-racist struggles and the demands of the Hollywood film industry, this paper has implications for contemporary social struggles. Depictions of marginalized public figures in

popular culture shape not only how we understand injustices from the past but how we view contemporary society in light of historic injustices. In a critique of biographies of Oprah Winfrey, Cloud (1996) observes that social stability depends on the ability of the dominant ideology to absorb and reframe challenges (p. 118). Working from Gramsci, Cloud argues biographies of people from oppressed groups often provide hegemonic representations of their subjects' lives that seek to contain any oppositional potential. Hegemonic constructions may also appear in films about marginalized groups, particularly those films about people who have presented a challenge to mainstream political and social institutions. In an analysis of "anti-racist white hero films," Madison (1999) contends that a series of civil rights films produced after 1980, including *Cry Freedom*, *The Long Walk Home*, and *Mississippi Burning* reasserted white hegemony in popular culture. By focusing on white heroism, these films positioned blacks as little more than victims in the civil rights stories. Thus, these films reasserted the authority of the white establishment that the main characters purported to critique. From this perspective, films delimit oppositional potential by containing controversy and challenge in the instance that they elicit them.

My interpretation of *Malcolm X* intervenes in contemporary considerations of political hegemony by suggesting that ideologically dominant frames may also provide a space for controversial texts to gain the media spotlight. Not only must films about controversial figures negotiate with Hollywood to incorporate new attitudes into popular culture (Winn, 2001), they may also embrace the structuring logic of hegemonic texts in order to insert counter-hegemonic ideas into the common knowledge of the culture. In my analysis, I propose the phrase "cinematic jujitsu" to highlight how movies that adopt the formal structures of dominant hegemony can convey controversial political ideas. Like the martial art, cinematic jujitsu uses counter

techniques that draw upon the strength of an opposing force in order to achieve a more dominant position. I explain how Lee's film presented Malcolm X's challenge to white hegemony through a narrative framework that incorporated Malcolm X into the American Dream myth. The American Dream myth constitutes a form of what Gramsci referred to as common sense. By attaching Malcolm X's counter-hegemonic ideas to a common sense framework, Lee's film brought Malcolm X's criticisms of racist conditions in America to broader audiences, thereby incorporating Malcolm's message into the nation's consciousness of racial struggle in the 1990s.

In the rest of this paper I argue that *Malcolm X* presents both a counter-hegemonic challenge to civil rights memory and an engagement with the American Dream myth central to liberal ideology, the belief system that privileges individual liberty and private enterprise over collective values and economic parity (Lasch, 1991). After a brief discussion of Gramsci's writing about the role of common sense in the process of hegemony, this paper describes how Lee's film framed Malcolm X's life within the common sense American Dream myth. Following my discussion of the film's conservative framing of the radical activist's life story, the second part of this paper explains how the framing of Malcolm X's life in terms of the American Dream provided a platform for Malcolm X's controversial challenges to American liberalism. I suggest that this film's treatment of Malcolm X illustrates the dialectical contradiction between liberal ideology and the life experiences of racially subordinated groups. Further, I explain how the movie's use of other formal structures and images of more mainstream political figures cemented *Malcolm X* within the common sense of liberal capitalism at the end of the millennium. I conclude by considering the implications of common sense framings of other popular culture texts that depict controversial figures and events from the past.

Common Sense and the American Dream

Gramsci's notion of hegemony explains how ideological texts shape people's taken-for-granted understandings of social reality. Gramsci contended that elements of civil society such as religion, media, and education, attained consent from subordinate groups for the authority of the ruling class (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 113-114). Functioning as a "hegemonic bloc," civil society plays a fundamental role in shaping what counts as common sense for the culture at large. Gramsci (1971) theorized common sense as a "conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man [sic] is developed" (p. 419). St. Louis (2004) contributes to Gramsci's conceptualization by theorizing common sense as both constituted by concepts and enacted as a process. Analyzing discourses about the racial basis of athletic ability, St. Louis asserts that common sense understandings about race involve "*the ability* to acquire particular thoughts or knowledge" (p. 34). The "substantive content of common sense –the what- is inextricably linked to its formative process and transmission – the how" (p. 34). St. Louis further explains that the processes of attaining common sense understandings occur in lieu of the relationship between "narrative structure and its elements as well as the narrative itself" (p. 34). Thus, taken-for-granted beliefs within a culture emerge not only through substantive content but also in the forms that comprise such content. These processes become matters of moral concern and call for ethical critique when narrative structures are marshaled to perpetuate racism.

Myths are foremost structures for the perpetuation of common sense ideas and beliefs. They are universalizing narratives that convey social attitudes by naturalizing particular beliefs about social life. Barthes (1957) suggests that all myths function ideologically by validating and maintaining "some specific social order, authorizing its moral code as beyond criticism or human

emendation" (p. 140). A key feature of myth is its story-telling function. As such, myths are established through common plot development, character types, and climaxes. The repetition of particular elements within a story or recurring generic patterns across seemingly disparate narratives constitute particular narratives as common sense depictions of social order and moral virtues. Although not all generic forms comprise myths, myths are enacted, in part, through their generic repetition across different narratives that lend coherence to popular texts.

The American Dream is a staple of United States' popular culture and thus comprises a core structure for perpetuating common sense ideals within the United States (Cloud, 1996; Hoerl, 2002; McMullen and Solomon, 1994; Winn, 2000; and Winn, 2003). This myth was popularized by Horatio Alger stories during the turn of the century in which individuals triumphed over humble beginnings (Weiss, 1969). Fisher (1973) argues that this myth is "grounded on the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of efforts, persistence, playing the game, initiative, self reliance, achievement and success" (p. 161). Narratives embodying the American Dream myth follow patterns by which protagonists face daunting obstacles toward individual success, confront personal barriers to achievement, work diligently to succeed (often failing on more than one occasion) and, in the final moment, reap personal and/or financial rewards. Accordingly, class inequality is the result of personal failure, rather than the consequence of structural limitations beyond personal control. Winn (2003) writes, "The Dream assures Americans that no class system hampers their advancement even though many Americans experience structural class limitations daily" (p. 308). By focusing on personal autonomy and individual effort, the myth establishes the common sense that social problems are challenges for individuals to overcome. Consequently, the myth renders as nonsensical alternative solutions such as seeking social change through collective effort or structural revision

to existing political, economic, or social institutions. As the narrative framework of *Malcolm X* suggests, even those texts that feature the life stories of radical political leaders may be subjected to the authority of this powerful cultural myth.

Malcolm X as a Black Horatio Alger

By structurally following the narrative patterns that typically embody the American Dream myth, Lee's film primed audiences to empathize with Malcolm's on-screen persona. Malcolm X was a strong proponent of collective protest against economic and political barriers to African-Americans' advancement; yet, Lee's film frames Malcolm X's story in terms of one individual's overcoming obstacles to achieve greatness. The movie also depicts Malcolm's life story as a series of identity and political transformations. Through these transformations, audiences witness Malcolm X's rise to fame and political leadership within the black community. The first hour of the film portrays the transformation of impoverished child Malcolm Little into drug addicted hustler Detroit Red, named after his hometown and his red hair. In this hour, Detroit Red is apprehended by police during an attempted robbery and is sent to prison for eight to ten years. The second hour of the film portrays Red's conversion to the Nation of Islam through the tutelage of a fictional prison inmate, Baines. Enlightened by his newfound knowledge about the history of racial oppression, Malcolm decides to adopt the last name X to renounce Western control of African-Americans' identities. After his release from prison, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad embraces Malcolm X and names him the Minister of Information. The following scenes depict Malcolm X's emergence as a vocal and influential advocate for black separatism and the Nation of Islam, as well as the black leader's expulsion from the black Islamic organization.

The last hour portrays Malcolm X's final transformation. Believing that the Nation of Islam wanted to stop his ministry, Malcolm X forms a new organization, the Muslim Mosque Incorporated, and calls for greater organization among blacks to improve black communities. Soon after he founds the organization, Malcolm takes a holy pilgrimage to Mecca, travels across Africa and the Middle-East, and concludes from his visits that people of all races should unite on the basis of divinely inspired love. When he returns from his Hajj, he adopts the African name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and expands his vision for black emancipation to include the participation of whites concerned about social justice.

Scenes portraying Malcolm as Malik El-Shabazz illuminate the transformation in Malcolm's thinking about the causes of racism during the last months of his life. Rather than understand racism as a white person's disease, he concludes that Western nations' control over the world's resources is a fundamental cause for blacks' subordinate status. Thus, El-Shabazz calls upon the United Nations to bring charges against the United States government for human rights abuses against African-Americans. By depicting Malcolm's growing interest in establishing an international and interracial peace movement in the final months of his life, the film's final scenes suggest that Malcolm X might have been an internationally influential figure for peace and justice had assassins not cut his potential short. The final scenes in the film illustrate Malcolm's efforts to generate support for his new vision in spite of impending threats to his life. The final moments of the film's narrative depict Malcolm's assassination during his final speaking engagement on February 21, 1965, in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom.

Through depicting Malcolm X's life as a series of transformations, Lee's film suggests that even the most disenfranchised individuals may become great leaders. According to the movie, Malcolm X's emergence as a prominent black leader was wrought through his intellect

and determination. This narrative structure fits with the patterns of other narratives that have evoked the American Dream myth by depicting hard work as the solution to problems of poverty and discrimination (Cloud, 1996). Despite the film's controversial content, *Malcolm X* is one of Lee's most conventional films. In contrast to Lee's earlier films that make explicit commentary about contemporary race relations, this motion picture follows the conventions of biographical films, or biopics that celebrate the efforts and accomplishment of great leaders in history. Within this genre, dialogue, lighting, and sound construct a linear narrative celebrating the life of an exalted leader or heroic figure, thus structurally enacting the core features of the American Dream. Film critics Carr (1992) and Murray (1992) equated *Malcolm X* with earlier biopics *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Last Emperor*, and *Gandhi*. These reviewers indicated that the film's conformity to Hollywood conventions for biographical films lent credibility to the film in ways that Lee's previous films had not done. Because this film resonated with films already popular among reviewers and mainstream audiences, Lee's emulation of these successful biopic films helped to establish the film's common sense appeal among audiences.

Reviewers applauded the film's resonance to myths about individual success and overcoming obstacles (Carr, 1992; Tucker, 1992; and Yearwood, 1992). Indeed, Charles (1992) praised the film as a "Horatio Alger tale" (p. 8E). Writing for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, Ebert (1992) also used the themes of Horatio Alger to describe Malcolm X in the film. "He was a strong role model who began on the streets, and through application of his intelligence, will and courage, became someone who made a difference" (p. 3). Reviewers' focus on *Malcolm X* as an iteration of the American Dream myth suggest that the film's narrative framework positioned mainstream audiences and critics to embrace the radical black leader as an exemplary model of individual determination and courage. By depicting Malcolm X as another iteration of the self-

made man, the film's mythic structure incorporated Malcolm X into the ideology of American liberalism.

In some ways, Malcolm X was already a more palatable figure for mainstream popular culture than other Black Power leaders. Groups advocating Black Nationalism including the Nation of Islam engage the rhetoric of self help that is both liberating and limiting for subordinated social groups (Shawki, 1990). Although a strand of the Horatio Alger narrative weaves nicely into the narrative of empowerment within Black Nationalist ideology, Black Nationalism also challenged liberal ideology by recognizing black people's exclusion from positions of power within the United States' political system. Arguably, the discrepancy between self empowerment rhetoric and social barriers to success propelled both the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X. Lee's film draws attention to this discrepancy by placing Malcolm's radical critique of the American political system in the context of a narrative about Malcolm X's personal achievements. Thus, the film both celebrates the American Dream myth and exposes the myth's falseness. This contradiction troubles the common sense of the American Dream even as it invites audiences into the narrative structure of the dream itself.

Contradicting the American Dream

Despite the film's positioning Malcolm X as a black Horatio Alger, the life story of Malcolm X does not fit seamlessly into the American Dream myth. Early scenes in the film suggest that Malcolm X, then Malcolm Little, was subjected to racial violence as a child. The first scene features Klansmen who threaten Malcolm's parents in the middle of the night until his father emerges from his home with a gun in his hand. A subsequent scene depicts his father's death, presumably at the hands of Klan members. Scenes of Malcolm's youth also implicate social institutions and businesses for oppressing blacks. One scene depicting Malcolm's

experience in elementary school portrays discrimination embedded in the social fabric of American life. Although he is considered a very smart and popular student, Malcolm's instructor tells him that his goal of becoming a lawyer is unrealistic and that he should be a carpenter instead. As Winn (2001) observes, this scene underscores Malcolm's later "belief in the falseness of the American Dream" (p. 459). This scene challenges the legitimacy of American liberalism from within narrative conventions central to that dominant ideology.

Additional scenes during the first half of *Malcolm X* highlight blacks' struggles with an oppressive white culture. During one scene, Detroit Red is arrested for conspiring to rob a house with his girlfriend, a white woman named Sophia. Sophia is given a 1-5 year sentence, considerably less than Red's 8-10 years. Malcolm X concludes that his real crime was not robbery, which usually results in much shorter prison terms: "It was sleeping with white women." The discrepancy between his sentence and the sentences of men who were not known to have dated white women points to ways in which blacks were punished for seeking inclusion into the white-governed society. By depicting Malcolm's transformation from a promising youth to a drug addict and hustler, the movie demonstrates how racist institutions and endemic poverty thwarted achievement for black men. Malcolm X's words narrated one scene to explain that criminals like West Indian Archie "were all victims of whitey's social order" and forced into lives of crime and drug abuse. Attention to the social and economic circumstances that led Malcolm to a life of crime challenged conventions of the American Dream myth.

These observations suggest that it is not just the American Dream myth or the structural barriers to success but the dialectic between the two that establish the movie's narrative structure. By drawing attention to structural barriers to individual achievement, the film instantiates the dialectical contradiction between the myth's promise of individual success and

the realities of African-Americans who, as a social group, continue to face economic and social discrimination.[2] In this regard, Lee's film provides a resource for "critical consciousness of the contradictions between experience and ideology" crucial to the process of social transformation (Cloud, 2006, p. 338). The movie's illumination of these contradictions forecloses passive acceptance of the assumptions underlying the American Dream and thus enables Lee to refigure the myth to incorporate one of its most ardent critics within it.

The movie's dialectical narrative structure ─its simultaneous contrast and consonance to the American Dream myth─ provides a platform for Malcolm X's political critique of liberal ideology. On the one hand, the film's use of the American Dream myth encourages mainstream audiences to identify with Malcolm. On the other hand, the film's attention to the racial injustices Malcolm experienced during his upbringing frames his critique as an understandable response to ongoing conditions of racial injustice in the United States. By framing Malcolm X's incendiary rhetoric in the context of the systemic problems facing the black community, Lee's film depersonalizes the radical activists' critique of white society. In this way, the film appeals to the sympathy of white audiences who were a primary market central to the film's commercial success.

Politicizing Horatio

The film's narrative of Malcolm's life story exposes ruptures in the viability of the American Dream, but it also positions audiences as witnesses to Malcolm's condemnation of core components of the dream. As the film's narrative offers contradictory messages regarding the viability of the American Dream, the movie suggests that Malcolm's own political consciousness emerged through his own understanding of the contradictions between American culture's common sense and the experiences of African-Americans. Lee's *Malcolm X* suggests

that the discrepancies between liberal ideology and the lived realities of African-Americans formed the basis of Malcolm's own political transformation. Scenes depicting Malcolm X's rise to prominence in the Nation of Islam resist the black leader's easy incorporation into the American Dream. According to the film, Malcolm's success emerged through his ability to rhetorically intervene in prevailing ideology that privileged the perspectives of whites.

During his lifetime, Malcolm X frequently condemned how the taken-for-granted truths of the culture ─the common sense of his time─ functioned ideologically by excluding the experiences and perspectives of African-Americans. Using Malcolm's speeches, Lee's film paints some picture (albeit in broad strokes) of Malcolm's political philosophy and influence that had been both controversial and pivotal to the trajectory of African-American struggle during the mid-1960s. According to the movie, Malcolm is first drawn to the Nation of Islam when Baines, a fictional character, instructs him to recognize how white culture has constructed negative meanings to blackness. Baines points to the definitions of white and black in the dictionary that characterize whiteness with purity and goodness and blackness as evil. He then tells Malcolm to "look behind the words" to find true knowledge about black culture. Enlightened by the revelation that white culture has propagated hegemonic depictions of blacks, Malcolm X reframes blacks' cultural knowledge by foregrounding black experience. (For an analysis of Malcolm X's use of this rhetorical strategy, see Terrill, 2000).

Throughout the last half of the film, Lee also depicts Malcolm X speaking to black and white crowds in an effort to correct what he believed were misguided beliefs that oppressed black people. To defend the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X suggests that Christianity's faith in the afterlife had diverted black people's attention from racial injustice: "White men tell us to wait for the hereafter. Well, the hereafter is here and now!" He also revises common sense

understandings of United States history by articulating blacks' very different orientation to the nation: "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock landed on us!" Malcolm argues that black people need control over their own economies as well: "You don't have to beg white folks for a job. . . . You'll still end up poor and without anything." In the film, Malcolm X uses these reframing practices to empower black communities with knowledge of their historic victimization and with a sense of entitlement to a better life. Scenes depicting Malcolm X's public oratory present movie audiences with examples of Malcolm's counter-cultural rhetoric that challenged the legitimacy of white hegemony (Lucaites and Condit, 1990); flouted expectations of dominant culture (Terrill 2000, 2001), and articulated truths about black experience in the face of danger (Novak 2006). Additional scenes portraying Malcolm X speaking to crowds of black and white audiences feature Malcolm's incendiary statements warning white-governed institutions that black communities would not passively wait for justice so long as oppression against blacks continued unabated:

> There's going to be a racial explosion. And a racial explosion is more dangerous than an atomic explosion. There's going to be an explosion because black people are dissatisfied. They're dissatisfied not only with the white man, but with these Uncle Tom Negro leaders that are trying to pose as spokesmen for you and I.

Publicly breaking from predominant leaders in the civil rights movement who thought that the American political system could be reformed, Malcolm believed that revolutionary changes were required to achieve racial justice and black empowerment in the United States.

In addition to challenging racist ideology, Lee's Malcolm X engages in collective protest for social change. One of the film's most stirring scenes demonstrates how organized dissent can be a force for racial justice. After Nation of Islam member Brother Johnson is brutally beaten by

local police, Malcolm leads several Nation of Islam men, each wearing black suits and ties, in an orderly march to police headquarters and to a local hospital to ensure that Johnson receives medical care. When the men march in solemn procession to the hospital, local Harlem residents take notice and follow them. After they arrive at the hospital, the stoic Muslim men stand on the sidewalk between police officers who are guarding the hospital and a throng of local black citizens who stand behind them, chanting, “We want justice.” Both the police and doctors are responsive to the marchers and give Johnson medical treatment. This scene challenges the individualist messages of the American Dream myth by portraying collective protest as an avenue for African-American empowerment.

While it depicts Malcolm’s transformation, Lee’s film also transforms the image of Horatio Alger’s hard-working hero. As the movie suggests, Malcolm X achieved greatness not only through his attention to individual goals but through his reframing of common sense ideas about race and his dedication to racial justice. Thus, *Malcolm X* portrays individual achievement not as an end to itself, but as an outcome of serious engagement with public life and its problems. Malcolm X, both in real life and in film, held onto controversial opinions in the face of sharp criticism. This paradoxical treatment of the American Dream myth depicts public dissent, including criticisms of American beliefs, as a moral virtue. According to Lee’s film, the American Dream is to transform society, not the self. This Horatio Alger character not only pulled himself up by his bootstraps; he worked to bring others up with him. Perhaps more notably, he also encouraged others do so the same. In this way, the movie draws upon the American Dream myth’s valorization of individual determination, a core component of common sense in liberal ideology, to affirm a sense of communal life and collective dissent as equally central toward achieving a just democracy in the United States.

Bringing the Past into the Present through Common Sense Images

Malcolm X's transformation of the conventional American Dream myth is also enacted through the use of visual footage of racial struggles during and after Malcolm X's time. This footage incorporated the black activist's rhetoric within the common sense of the United States' political and social climate. Early scenes in the film present archival broadcast television footage of police dogs and fire hoses set on protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, as well as Martin Luther King's arrest during that rally. The sequence of images of police brutality against black activists during the civil rights era ends with Malcolm's concluding statements: "To love the enemy is not intelligent. We have the right to defend ourselves." Because these broadcast images brought the civil rights struggle to living rooms across the nation, they garnered widespread support for the movement and established the brutality of white resistance to civil rights as an uncontested truth in the nation's consciousness (Brasell, 2004). Thus, this footage provides visual common sense attesting to the legitimacy of Malcolm's indictment of the prevailing legal system.

The film's opening scene also uses a familiar image of police violence to introduce Malcolm's life story. During the opening credits to the film, film footage of four police officers beating Rodney King in 1991 appears on the screen. Malcolm X's words spoken to a cheering crowd accompany these images. His words, taken from his most widely known speech, directly challenged assumptions underlying the American Dream myth. "You are the victim of America. . . . We've never seen democracy. All we've seen is hypocrisy. . . .We don't see the American Dream. All we see is the American nightmare" (1965, p. 26). Footage of police officers beating Rodney King in 1991 stands as a visual commonplace for thinking about racial violence at the time *Malcolm X* was released. This footage also contextualizes Malcolm X's fiery condemnation of the American political system within the contemporary racial climate at the time the film

showed in theaters and suggests that targeted violence against blacks by state authorities has been a persistent problem in the United States. Thus, footage of King's beating frames the story of Malcolm X as a lesson for understanding and responding to race relations during the 1990s. These images also provide a rationale for Malcolm's disavowal of nonviolent protest that contemporary black audiences might have more readily related to. Contemporary images of violence against blacks within a film narrating one person's self-transformation illustrates how the film joins Malcolm's rhetoric with more contemporary events to challenge white hegemony. Indeed, these images provide vivid support for Malcolm's conclusion that blacks were not living the American Dream, but were experiencing "the American nightmare."

The closing scene also establishes Malcolm X as an important figure for empowering racial minorities in the present. In the film's final scene, a contemporary Nelson Mandela appears before a classroom of non-white children. The image of Nelson Mandela identified historic black struggles in the United States with the challenges facing South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid. Implicitly, this scene calls for contemporary society to apply Malcolm X's critique of racial injustice to international antiracist struggles. This scene also contributes to the structural devices that positioned Malcolm X as a legitimate figure in the history of racial justice in the United States. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, political moderates in the United States embraced Mandela as an icon for global democracy and social justice. By showing Mandela repeating Malcolm's famous call to give racial minority groups equal status "by any means necessary," this film includes Malcolm within the history of black leaders who have been heralded by mainstream, white society. Conversely, this closing scene frames the strategy of confrontational black protest as just action within a liberal democracy. By depicting Malcolm X within the context of figures and myths resonant with dominant political values, Lee's film

mainstreams Malcolm. Rather than blunt the edge of Malcolm X's critique, however, the film's use of conventional narrative, documentary footage, and the figure of Nelson Mandela situate mainstream audiences and commercial media to consider Malcolm's radical political philosophy. *San Francisco Chronicle* film critic Guthmann (1992) wrote, "the film dealt with an ideology and world view" that had never been "explored in a mainstream Hollywood film" (p. E1). By framing Malcolm X's critique both within and against the American Dream, this film creates a space for the black leader's unconventional political beliefs and rhetorical practices to gain the media spotlight.

Cinematic Jujitsu as a Force for Imagination in Popular Film

Malcolm X was a counter-hegemonic film wrapped up in the generic traditions of liberal ideology. The video footage and the American Dream myth that helped to structure *Malcolm X* suggests that common sense understandings of social life are shaped by a myriad of forms within popular culture. The film adapted common sense to Malcolm X's counter-hegemonic discourse by linking visual signifiers of injustice to Malcolm's words and by embedding mythic structures into Malcolm X's life story. *Malcolm X* appealed to prevailing understandings about race relations in the United States by reflecting both a familiar mythic structure and everyday images in non-fiction media that challenged that myth. The movie's narrative framework was central to the its counter-hegemonic potential because it enabled the film to resonate with culturally powerful belief systems. Grounding Malcolm X's ideas within the familiar narrative structure of the American Dream myth, Lee's film integrated criticisms of white hegemony into popular culture.

Cinematic jujitsu offers a unique strategy for activists and scholars interested in the process of social change, for it suggests that the social order may be challenged both within and

against the discourses and forms of dominant ideology. My analysis of *Malcolm X* suggests that counter-hegemonic messages may be inextricable from dominant ideology in popular texts insofar as common sense beliefs and structures open spaces for commercial media to recognize social injustices and re-envision a just and equitable future. Marcuse (1964) writes that the past may provide motive power in the struggle for changing the world (pp. 79-80). For Marcuse, memories are resources of the imagination, or forces for re-envisioning social relations. Through the remembrance of things past, the omnipresent power of the given facts may be open to critical interrogation. Marcuse also insists that "the oppressive rule of the established language" may only be broken by the "subverting use of traditional material" (pp. 79-80). Likewise, the converse is true; to become credible and relevant to contemporary publics, subversive discourses require the use of conventional materials of the present. The memory of Malcolm X constructed by Lee's film and journalism reviews suggests that remembrance of injustices from the past may reawaken political understanding and inspire political critique in the present, but they can only do so by appealing to prevailing beliefs and expectations. Therefore, popular texts might do well to embrace conventions nurtured by common sense. In the process, popular texts may also transform old knowledge into new insights.

This conclusion suggests revision of critical theories that explain popular media as resources for securing dominant hegemony through audiences' consent. Indeed, mainstream, commercial films may have greater potential to integrate new attitudes and beliefs into popular culture than do radical, counter-hegemonic films. These may not be large spaces, however. Admittedly, the formal structures of dominant ideology constrain the counter-hegemonic potential of popular texts. Despite its explicit avowal of contentious dissent, *Malcolm X's* narrative framework contained activism to the memory of a traumatic past. By featuring the life

story of a radical leader gunned down at the apex of his career, Lee's film obscured how most movements in the United States evolved and continue to respond to different exigencies and goals. Thus, the movie offered no clear lesson for how activism might proceed in the present. The films' conflicting arguments about contentious protest have implications for racial conflicts and struggles at the time the film was released to theatres. Events such as the 1991 Rodney King beating in Los Angeles, California, the 1998 dragging death of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, and the targeting of Arab-Americans for hate violence after September 11, 2001 attest to the continued need for critical analysis of public discourses about race or, conversely, discourses that deny the ongoing presence of racial discrimination. Although Malcolm X reminded audiences that King's beating symptomatic of broader structural inequities, the film gave audiences few avenues for responding to contemporary racial injustices. Critical theorists might do well to attend to the delicate balance of common sense and controversial challenge required of the cinematic jujitsu artist. While one move could subordinate new ideas to the authority of conventional structures and ideas, another could distract audiences from considering the legitimacy of controversial material. Further, the artist must be able to offer direction for future action. As Gramsci might remind us, the process of social change calls for alternatives to hegemonic narratives that structure common sense and must provide avenues for channeling this knowledge into public action.

Endnotes

[1]These figures come from the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), which has "box office/business" link on the database's main pages for each film.

[2]The National Urban League (2004) reports notable economic gaps between African-Americans and whites. Twenty-five percent of blacks live in poverty compared to twelve percent of whites; male earnings are seventy percent that of white males; and African-American unemployment is twice the national average (online database).

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