

## How To Remember Malcolm X

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Historian Michael Kammen writes in *Mystic Chords of Memory* that “we arouse and arrange our memories to suit our psychic needs.” A culture’s memory, he adds, “which contains a slowly shifting configuration of traditions,” is “always selective and is so often contested.”

Film director Spike Lee, known for his controversial portrayals of Black America, says his purpose in creating the epic 1992 film *Malcolm X* was “to open up the history book” on the assassinated activist. In doing so, Lee has provided an informative and entertaining yet mediated version of Malcolm X to a generation who knows very little of this man. The problem is that while it is impossible to offer a portrayal that generates a complete understanding of any individual, Lee often diverts from the accepted facts about Malcolm X, whose controversial life and legacy would seem, in this day, to demand an even closer attention to the “historical truth.” The result is twofold: a figure is enshrined more than ever by memory’s mythic mists and an art form is allowed to become a new generation’s sole understanding of reality.

How close, then, should historical dramas created primarily for mass entertainment attend to the facts? Should filmmakers selectively arrange, rearrange, and distort history to suit the needs of the story, their aesthetic and social views, and/or a culture’s “psychic needs”? Are falsehoods more dangerous when paired with accurate, truthful information? If the only reality presented is a mediated reality, then is constructing that reality ethical, especially when certain facts are misrepresented? Are there any acceptable reasons for revisionistic histories? And, finally, whose truth is Truth?

Parts of the *Malcolm X* film, based on the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley, are not true to the facts, according to Bruce Perry’s *The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America*, a book critically praised for its “more complex portrait” of Malcolm X. These alleged falsehoods include: the perpetuation of the “myth” that Malcolm’s mom was a “strong but loving, protective mother” when she actually “ruled her children with an iron hand”; the portrayal of his mother as a “gun-toting” woman who fended off a band of Ku Klux Klansmen when the incident, according to his mother and aunt, never occurred; the creation of a hero out of Malcolm’s “brutal,” “skirt-chasing” father, Earl Little; the contradictory story of how Earl Little was burned out of his home, allegedly beaten, and subsequently killed when laid in the path of a streetcar; and the seemingly exacerbated retelling of Malcolm’s life of violence and crime. Lee also used a fictional character to lead Malcolm to Islam instead of his own brother and sister, as described in both Haley’s and Perry’s books. In fact, nothing is said of Malcolm’s sister (half sister really) Ella Little whose influence on him and his thinking was enormous.

Lee said his intention was to “not tear down Malcolm; for us, this is an act of love.” Changing names and dates of events, Lee says, was not distortion. “. . . we’re not making a documentary; we’re making a drama. You can’t include everything; some things you switch or turn around.” The film’s producer, Marvin Worth, who knew Malcolm X, says “Everybody’s got their own version of Malcolm X. He was one of the most misunderstood people in history. We’re not playing games with making up our opinion of the truth,” noting the script’s adherence to the Haley book and the writers’ use verbatim of Malcolm’s speeches.

Entertainment writer David Ansen asserts that Lee is not a historian but a consummate “showman” and knows how to entertain his audience, noting that the filmmaker devotes over a third of the movie to Malcolm’s “wild early years.” The artist in Lee wants to give us the man as well as the myth—“the inner evolution that is Malcolm’s real and haunting story,” he adds.

But does being a showman give license to distort? No, some of Lee’s critics say, indicating Lee’s stretching of the truth goes too far. Lloyd Rose says, “No one can argue that facts aren’t primary in attempting to get hold of history.” Perry writes: “Lee’s film is well made and entertaining, but it is fatally flawed from the standpoint of biographical and historical accuracy. His *Malcolm* is largely a myth.” Writer and Black activist Amiri Baraka says Lee “is able to manipulate popular imagery” in the pursuit of artistic but nationalistic ends, maintaining that, “We will not let Malcolm X’s life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier.”

Baraka, perhaps the most vocal of Lee’s critics, adds: “Malcolm X’s life is not a commercial property. It can’t be claimed by a petit bourgeois Negro who has \$40 million,” referring to Lee’s accumulated wealth and to the merchandising of the Malcolm X name, a systematic selling of a cultural image via baseball caps and T-shirts.

In fact, many critics of the film and of Lee's directing-storytelling style have accused the filmmaker of "participation in a 'retrograde' movement" to rehistoricize the memory of Malcolm X to serve Lee's own purposes. These presumed purposes range from the negative—pure profit motives and the enhancement of Lee's celebrity status—to the more positive—legitimizing an authentic African-American hero and answering the call to "lay claim to an intelligent black culture."

As artist, Lee has been praised for his positive portrayal of African-American life and his ability to confront issues that no other filmmaker has been bold enough to tackle. His strength is in inviting the black audience "to discover the pleasures of seeing its usually hidden and segregated social and cultural world exposed to the legitimating power of celluloid. It is comforted by Lee's ability to construct recognizable images of racial community, particularly where the forms of solidarity in cinematic circulation are scarce outside the movie theater." His aim, it seems, is community-building within the African-American culture and the breakdown of stereotypes within America. To do this, Lee has "consistently put images or dialogue on film that have flooded the viewer with the remembrance of things past or recognition of things present."

In an interview with Artforum, Lee asserts that "I want people to be all fired up for this. To get inspired by it. This is not just some regular bullshit Hollywood movie. This is life and death we're dealing with, this is a mind set, this is what Black people in America have come through."

### Micro Issues:

1. How closely must a film based on a specific historical character stick to the known truth about the character?
2. Should the filmmaker alert the viewer that certain events within a historical film have been dramatized or that they are fictional?
3. Should a filmmaker deliberately advocate a political position in history-based film?

### Middle-range Issues:

1. What are the audience member's responsibilities when watching a film that purports to be a true account of history?
2. Should filmmakers be allowed to alter historical fact for a higher purpose? What about biographers? Creators in other media?

### Macro Issues:

1. Is film an appropriate forum for discussion of the civil rights movement?
2. What does the filmmaker owe to an audience that may have no firsthand awareness of the historical premise of the movie?
3. What standards of truth should entertainment meet? Are there different standards of truth for different media?
4. In an issue as complex as the civil rights movement, is there more than one version of truth?
5. Is the creation of a legend, whether with truth or with fiction, a legitimate purpose for a filmmaker?