

*America through My Lens:
The Evolving Nature of Race and
Class in the Films of Spike Lee*

SPIKE LEE

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SPIKE LEE is a writer-director, actor, producer, author, and educator who has revolutionized the role of black talent in cinema. Widely regarded as today's premiere African American filmmaker, Lee is a forerunner in the "do it yourself" school of independent film. Lee's latest endeavor is the documentary *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise*. Such films as *Inside Man*, *25th Hour*, *The Original Kings of Comedy*, *Bamboozled*, and *Summer of Sam* are examples of the breadth and diversity of Lee's subject matter. Lee's films *Girl 6*, *Get on the Bus*, *Do the Right Thing*, and *Clockers* display his ability to showcase a series of outspoken and provocative sociopolitical critiques that challenge cultural assumptions, not only about race but also about class and gender identity.

Lee began teaching a course about filmmaking and black film at Harvard in 1991 and continued to teach at other universities. Since 2002 Lee has been Artistic Director and Professor of Film in the Graduate Film Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Spike Lee has combined his extensive creative experience into yet another venture: partnering with DDB Needham, he created Spike/DDB, a full-service advertising agency.

Before we get rolling, some of my films have dealt with race. I would like to give you some of my background, which I think will help inform you of who I am and how I made the films that I've made so far.

CHILDHOOD

I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, but I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. We lived in a predominantly Italian American neighborhood, Cobble Hill. It's right by the Brooklyn waterfront, which was predominantly Italian American. We were one of the first black families to move into this neighborhood, so my siblings and I were called "nigger" a couple times the first couple weeks.

But when they found out there was no other invasion of black families following us, then we were all right. Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, I had no idea I wanted to be a filmmaker. I went to see movies. My mother would take me to films, and my father's a jazz musician, and he would take me to the Village Vanguard, where he was playing. Filmmaking was not something I thought you could do. You just went to movie theaters, had fun. At Saturday matinees my friends and I would throw stuff at the screen, throw candy at each other, drink soda, and try not to get thrown out of the theater.

We had no understanding that people actually made films. But even at that early age, I still noticed something, that the richness of the African American experience, which I could see standing on the corner while I was looking out the window, was absent for the most part in films and television.

I was born in, I think, a great time, because I was a child of the civil rights movement. All this stuff was happening when I was seven, eight, nine years old. I saw it firsthand, and of course at the time it was Sidney Poitier who was leading the way, and there was also Diahann Carroll's TV show *Julia*. For the most part, that was it. I remember distinctly seeing Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra on television. My mother grabbed me, telling me Cleopatra did not look like that. This is the type of household I grew up in, where my parents were very, very vigilant about letting us know, reteaching us. I was not taught in school that George Washington, the first president of the United States of America, owned slaves. In fact, many of our presidents, many of the people, the framers, of the United States Constitution, owned slaves, but we weren't taught that in school.¹

1. James Lance Taylor, "Slavery in America," in *1500-1815*, vol. 1 of *Americans at War*, edited by John P. Resch (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 169-74.

My parents felt it was their duty to try to tell us these other things, like Christopher Columbus. We learned about him in our house, and number one, “How can you discover something with people there already?” I find myself as the parent doing the same. Even though my children go to elite private schools in New York City, we still have to reeducate them from the stuff that’s being taught to them.

EDUCATION

Education for me is very important. My mother taught for many years. My grandmother taught, but I’ll get back to her later. My great-grandfather was a disciple of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute. We have a long history of educators in my family.

I went to Morehouse in Atlanta, Georgia. My father was three years behind Dr. King at Morehouse. My grandfather went to Morehouse. My mother and grandmother went to Spelman, which is across the street. It was expected that I go to Morehouse College.

I come from a background where education is part of the fabric of who we are. Something that is not really thought about a lot is that our ancestors, if you are African American, knew that education would be one of the ways to lead us out of bondage. During slavery, if you got caught by massa readin’ or writin’, that was your ass. Three things could happen to you: you could get whipped, lynched, or castrated; if massa was having a bad day, you’d get all three.

Despite knowing those terrible things could happen to them, people still knew it was their duty and obligation—those who knew how to read and write—to teach other people the same, because they knew, as I said before, that education would be the key. It’s somewhat disheartening today. Recently, the *New York Times* ran an article that talked about the dropout rate among African American males, and it said that in New York City, only 50 percent of African American males graduate from high school.²

How do we get to a place where people were willing to die to get educated, but now we’re dropping out at record rates? When I teach or speak to audiences of young African Americans, I really try to stress to them that there is nothing cool about being ignorant. Many young African Americans are under tremendous pressure because they speak correct English or get good grades; they’re ostracized as being white, a sellout, an Oreo, which is really ignorant.

2. Sam Dillon, “Large Urban-Suburban Gap Seen in Graduation Rates,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2009, A14(L).

If you're hanging out on the corner, smoking a joint and drinking a 40 with your pants hanging below your ass, you're keeping it real, not knowing that you're ignorant. Education has always been one of my passions, and for the past eighteen years, I've been a professor at NYU, where I graduated from the Tisch School of the Arts. For the past ten years I've been artistic director of the Graduate Film School.

Education has no race, no color, and no religion. It's something that these African American kids really have to learn. Not everyone is going to play in the NBA or NFL, and everyone can't rap. We have a generation of young people growing up who don't see any other options, so they end up on the corner, drug trafficking. There is a direct correlation between the dropout rate and the same numbers that go into the jails and prisons.³

This is really my background. When I decided I wanted to be a filmmaker, I wanted to, from out the gate, try to tell stories that reflect the African American experience.

IMAGERY

The richest African American experience, which I could see out my window was standing on the corner, I didn't see in films or in television. When I decided I wanted to be a filmmaker, I might as well have told people that I wanted to walk on the moon. At that time, there was only one African American director who worked directly in Hollywood. That person was Michael Schultz. You might have heard of *Cooley High*; he directed a lot of the Richard Pryor films. Richard Pryor was the biggest star in Hollywood at that time.

The richness of who we are is what I wanted to see on the screen. When you look at the history of cinema, which you could start with D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, and look at the history of TV, which you could start with *Amos 'n' Andy*, these great mediums have been used to give misrepresentations of people. Film and TV are very powerful—powerful tools—especially in the hands of great filmmakers.

D. W. Griffith was a great filmmaker. Because of his skills, he could make a film that caused the president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, to say, "It is like writing history with lightning."⁴ *Birth of a Nation* was such a powerful film that it could stir up great reinventions of the

3. Sam Dillon, "Study Finds That about 10 Percent of Young Male Dropouts Are in Jail or Detention," *New York Times*, October 9, 2009, A12(L).

4. Roger Ebert, "*The Birth of a Nation* (1915)," March 30, 2003, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030330/REVIEWS08/303300301/1023>.

Ku Klux Klan. *Birth of a Nation* was actually used as a recruiting tool for the Ku Klux Klan.⁵

With these powerful images, it takes away people's humanity. The United States of America is the most powerful country in this world, not because we have more nuclear arms than anybody, except the Soviets.⁶ We dominate the world because of culture. A nuclear bomb never influenced how somebody talked, how they dressed, how they danced. We dominate because of culture, because of rock and roll, because of hip-hop, because of Levi's, because of Nike, because of Coca-Cola, because of Apple, because of films, TV. That's how we dominate the world: because of culture.

These images, whether you like them or not, have a very powerful influence on how people think and react. Many of my female African American friends who have traveled all over the world have been accosted by men solely because the men thought these women were the women they had seen in music videos bouncing, doing all types of stuff. That is how powerful these images are.

For me, it became very clear one day. I went to see a Bruce Lee movie on Forty-Second Street, Times Square. I don't know if it was *Five Fingers of Death* or *Enter the Dragon*, one of those films. After the movie, I saw five thousand kids run up and down Forty-Second Street doing flying kicks, hitting each other with their nunchakus, thinking they could speak Chinese, and then that's when it hit me. It was like an epiphany, a revelation. This is the power of films. I also saw it when *Superfly* came out. Everybody started to want their hair like Superfly, and they were wearing full-length mink coats. It was crazy.

That is when it all began to click, and if you see an image long enough, if it keeps being fed to you again and again and again, then you're going to believe it. There are stereotypes about African Americans or other people that start in film and television that are still with us today. We definitely think of the treatment of Native Americans in film and television, especially if you look at the films of director John Ford and John Wayne. They tried to make up for it with their last film, *The Searchers*, but I feel that it was too late. The damage had been done.

5. K. Stephen Prince, "The Birth of a Nation (Film, 1915)," in *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience* (ABC-CLIO, 2010–), <http://africanamerican.abc-clio.com/>.

6. Federation of American Scientists, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," <http://www.fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/nuclearweapons/nukestatus.html>.

I began to think about it: why are these images out there? I have a theory. This country was based upon democracy, and you can say, well, maybe not democracy for all, but democracy. If the founding fathers were to be God-fearing, God-loving people, if they are that, how could they justify the treatments of the Native Americans first and later with slaves? Because they had to deal with that. My theory is that it became easier to maneuver in this murky territory if Native Americans and slaves were not human beings. They were less than human. Go to the Constitution of the United States of America: slaves are listed as three-fifths of a human being.⁷ I'm not making this up; Google it when you go home. Three-fifths of a human being, not four-fourths, not eight-eighths, not six-sixths: less than whole. If you could ostracize these people as less than human, "they're not equal with us," then you can get around all these issues about how you're treating them.

It was done with the Native Americans. If you look at the films, the books, the TV shows, they were portrayed as savages. One day I hope to make a film dealing with some of the Native American experience. I think what happened to them is criminal. Now they are relegated to reservations across this country—I call them more like concentration camps—where they have the highest level of alcoholism and diabetes. We can go on and on and on. It's no fun living on the reservation, and if you're lucky, you might have a casino. A lot of those are just fronts for some other people.

We're dealing again with imagery, and no one is better than Hollywood in portraying imagery. You go around the world, and there is a John Wayne image. That came from Hollywood. We could go on and on and on about this imagery of who and what America is, but it's going to have to change, because I don't know if you have noticed—maybe you didn't get the memo—but by the year 2035, white Americans are going to be a minority in this country.⁸ I'm gonna repeat that. Maybe not in the state of Utah—it's going to take longer than that. In 2035 white Americans will be a minority in this country. So it always comes down to who tells the story. If you win the war, then you win the battle, and it's almost certain that you're going to tell a story the way you want to tell it, and that's going to be perceived as the truth.

7. US Constitution, Article I, Section 2, para. 3.

8. Census Bureau. "United States Population Projections: 2000 to 2050," <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/analytical-document09.pdf>. The article projects 2042 as the date.

My grandmother taught for fifty years as an art teacher. Her name is Zimmie Retha Shelton. She lived to be one hundred years old, and for fifty years she saved her Social Security checks to put her grandchildren through college and higher education if they achieved it. Since I was the eldest, I had first dibs. My grandmother's grandmother was born a slave. Her grandmother was born a slave, yet she graduated from college. So when we talk about slavery, it's not that distant from my grandmother. I'm five generations removed from slavery, and I think about that anytime I get in trouble. I always refer back to my ancestors, who worked from can't see in the morning to can't see at night.

Many times families were split apart, never to be seen again. Anything I went through or will go through pales in comparison to what my ancestors went through. I had an extra-special duty, at the beginning, to do some films dealing with race in this country. Now, if you Google or go to IMDb and look at my body of work, all my films do not deal with race; that is not my only interest.⁹ But since we're here to talk about race tonight, I'm going to look at some of the films and discuss them with you and how they fit into my vision.

SCHOOL DAZE

As I said before, I'm a third-generation Morehouse man, and I wanted to do a film about my college experience. Even though I grew up in Brooklyn, I was still like many people who grew up in the northern cities. When it came to be summertime, your parents shipped you South to their parents so they could get a break. Every summer my brothers and I were shipped down South, and we would spend half of the summer in Atlanta and the other half in Snow Hill, Alabama.

I had become somewhat privy to the black-college experience. But going there was something else. The first film I'm talking about is *School Daze*, which came out in 1988. What I wanted to do with *School Daze* was use a black-college experience as a microcosm for what was happening in the black community at the time, and in some ways still is today. I wanted to show the divisions among us based upon skin complexion, hair texture, and social status. I got heavily criticized for *School Daze* for airing our dirty laundry. White moviegoers would know how we are. I laughed at that, because some of that stuff was instituted by massa with the separation of slaves by dividing people in the big house and people in the slave

9. Spike Lee, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000490/>.

quarters. It was amazing to me how deep this color thing was, and you could trace that back to slavery, again, with massa slipping into the slave quarters at night and having his way. It's not as evident as it was before, but we still, among ourselves, have issues with color, with skin complexion. If we just take a look at the music videos out today and see who's cast in them and what the look is, it's still there.

DO THE RIGHT THING

My first two films, *She's Gotta Have It* and *School Daze*, as far as my directing skills went, I was not confident, so it was really my third film, *Do the Right Thing*, where I began to feel confident as a director. Right after *School Daze*, I wanted to deal directly with race. At that time New York City was a racially polarized city, a lot of it spurred on by the then mayor, Ed Koch. Growing up, there had always been a lot of hostility, sometimes between African American and Italian American communities. I've come to the realization that maybe it's because we're so much alike in a lot of ways, but I really wanted to deal with race head-on. One of the major criticisms for *Do the Right Thing* was that at the end of the movie I did not provide the answer to race. Well, we never tried to pretend to be Jesus or God or Allah or whoever. We never tried to say we had the answers. Our job, we felt, as the filmmakers was to present what we saw, and maybe through dialogue we would try to come to some answers. But there were certain things that formed the foundation of *Do the Right Thing*.

Number one, as I said before, New York City at the time was very racially polarized. Then there was an incident in Howard Beach where three African American men were driving home. Howard Beach is a predominately Italian American neighborhood. Their car broke down, and they went into the New World pizzeria and were chased out of the pizzeria by a gang of young Italian American Louisville Slugger-wielding teenagers, and one of the men trying to get away ran onto the Belt Parkway and got hit by a car.¹⁰

There was another incident at Brooklyn College, where in the cafeteria there was one jukebox and there was static about what type of music black students wanted to listen to and what type of music the white students wanted to listen to, so I stored that, too. And so using all these things, I came up with this idea of having this script called *Do the Right*

10. Sam Roberts, "Metro Matters: Howard Beach Can't Forget Violent Night (Metropolitan Desk)," *New York Times*, June 18, 1987.

Thing, which takes place on the hottest day of the summer, on one block in the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, which at the time was predominantly black, but there is a thing called gentrification, so Bed-Stuy is not do-or-die anymore. All these things we put together in the film.

When the film debuted in Cannes, there was a furor right away because there was a certain element in the American press who thought it was the first film that would cause riots all across America. I felt that the African American audience was just as intelligent as any other audience, and they're not going to try to go out and do the same thing they see onscreen. No young black kid's going to see the film and then go try to be like Mookie and throw a garbage can through a pizzeria window.

But that was the charge. And I had to do many interviews defending the film for that, and I'm thinking many white Americans chose to see the film when it came out on video, or later on TV, in the safety and comfort of their own living rooms because, I'm not lying, David Denby and Joe Klein said, "Pray to God that this film does not open in your neighborhood, and do not go see it with a Black audience."¹¹

I saw that when you deal with race, one, they try to chop your knees off or call you a racist. That's the oldest trick in the book. Say you are that subject—they would negate what you are saying. But we understood that there were truths in this film, and we did not go to the Academy Awards expecting to win anything. We were, as they say, as a lot of athletes say a lot of the time, "just happy to be there." But very few people are being taught *Driving Miss Daisy* in universities and colleges across this country today. *Driving Miss Daisy* won Best Picture that year; you can look it up.¹²

What really surprised me with the reaction of *Do the Right Thing* is that race is this great big elephant in the room, for the most part. It bubbles under the surface, and blacks and whites are afraid to talk about it, but you have flash points. Whether it's O. J. or Professor Skip Gates, there are various things that happen where it flairs up as a great big thing and then dies down. I feel this will continue to happen unless we really start to have serious discussions about race. I know it's very hard to do, but if we talk about race, we're going to have to really go back to the source and deal with slavery, and that's something. With the exception of *Roots*, which is a really commendable but still a watered-down version of what actually happened, we're not going to get to that point. I still feel that this country

11. David Denby, "Movies: He's Gotta Have It," *New York Magazine*, June 26, 1989; Joe Klein, "The City Politic: Spiked?," *New York Magazine*, June 26, 1989.

12. Academy Awards Database, Best Picture—1989, <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/>.

will never be as great as it can be until we talk about that. Now, I did think, however, that with the election of President Obama that this country did make a great turn. It didn't last that long because of crazies, with these Tea Baggers and men of the cloth proposing to burn the Koran. We're in a very crazy place now, but we're going to have to learn how to live with each other sooner or later. Hopefully, it will be sooner, because I gave you that census number, and it'll be a little longer in Utah, but what are we to be as a country? How do we look?

Here's the thing I was thinking about. We're supposed to be the beacon of democracy. We always talk about how we wrote the book, and then people around the world are looking at what's happened at Ground Zero with this Islamic center and looking at us like we're crazy.¹³ And then there's the preacher trying to burn the Koran.¹⁴ These are not good things that are happening. It really comes down, again, to race. When we're dealing with race, we're talking about how one people might feel they're superior to another. By using imagery, placing images that dehumanize and derogate people, by just putting that stuff out there, people believe it. *Do the Right Thing*, again, opened my eyes to the power of the meaning and also let me know that it's something that cannot be played with. This is very serious.

Dr. Henry Louis Gates is a dear friend of mine, and I was astounded when I read and found out that he had been arrested entering his own house—a Harvard professor. That's astounding, and I was perplexed by President Obama's solution to this incident.¹⁵ "Let's have a beer on the lawn and talk about it." I still have not understood that one; it's perplexing to me. "Have a beer and talk about it," which reminded me somewhat of the ending of *Do the Right Thing*.

Originally, *Do the Right Thing* was supposed to be done for Paramount Pictures, but they did not like the ending. They wanted Mookie and Sal to hug at the end of the movie. Just a little short of "We Are the World," that's what they wanted, and I was not doing it. I was not doing it. So, let's have discussions, but let's have honest, truthful discussions that deal with the hurt that we all experience in this country, and not some superficial "Have a beer" and "Why can't we all just get along?" because there's too much history here in this country.

13. "The Islamic Center Controversy, Aug. 15–21," *New York Times*, August 22, 2010, 2(L).

14. Damien Cave, "Far from Ground Zero, Obscure Pastor Is Ignored No Longer," *New York Times*, August 26, 2010, A14(L).

15. Helene Cooper and Abby Goodnough, "In a Reunion over Beers, No Apologies, but Cordial Plans to Have Lunch Sometime," *New York Times*, July 31, 2009, A10(L).

JUNGLE FEVER

After *Do the Right Thing*, I took a break, came back with *Mo' Better Blues*, but then I wanted to deal with race again, more specifically, the dynamics between Italian Americans again and African Americans with the film *Jungle Fever*, which came out in 1991. Which reminds me, today I did an interview with *Ebony* magazine for the twentieth anniversary of *Mo' Better Blues*, and I'm like dag, twenty years.¹⁶ So, every year it's going to be, for the next four or five years, the twentieth anniversary of one of my films because we were doing one every year. With *Jungle Fever* there were a lot of misconceptions about that film. I never, ever thought that interracial marriage could not be possible—it's not a bad thing when two people love each other—but the scenario we had in that film, with two great performances by Wesley Snipes and Annabella Sciorra, is when two people from two different races get together for the wrong reasons and what would be the ramifications of that. We had one scene in Bensonhurst, again another predominately Italian American neighborhood. Used to be that, but it got gentrified, too, but Bensonhurst back in that day was Bensonhurst. One day filming *Jungle Fever*, I needed police protection because there was a death threat when we tried to shoot in that neighborhood.¹⁷ Again, we touched a raw nerve.

Now, as I said before, a lot of times I'm seen as a director who only deals with race. I've never set out to become a spokesperson on race or a spokesperson for African American people. I never try to say I'm speaking on behalf of forty-five million African Americans. People try to put me in that position, but it's something that I've been very uncomfortable with. But race makes people very uncomfortable, and it's not necessarily good for the box office, either, but I've done films where the box office is not the major consideration, and my films have not cost so much that it became prohibitive for the studios to finance them.

MALCOLM X

The next film I'll go to is *Malcolm X*, which was 1992. We're coming up on that twentieth anniversary, and I own the only 70-millimeter print of that film, and it's been in the vault. We'll bring it out of the vault for the twentieth anniversary. Hopefully, Denzel will show up for it.

16. Margena A. Christian, "Mo' Better Blues, 20 Years Later . . . Inside Spike Lee's Sexy Tribute to Jazz," *Ebony*, December 2010–January 2011.

17. "Spike Lee Film Project Guarded after a Threat (Metropolitan Desk)," *New York Times*, September 21, 1990.

When I was in junior high school, I had an English literature class where one of the required reading materials was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*. And to this day that still has been the most influential book I've read, and for the students here, even if you haven't taken a class where it's required, you should read that—show some initiative and read that book on your own time. Get off the Twitter for a little bit, Facebook, MySpace; let it go for a little bit and read. You could read it on your iPad or on your computer screen.

I was not the original director on *Malcolm X*. The original director is a great director named Norman Jewison, who did great films dealing with race; go back to *In the Heat of the Night* with Rod Steiger and Sidney Poitier, *Hurricane*, *A Soldier's Story*, all films directed by Norman Jewison.

When I read that he was slated to direct this film and I said publicly that I didn't think he was the right director for it, the late producer Marvin Worth contacted me and said, "Why don't you stop talking to the press. Let's arrange a meeting between you and Norman Jewison." And so we sat down, and Norman Jewison gracefully bowed out. He didn't have to do it; he was signed on to do it.¹⁸ But Denzel was on the film with Norman Jewison, because they had worked together before.¹⁹

Coming aboard, I had the choice of writing a script from scratch or reading the various scripts that were written over the years, because Marvin Worth had been trying to make this film for twenty years. I read all the scripts. The first script I read was written by Arnold Perl and the great James Baldwin. That's the script I chose to rewrite.

It had to be rewritten because there was stuff that we wanted to have that the script did not deal with. Denzel Washington, I feel, gave one of the greatest performances ever, ever, as Andre and Kanye would say, ever, ever—ever, ever. We both knew how important this film was. We also knew how much pressure there was every day: almost every day Denzel and I would tease each other and ask each other, "Did you bring your passport?" just in case we had to leave the country under the cover of darkness.

The reason we felt we needed the length of the film is because if you look at that movie, Denzel's playing four or five characters, and you see the evolution of someone. He is someone who starts out with his father

18. David Ansen, "The Battle for *Malcolm X*," *Newsweek*, August 26, 1991.

19. Norman Jewison directed Denzel Washington in the film *A Soldier's Story*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088146>.

murdered by the Klan, becomes a pimp, Detroit Red, joins the Nation of Islam, then evolves into true Islam. As he eventually comes to wisdom, it comes to light that all people are the same. It was important to show that in the film, because through the mainstream media, Malcolm X had been portrayed one way.

Denzel began to prepare for the film a year before we began. The reason Denzel is one of the greatest actors of all time is that he's one of the most intelligent actors. Many actors when they do a film where they're playing someone's life really think that "As long as I speak like them, get their speech patterns, look like them, then my job is done." Denzel knew that if you do that, that's just the surface; that's just a thorough impersonation. Denzel knew that in order for the audience to believe he was Malcolm, he would have to show the essence of the man.

And so you ask, how do you show the essence of a man? You show that by letting your body be a vessel, let Malcolm's spirit channel through you, and make people believe that is not Denzel on the screen; that is a reincarnation of Malcolm X. I'm a witness to that transformation. There were many times while we were filming *Malcolm X* where I had to pinch myself, because I lost Denzel Washington and I was seeing Malcolm before me. And I wasn't the only one; cast and crew bore witness to that too.

I remember one specific scene; all the speeches in the film are the words of Malcolm, his actual words taken from his speeches. A roll of 35-millimeter film is about ten minutes. We had, like, a ten-page scene where Malcolm's giving his speech and Denzel's giving this riveting performance. I'm looking at the monitor to one side—I'm looking to him. I'm also looking at my script, so I can read what he's saying.

So as we're going through the script, I'm flipping pages. A magnificent performance, and I see I'm on my last page and the scene should end, and I call cut. As Denzel gets to the last word in the scene, and I'm about to call cut, he keeps going. Even though the scripted part is over with, every word that is coming out of his mouth is as if it was written by Malcolm himself. I'm not going to be stupid enough to call cut—he'll kill me. I let it go until the film runs out, and the director of photography, Ernest Dickerson, his camera operator says, "You looking at me?" like, "The film's running out." I said, "You gotta wait." Film runs out, people start applauding, and Denzel's like in a trance. I say, "Did you know that you went past what was scripted?" He says, "Spike, I cannot even tell you what I said." That was a very specific example of him allowing the spirit of Malcolm to come through him.

Now, how'd he do that? It came with the year of preparation; it came with him learning, him reading the Koran, him learning to pray—to say prayer in Arabic—him deciding I cannot play this role, so I'm gonna have to stop drinking. I cannot play this role, so if I'm eating pork chops and stuff, swine, can't do it. And that is the power of the film to me, Denzel's performance. And that film deals directly with race in this country. Here is someone who stood up to white America and said, "We are human beings too."

Now, of course you had the counterpart of Dr. King, so in a lot of ways Denzel was giving America—I mean, excuse me, Malcolm (Freudian slip), Malcolm was giving America a choice, like, look, deal with me or you deal with Dr. King. You saw how America dealt with them: both were assassinated.

With Malcolm, definitely the Nation of Islam had their hands in that. But there's no profit talking about race in this country, because there are many people wanting you to think that everything's okay, everything's okeydokey, and particularly for African Americans, they always throw the successful ones in your face. How could things be so bad? You have Oprah Winfrey, you got Will Smith, and those are examples of people who—because they're great talents—were able to slip through. But we still have a serious problem here in this country in race, and the fact that we have an African American president has not really made the discussion, I feel, that much easier.

4 LITTLE GIRLS

It is well documented that the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, made white America wake up to what was really happening in the South, this whole civil rights struggle. With this film, I wanted to go back to the people who were there, to the witnesses.²⁰ Let them tell their stories about who these four girls might have become if they had been allowed to live. Very, very hard film to do.

It is not easy to talk to parents about their children who were murdered by the dynamite sticks that were planted by the Klan. For years they've been trying to forget their loss, but you can never forget that. By agreeing to be in this film, they knew that they would be opening up deep wounds that they had tried to not open up. It was the first time I had done a documentary, so I was very shaky about asking questions that you

20. Janet Maslin, "Still Reeling from the Day Death Came to Birmingham," *New York Times*, July 9, 1997.

knew might cause people to break down. But I knew it was part of my job as a filmmaker to do that. I was astounded by people's eagerness to tell their story about what happened. Because a lot of stuff had not been told about the bombing of the church.

One of the hardest things I had to do, in that film and during the research, was the postmortem, the photographs that were taken in the morgue of the four little girls, and I'd never seen bodies like that before. I had to think long and hard, and I prayed on it. Should I include these horrific photographs of the four girls in the documentary? My conscience told me I should put them in because I wanted the world, anybody who saw the film, to see what those sticks of dynamite had done to these young girls. The first screening that we had, the parents were there, and I chose not to tell them that these photographs would be included. It shocked them, but afterward they came up to me and said they understood why the photos needed to be there.

When you look at that film, you see the hatred with Sheriff Bull Connor—I think his official title was “commissioner of public safety”—who ran around in a white tank as he turned the German shepherds and the water hoses on black folks and then consequently the bombing. I mean, that was not the only bomb. The city had a nickname. Black folks called it Bombingham, Alabama, because bombs went off regularly in Birmingham.²¹

VIGILANCE

It makes you think: where does this hate come from? I'm not gonna say the Klan is the only hate group here in this country. But where does the hate come from? And as Americans, we have a tendency to always look for the boogeyman in this country. First, you could say definitely the boogeyman was the Native Americans. Then you had the slaves. Go to World War I, it was the Germans; World War II, it was the Nazis, the Fascists, the Japanese. Post-World War II, it was definitely the Soviet Union, the Communists. Now, we all know who the new boogeyman is, where every person who's of Islamic faith is a terrorist. And that's crazy too. We have a whole lot of things that we have to deal with in this country, and as Michael Jackson said—I'm not trying to be funny—we gotta look at our own selves in the mirror.

21. Rick Bragg, “F.B.I. Reopens Investigation into Landmark Crime of the Civil Rights Era,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1997.

As parents, we have to be really careful what we say around our children because children pick up stuff. Kids are not born racist, sexist, or any other -ist you want to add. This is something that is learned. We have to combat this. We have to stand up to that, no matter what it is. When we see it, we have to see it for what it is and call it out. We have to be vigilant; we can't just stand by, laid-back, in the cut, and let stuff slide. If friends and relatives say something, you have to pull their coattail, let them know that they have to begin another way of thinking.