

Commentary on ‘Judas and the Black Messiah’

written by Larry Hales
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I remember the feeling of being in the theater to see the movie “Malcolm X.” I was 15. My political interests had already been piqued by the L.A. rebellion which began

on April 29 of the same year. I had been forced to leave the city of my birth, a city in the middle of the industrial belt, picked up and dropped down in Dallas, Texas. Everyone spoke in a different accent, used different slang. I was lost and confused, missing home, and so sat down in the theater alone.

The beginning credits are overlaid with a U.S. flag which is interspersed with the grainy black and white footage of Rodney King being repeatedly battered with batons by LAPD. Denzel Washington recites parts of speeches given by Malcolm X.

The audience in the film retorts and it begins a call and response. In the theater there was silence. This was before YouTube, so I'd never heard Malcolm's voice but had only read his autobiography. Denzel's voice might as well had been Malcolm's.

Rodney King lies on his side and the baton swings from the hands of the faceless cops continue. Malcolm's words punctuate each blow. The flames begin to engulf a flag I had already learned as a symbol of something not meant for people like me. A chorus rises over the accompaniment and a car drives by in the black and white footage as Malcolm talks of the hypocrisy of so-called democracy and gets to the barbarity that gave rise to the U.S. and to the initial capital from which capitalism grew.

“We don't see any American dream. We've experienced only the American nightmare.”
— Malcolm X

“Malcolm X” is certainly not a perfect biographical film. It omits Malcolm's further development as an internationalist and anti-capitalist. Nevertheless, it still was groundbreaking to have a movie about one of the preeminent political minds produced in the U.S. I had never seen anything like it. I imagine most my age hadn't either. It was rare to see a movie with a majority Black cast even, let alone something focused on the life of a Black radical.

After the film most of the movie goers sat in the audience. Perhaps some remained to listen to Aretha Franklin's cover of Donny Hathaway's "Someday We'll All Be Free." For me it was that I could not get up. Simple as that. It was a mixture of ardor and hurt that stirred my mind and I couldn't move an inch, and didn't for maybe 5 minutes.

For years after the L.A. Rebellion I felt that it was the event that affected me most and was responsible for my political trajectory. It was a spark. But it is significantly much more complex.

The L.A. Rebellion itself was due to a confluence of factors that mark a long winter. The internal liberation movements, especially the Black liberation movement, having been smashed by the political powers in the U.S. via their police forces and courts, along with the politicization of the drug trade, deindustrialization, the growth of neoliberalism, the waning of global leftist movements and the later collapse of the Soviet Union are all contributing factors. Rebellions are a semi-regular feature of life under capitalism. In the instance of the L.A. Rebellion, as in many other cases, it was against the state apparatus, of which police are a part. It was a cry, however, that seemed to echo in a political vacuum. It is not entirely true of course, but because of the context listed it seemed that way.

Now comes "Judas and the Black Messiah." As a movie it is well made. The acting is tremendous. Daniel Kaluuya is very convincing as Chairman Fred Hampton. His performance is on par with Denzel's Malcolm.

There is less footage of Chairman Fred, because he was only 21 when he was assassinated and his political life, the point from which he was thrust into leadership and the national spotlight, was too brief. Kaluuya is 11 years older than Chairman Fred was at his death. Some have complained of the disparity in age. However, it would be difficult to find someone closer to the right age who could truly display the emotional and intellectual maturity Chairman Fred exuded. Plus, it is a rare feat for

an actor to play the same age as their character, especially in early adulthood. Hampton belied that which is normally attributed to someone only 21 years of age. This is not meant to be a knock against young adults of course. In reality, while full maturity is not reached at 21, the expectations then versus now were different.

Dominique Fishback as Deborah Johnson, now Akua Njeri, is understated yet very effective. The scene where the cops execute an already shot and drugged with a lethal amount of barbiturates Chairman Fred is so effective that her rage radiates through the screen. Fishback explained that Akua told her not to cry and that she refused to look back because she wanted to remain defiant. Fishback is able to convey that desire to want to see her beloved and at the same time not wanting to give his murderers the satisfaction of seeing her affected.

If this were a straight review on the artistic merits, the performances of the actors of the film and the aesthetics of the cinematography, then I'd commend all the other actors. That isn't my primary duty, but a cursory one. I'd be remiss to not write about Lakeith Stanfield.

The main point of contention for political appraisals of "Judas and the Black Messiah" is the dual focus, which gives equal screen time to William O'Neal, played by Stanfield. The movie opens with a dramatization of the interview O'Neal did for the second part of "Eyes on the Prize." It then shows actual footage of rebellions during the period of the mid to late 1960s, with speeches given by various political leaders, from Angela Davis, to Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and others, until it shows Martin Sheen as J. Edgar Hoover speaking to F.B.I. agents and labeling the Black Panthers as the single greatest threat to national security.

Stanfield is 12 years older than O'Neal was when he was arrested for driving a stolen vehicle across state lines. Stanfield looks considerably older than pictures of O'Neal. The only recorded footage is from the "Eyes on the Prize 2" documentary, which was released the same night O'Neal committed suicide by running out into

traffic. O'Neal was 40 at that time, but looks slightly older than Stanfield does in the movie. That aside, Stanfield is convincing as a person drowning in his circumstance. This is not surprising as Stanfield has range as an actor and his lithe frame lends itself to the role. His eyes convey a charming lost slitheriness, an amalgam of a fox, doe and snake. A good actor has to embody a character down to the fingertips and the most minute of gestures. He has what we have come to imagine O'Neal to be down to the molecule.

**“I don't know what I'd tell him other than I was part of the struggle.”
— William O'Neal, 1989, “Eyes on the Prize 2”**

On the criticism of focus:

One can only imagine what O'Neal meant by the quote above. He most likely meant it differently than what his actual part in the struggle was. He was an informant. A snitch. A rat. He participated in the assassination of Chairman Fred Hampton and Defense Captain Mark Clark and the maiming and terrorizing of an oppressed community. He was one of many, unfortunately. He is perhaps the most well known.

Is it a missed opportunity or a mistake to have him as a focus of the film? It is clear from the interviews with the director. It is no accident that the film plays as a thriller, because that was the intent. There are a great many similarities to “The Departed.” It doesn't have the same amount of tension, mostly because it exists in the real world history and so doesn't have the same level of trickery and twists.

It works mostly as a piece of art, but also in displaying the complexities of people and history. It would be easy to consign O'Neal to a minor role, despite the outsized effect. But to do so would mean missing an opportunity to show the reach of the state — the police, courts, all the means by which power and control over society is exercised and help those in power remain so.

Additionally, O'Neal was a person, with his own backstory, connections and motivations, in this instance it was self preservation. Such people are fairly commonly seen now, for example, Lil Wayne supporting Donald Trump for a pardon is O'Nealesque. In fact, the qualities of many wealthy neocolonial types are those that O'Neal expressed. The FBI is very much as the film portrays it, as political police who know few boundaries when it comes to the means to suppress dissent. Using a 17-year-old who delved in the underground economy for survival presented no ethical dilemma.

The greatest effect of the dual focus is the juxtaposition. Chairman Fred Hampton embodies the idea of revolutionary suicide. Huey P. Newton explains it as such:

“Revolutionary Suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible.”

It is not simply a life desired as an individual but a desire for all to live in such a way. This is evident throughout the film, whether it be Chairman Fred meeting with a gathering of white people assembled by the Young Patriot Organization or in the solidarity with the Young Lords. It is also displayed in the final scene where Chairman Fred refuses to go on the run and uses the money given to him for the opening of the medical clinic.

“Why don't you live for the people. Why Don't you struggle for the people. Why don't you die for the people.”

— Chairman Fred Hampton

O'Neal's life is in contradiction to Chairman Fred's quotes above. He is driven by self-preservation and commits a reactionary suicide, his spirit crushed by the conditions of the system, his soul murdered. And so it would seem that it was of little consequence to him to commit to the acts to undermine the Black Panther Party and

to take part in the assassination of two of its brightest leaders, and in Chairman Fred Hampton one of the brightest strategists, organizers and theorists. He showed value in only his life. In the end, surely haunted by his own actions, his own physical life meant very little and so he ended it by running into traffic.

In the current context: a world where there is no longer a socialist camp, but independent economic spheres that threaten the primacy of U.S. imperialism, and one where there exists a profound political and ideological crisis, it is important that any tool be recognized that presents an opportunity to present ideas many are not familiar with.

While not many people are seeing this film in a theater, but at home, I am imagining them sitting there and interacting with the film as the current social and political context as their backdrop. How might the ideas expressed impact them? How might we use the film as a tool to drive discussion and develop their understanding of the world about them? That is the task and it is the great value of the film that not only is it well made and engaging but useful in its presentation of the politics of the most impactful communist-inspired organization of the last 50 years.

