
By Elysse Leonard for *The Seventh Art*

“We will no longer let you beat us with your clubs in the dark corners,” Martin Luther King, Jr. declared. “We will make you do it in the glaring light of television” (qtd. in Williams 252). The diffusion of the Holliday videotape, which captures the brutal beating of Rodney King by several Los Angeles Police Department officers, across media outlets provided seemingly hard evidence of racist police brutality for all to see. Despite the fact that four of the officers were tried in a state court for using excessive force, all but one were acquitted. Terry White, the prosecutor, described the footage as “the most objective piece of evidence you could have” (“The Rodney King Case”). However, the historical “fact” of the beating was rendered an “undecidable text” due to constant mediation by journalists, attorneys, politicians and laypersons alike, whose explanations of the footage were projected onto it. As the facts of the event were narrativized and moralized, fitted to competing frames, it became, as Linda Williams puts it, a “racial Rashomon” (257). *Dark Blue* and *Malcolm X*, narrative films that open with the Holliday footage, recapitulate this struggle for racially motivated interpretation. The former, a crime thriller directed by Ron Shelton, takes place in Los Angeles during the days leading up to the Rodney King verdict and the subsequent riots. Centered on police corruption and the use of excessive force, *Dark Blue* adopts the guise of a progressive, critical orientation while implicitly legitimizing police brutality and displacing black bodily suffering for white victimization. In this sense, it reiterates and affirms the racist logic underpinning the defense’s framing of the King footage in *California v. Powell*. *Malcolm X*, on the other hand, a biopic of the Black Nationalist leader and icon of racial opposition directed by Spike Lee, exposes and interrupts this latent cultural logic, tracing a historical continuum of black bodily suffering at the hands of whites.
Taken together, these films reflect and propagate racially determined modes of “reading” the visible evidence of interracial violence, offering up distinct conceptions of national identity, victimization, and collective historical trauma.

Both *Dark Blue* and *Malcolm X* weave archival materials into their story. The latter reveals Malcolm’s lifeless body being rushed to the hospital in a grainy, unstable, black and white image, segueing into a montage of archival footage and stills of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights protests etc. overlaid with Ossie Davis reciting the eulogy he delivered at Malcolm’s funeral. The opening of *Dark Blue* “reinvents” the high-speed chase that allegedly preceded the violent confrontation between King and the LAPD, for which no video record exists. Director Shelton outlines the efforts made to achieve a sense of authenticity: the scene was shot on four camcorders, the very model used by Holliday, and on location, tracing the exact route from the foothill freeway to the Paxton off ramp and the vacant lot in which King was beaten. Shelton remarks, “It was conceived that I could shoot footage that would cut into the real footage, so that you wouldn’t know when exactly the historic document began.” The result of such imperceptible blending of “real” and fabricated material is what Hayden White calls “history as you like it.” In this circumstance, facts are but functions of the meaning projected onto an event, rather than data from which meaning is created.

Both the prosecution and defense in the King trial converted the Holliday tape into a narrative text in an effort to legitimize their respective accounts of the event. By exploiting the manipulability of the videotape, the defense attorneys were able to put forth a narrative “from the perspective of beleaguered law enforcement authorities attempting to bring into custody an unruly and belligerent black scofflaw” (Tomasulo 76). They utilized voice-over narration and the ambiguated effects of slow motion and freeze-frames to cast each blow as a direct response to
King’s actions, transforming “Holliday’s long take into a montage” (Tomasulo 76). The visual evidence was placed within a “racist interpretive framework” that construed “King as the *agent* of violence” (Butler 16), one whose threat was established by citing a set of events preceding the beating, including King’s multiple moving violations and his suspected substance abuse. These are events for which there is no video evidence. *Dark Blue* fills in this evidentiary gap, staging the high-speed chase and extending the context of the original footage to encompass King’s criminal behaviour.¹ As Eric Santner acknowledges, such representations run the risk of “narrative fetishism,” simulating a wholeness and “intellectual mastery” over cultural trauma that isn’t available.

*Dark Blue* and *Malcolm X* take the King footage as an index of American identity, of the complex interrelationship between race and nation. Shelton labels *Dark Blue* “a Western for all intents and purposes,” implicating it in that genre’s project of national myth-making, which is predicated on an us/them dichotomy – the taming of the primitive “Other.” This genre framework crystallizes during the riot sequences, which Shelton believes “could be 1870 in Tombstone” were it not for the cars. Kurt Russell’s character, Eldon Perry, unpacks this meta-narrative during a speech he delivers at the end of the film that explicitly condemns police brutality while implicitly legitimizing it as the ugly yet necessary legacy of nation-building:

> Law enforcement has been my family’s business since Los Angeles was a frontier township. I … remember sitting on my granddaddy’s lap listening to stories about chasing horse thieves and rustlers into the Santa Monica mountains and coming back with a bad guy tied to his Appaloosa. And when my dad got into the business there was black and whites, traffic signals. But the job hadn’t changed.

¹ “Vehicle is in excess of 100 mph,” the dispatch informs us via voice-over, followed by an extreme close-up of a speedometer reading 105 mph.
Malcolm X, on the other hand, puts forth a paradoxical and racially circumscribed understanding of citizenship. The King footage is intercut with a burning American flag. Denzel Washington, as Malcolm X, re-narrates the beating through voiceover, embedding it within a larger context of failed democracy:

You’re not an American; you are the victim of America. … Being born here does not make you an American. ... You are one of the twenty-two million black people who are the victims of America. You and I, we’ve never seen any democracy. … All we’ve seen is hypocrisy. We don’t see any American Dream.

We’ve experienced only the American Nightmare.

The use of parallel editing repositions a symbol of America in the context of the less glorious video footage, drawing a connection between the two images and their meaning – America and racism. Malcolm X can be read as an attempt to offer a corrective to exclusionary national discourse, reflected in the King trial, through the canonizing of Malcolm X as an American political hero.

Linda Williams locates a “paradoxical power” in the spectacle of black bodily suffering and white force: recognition of latent virtue that facilitates moral legibility of the us/them dichotomy (252). As Judith Butler argues, the defense in California v. Powell exploited this melodramatic logic, projecting white aggression onto King’s body and appropriating his fear and vulnerability as that of the officers. The defense rationalized brutal force as a product of the officers’ fear of King’s strength. Laurence Powell, observed striking King over forty-five times, claimed he was “completely in fear for [his] life” (“The Rodney King Case”). Elizabeth Alexander observes that the trial was filled with “language of black male bestiality and hypervirility”: King was described as “‘bufﬁed-out,’ a ‘probable ex-con,’ ‘bear-like,’ ‘like a
wounded animal,’ ‘aggressive,’ ‘combative,’ and he was ‘equate[d] … with a monster’” (93). *Dark Blue* adopts this logic, supplanting the violence directed at King with a frame of white victimization. Following the film’s inclusion of the King footage, Sergeant Perry and his partner, Detective Bobby Keough, face a review board evaluating whether Bobby’s use of deadly force against repeat offender “G-Bone” was “in policy.” Bobby explains, “He drew down on me. … The last man Robertson pulled a gun on isn’t with us anymore.” Perry confirms this Manichaean stance: “At the end of the day, the bullets were in the bad guys, not us.” This sequence is intercut with a brutal robbery-homicide committed by black/white duo Orchard and Sidwell, substituting for G-Bone’s off-screen criminality, as well as that of King, and implicitly legitimizing the use of excessive force on the level of form. A sound bridge links the review board with the following scene, in which a newscaster is heard on a television in the background: “It’s the second full day of deliberations in the Rodney King beating trial.” The review board, then, is bookended by archival footage reinforcing its thematic parallel with *California v. Powell*; G-Bone and Orchard’s aggressive actions become those of King, and vice versa. Similarly, the fictional and historical LAPD figures are aligned as hero-victims. Sensational scenes of pathos affectively bracket the officers’ overt racism and violence, ascribing them a false virtue and seemingly “entitling” their brute tactics. Perry’s wife leaves him in a particularly sentimental scene. In the end, his function within the narrative becomes that of a martyr: he offers himself up for arrest in order to expose his corrupt superior. Bobby achieves similar recognition of virtue through bodily suffering; gunned down by Orchard and Sidwell, his victimized body supplants that of King. “He had a good one,” Perry declares, “and it cost him.” Perry’s outrage over Bobby’s death spurs his heated pursuit of Orchard and Sidwell through the riot-stricken streets of Los Angeles. His emotions are externalized, projected onto the environment and black bodies as chaotic violence.
The Los Angeles riots are thus implicitly refigured as the outcome of outrage over *white* rather than black bodily suffering, eliding the racial politics underpinning the historical and narrative events. *Dark Blue* engages in this sort of calculated elision throughout. The deaths of black characters at the hands of white officers remain off-screen. The events surrounding G-Bone’s murder, for example, are conveyed aurally. During a raid intended to eliminate a biracial pair of ex-convicts, Perry goads Bobby into shooting the unarmed white “suspect” while his black partner is “dropped” off-screen, as indicated in dialogue. Black aggression and white vulnerability also displace black victimization in archival footage. Prefacing Bobby’s murder, a television in Orchard and Sidwell’s house displays the infamous Reginald Denny footage that captures a white truck driver being pulled from his cab and beaten to near-death by a group of black youths. This set of events is recreated during the riot sequence, with Sidwell standing in for Denny. Shelton alludes to processes of identification with white victimization: “We created, based on real footage of the riots, a sense of what it might be like to be caught in it as a white cop.” Subjective cinematography evokes a sense of threat associated with black bodies, perched atop buildings like birds, knocking on Perry’s vehicle, throwing a glass bottle at his/our windshield. This perspective coincides with actual coverage of the riots, which Butler characterized as using “scanning techniques which appeared to ‘hunt down’ people of colour and figure their violence as ‘senseless’ or ‘barbaric’” (21). Shelton, revealing such a “primitive” lens, explains in an interview with *Cinema Confidential* that he “wanted to turn Los Angeles into a Third World country.”

Interracial conflict is also carefully absented from the publicity and critical discourse surrounding *Dark Blue*. Despite its initial narrative weight, the King footage is quite literally relegated to the background; events surrounding the trial are omnipresent, covered on televisions
and radios throughout the film, yet repressed. Perry and Bobby enter a bar as a news report on the television announces, “The latest now on the Rodney King beating trial...” Bobby asks, “Can we turn this shit down?” Perry embodies this racial repression. Bobby asks him why he “never talks about the King thing,” to which he responds, “I avoid the subject because it pains me to see real criminals free while four of my brothers eat political shit because the Pogues outlawed the choke hold.” Contemporary reviews also “avoid the subject” of race in favour of broad humanist concerns: “When does toughness become bullying?” Stephen Hunter of The Washington Post asks. “When does will to win become need to dominate? When does courage become sociopathic obsession? When does a hero become a monster?” Rodney King disappears within such discourse; he is “reduced to a phantasm of white racist aggression” (Butler 20).

*Malcolm X* disrupts this reductive narrative. It casts a wide net, surveying Muslims and Christians, criminal and altruistic behaviour, nonviolent protest and black nationalism, etc. The image of blackness it puts forth is multifaceted, not monolithic. Malcolm X embraces Islam and Pan-Africanism, dismissing Christianity and patriotism. He transcribes the dictionary in entirety in order to familiarize himself with the way in which white language circumscribes blackness. Lee thus challenges facticity and thematizes the notion of history as discourse. He exposes the racial unconscious of films like *Dark Blue*, as manifest in Malcolm’s everyday reality. Malcolm describes his relationship with his foster parents, recalling the bestialization and visual repression of black bodies discussed already: “They talked about me like I wasn’t there, like a pedigreed dog or a horse, like I was invisible.” *Malcolm X* alludes to a filmic history of disavowal and the co-opting of black suffering by white male antiheros. Red and Shorty, playing Bogart and Cagney, reveal the mechanism of appropriation in a moment of self-conscious stylization. Shot in soft focus and warmly lit, Red falls to the ground feigning death following a non-diegetic
gunshot. His face, distorted via wide-angle lens, is captured from a worm’s-eye view. A graphic match links this idyllic scene with the grim reality of Malcolm’s father’s death: a close-up reveals his bloody face against train tracks, screaming as a train approaches. Recurrent flashbacks of this image suggest the return of the (racial) repressed; the violent reality of American race relations surges up from beneath. The boundary between mediated and real violence blurs, as does that between fact and fiction, recalling the King beating and the interpretive violence that masked it. In an effort to redress this representational blind spot, interracial conflict is foregrounded alongside Malcolm X’s martyrdom. In line with an attempt to Americanize Malcolm X, Lee casts him as a Christ-like figure. Davis’ eulogy bolsters this image:

Consigning these mortal remains to earth, the common mother of all, secure in the knowledge that what we place in the ground is no more now a man, but a seed, which, after the winter of our discontent, will come forth again to meet us. And we will know him then for what he was and is, a Prince, our own black shining Prince, who didn’t hesitate to die, because he loved us so.

How does one reconcile prosecutor Terry White’s claim that the King footage is “there for everyone to see” and the multiple, varied narratives built up around it in the trial, Dark Blue, and Malcolm X? Butler explains that this position, “assume[s] that one is presenting the case to a set of subjects who know how to see” (17). Instead, we see the effects of the “racial production of the visible, the workings of racial constraints on what it means to ‘see’” (16). Take for example the elision of interracial violence in Dark Blue. Orchard (black) and Sidwell (white) discuss the impending King verdict: “What? The jury don’t have fucking eyes?” Sidwell asks. “It’s Rodney King getting his ass beaten, man.” Orchard responds, “It don’t matter. Ain’t no brothers on that
jury out there. … It’s Simi Valley. All good, decent white folk.” Similarly, Assistant Chief Holland (Ving Rhames), the token black board member, casts the only “not in policy” vote in Bobby’s shooting review. Williams labels this sort of scenario “a melodrama of the differences in black and white perception” (258). How are these differences characterized? Citing James Baldwin, Alexander claims that “the evidence of things not seen” is fundamental to an “understanding of what African-American spectators bring to the all too visible text” (95).

*Malcolm X* puts forth a similar model of critical viewing/reading. Baines instructs Malcolm to study the dictionary “so [he] can read the truth behind the words,” behind white discourse. In acknowledging this hidden reality, black spectators forge a collective memory – a materially grounded history, a felt memory that butts up against the notion of “history as you like it.”

The King footage was experienced, Berlant notes, “as an aftershock, an event in an open series of national events” (95). The repeated image of Malcolm’s father’s death can be read as another such “aftershock,” as can the night bombing of his house, which recalls that of his childhood home in addition to the burning flag from the credits sequence. In adopting a pastiche of archival and fabricated footage, the film traces a continuum of both physical and representational violence. Archival images of the Ku Klux Klan and black bodies lynched, beaten with batons, and hosed down during civil rights protests illustrate and are intercut with *Malcolm X* delivering a speech: “The black people in this country have been the victims of violence at the hands of the American white man for four hundred years. … A hundred years ago, they used to put on white sheets and sic bloodhounds on us. Nowadays, they’ve traded in the sheets … for police uniforms.” He describes the evolution of state-sanctioned racism, the way in which overt racism became covert and institutionalized, positioning the King footage within this meta-narrative. A stylized variant of the Ku Klux Klan appears via flashback, uniting
(mediated) individual and collective historical trauma. It references Birth of a Nation, or rather, a white mediated vision of black/white conflict that, like Dark Blue, appropriated black victimization for white protagonists, again, exposing a further, representational violence that eschews black embodied experience. In tracing this history, Lee is invested in forging a transnational black community that shares a legacy of violence and hatred. Malcolm X makes himself a spectacle of black vulnerability by having his family witness his assassination. Like Rodney King, slave narratives, and the corpse of Emmett Till, he passes along the evidence of communal violation. Editing binds and obscures geographical distance in the final scene: in acknowledgment of this legacy and collective identity, black schoolchildren across the globe rise up and declare, “I’m Malcolm X!”

Malcolm X resists the ‘documentary’ form, which Alexander suggests, “dehistoricizes both the body and the event” (108). Instead, it foregrounds artifice and thematizes mediation by juxtaposing Malcolm the man and Malcolm the icon/commodity. It employs techniques of distanciation, notably direct address. Lee adopts a language of personal pronouns throughout the voiceover narration (e.g., “You are the victim of America”). Overlaid with Davis’ eulogy and intercut with archival footage, a tracking camera scans groups of black men and women gazing at the camera/audience. Lee mixes multiple film stocks (e.g., 8mm, 35mm, colour, black and white), undermining a seamless, transparent aesthetic, like that of Dark Blue. Filters, saturated colours, and costuming visually demarcate the 1940s from Malcolm’s later life, maintaining a sense of historical specificity. By contrast, the Holliday videotape’s apparent objectivity unmoored the event from its singular context. Bill Nichols outlines the defense’s strategy in California v. Powell: “The work of signification within the tape, and within the act of interpretation, [was] erased in favour of transparency” (29). Narrative assumes the form of raw
evidence. The defense “slowed down the … videotape so that it no longer existed in ‘real time’ but rather in a slow dance of stylized movement” (Alexander 108). As the prosecution charged, “freeze-framing distorted and dehistoricized the narrative logic of the beating” (Alexander 93). *Dark Blue* attempts to exploit and extend the Holliday videotape in order to conceal its own enunciation, to relegate the beating to the past, and to disrupt any sense of a racist historical continuum. Like the defense in *California v. Powell*, Shelton ends the King footage on an ambiguating freeze frame, arresting the sense of continuity developed in *Malcolm X*. A subtitle during the chase reads: “Los Angeles, California, 12:47 A.M. March 3, 1991,” locating the event in a precise, distant (i.e., “safe”) temporal and geographic space, a decade prior to the film’s release. Shelton’s invocation of the western genre has a similar effect. Whereas *Malcolm X*’s aesthetic can be understood as stylized, historical, and encouraging active engagement, *Dark Blue* negates historicity and elicits absorption through transparency in a manner reminiscent of the defense’s application of the King footage in *California v. Powell*.

*California v. Powell, Dark Blue, and Malcolm X* challenge the autonomy of the visual document and the revelatory capacity of “the glaring light of television.” They demonstrate the collision between fact and meaning, history and narrative. They interpret the same footage through competing historical, narrative, and moral lenses, rendering it an “aftershock” in the American unconscious. More than a decade after its occurrence, the King beating was still being subjected to permutations. King came to signify events and experiences in excess of his own body, which became a metonym for discourses of nationalism and race. *Dark Blue* and *Malcolm X* can be understood as positing racist and antiracist frameworks respectively. The former supplants King’s bodily history and that of black males more broadly with what Alexander calls a “myth of white victimization” (94). It represses black urban images, a “racial unconscious” that
surges forth in *Malcolm X*. While *Dark Blue* retreats into a “timeless” past, evoking frontier myths in order to solidify *white* national identity, *Malcolm X* traces a historical continuum that unites blacks transnationally and upsets notions of democracy by visualizing that which had been repressed: a legacy of black victimization. Taken together, they expose racially determined modes of reading, seeing, and emplotting black/white history. With the King beating, Nichols argues, “the historical referent once again cuts through the inoculating power of signifying systems to turn our response to that excess beyond the frame” (19). “That excess” constitutes the material, lived, *embodied* history of black men and women.
Works Cited


