
Historical Films: Myth and Reality

by Matthew Dixon

Films are an extremely powerful medium and are greatly influential, creating legends or destroying them in a matter of two or so hours. In recent years the rise of historical films based on speculation and popular beliefs has destroyed or obscured the truth behind many important historical events and characters, helping to encourage a myth that many of the average audience members have taken as truth without question as they have been presented with no alternative. In most cases the popular speculation has been the only form of the historical event that has been presented to the audience, creating the myth of a hero or a villain, leaving the judgement not to the viewers but to the directors and writers of the movies themselves. Not only has the mixture of fact and fiction created a myth of the director's making but it has promoted that myth as a reality. Oliver Stone, the most famous of the controversial directors, is not the only one to help create the myth and promote historical movies based on speculation. Spike Lee created the rebirth of the famous black activist Malcolm X and director Edward Zwick re-created in his film *Glory* another moment in history with political overtones in his film about the Union army's first black regiment in the American civil war. Through such 'historical' films there has not only been the creation of a myth or legend but the promotion of a political view point that the director wishes to make, either to create a controversy that will make the movie a money making success or to create a pedestal from which the director can preach his own beliefs and views. In movies such as Oliver Stone's *JFK*, Edward Zwick's *Glory* and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* the director has an audience far greater than any documentary that can clearly present all of the facts from both sides of the spectrum and therefore it is the only version of the story that many will see. The directors of such films, knowing that they have a captive audience, can therefore choose which facts that they place in their film to create the myth or message that they wish to create and leave out the facts and events that, although important and relevant, go against their beliefs and destroy the myth they wish to create. Those directors who somehow manage to entertain the masses and make an argument are very special. Oliver Stone, Edward Zwick and Spike Lee are three directors who possess the talent to entertain and present an argument successfully, making it difficult for others, concerned with the truth but with less money and no talent for directing or writing a film, to argue against their views. Such "historical" film directors cleverly create myths to promote their own beliefs or sometimes mischievous speculation and the average movie goer, faced with no other opinion on the screen, generally believe that myth as reality.

JFK

"It is not journalism. It is not history. It is not legal evidence. Much of it is ludicrous. It's a piece of art or entertainment."

- Desson Howe¹

For Oliver Stone, the 1960s have always been an obsession and along with his fascination with that decade there lies an even greater obsession with the evils of the

¹ D. Howe, JFK, [Washington Post](#), December 20th 1991, pp. 22

Vietnam war.² Such an obsession is understandable considering Oliver Stone fought in Vietnam and experienced the horror of that war first hand³ but his hatred of those behind the politics of the Vietnam war has made his film JFK filled with myths and legends that help to destroy those in charge of the Vietnam war and glorify those who tried to stop them.⁴ Such themes in Stone's films create a myth that many movie goers accept as a reality due to the fact that no alternative is given to them and film, being such a powerful medium, is often seen as truth.⁵

Since the beginning of his career Stone was taught by his mentors, such as Martin Scorsese, to make films based upon personal experiences.⁶ Throughout his film career, in such films as *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, there can be seen a continuing theme of hatred for those behind the Vietnam war and grieving for the loss of Americans in battle⁷, Americans he saw die first hand.⁸ Stone tries, In JFK, to present a continuing argument that can be seen in most of his films and that argument is clearly that America was wrong to be involved in the Vietnam war.⁹ Throughout each film Stone tries to create a view of the sixties that Emmanuel Oliver, a film critic and writer, calls a "rewrite of the sixties (that is) just not plausible".¹⁰ Stone, in JFK, has produced an image of American politics in the 1960's that, although highly implausible, will be the only view that many people who were not alive in the sixties will receive. Stone does not simply create a movie about the assassination of Kennedy but develops a thesis which explains America's decline due to a conspiracy by the United States establishment to kill off the one man who might have changed the sixties completely.¹¹ Remarkably Stone manages to accuse every single American elite group of some involvement in the assassination of the President. The CIA, the FBI, the military-industrial business sector, the Mafia and even President Lyndon B. Johnson are accused of some role in the assassination and the cover up that followed. For Oliver Stone it is the people who conspired to assassinate the American hero John F. Kennedy who are to blame for the social decline afflicting America currently.¹² Oliver Stone's belief that Kennedy would have pulled out of Vietnam and the theories he puts forth in his movie JFK about Kennedy's assassination are myths but they are myths powerfully presented as reality and that is where the danger lies. The myths Stone presents are myths that many viewers believe because the film, although simply a piece of film entertainment, cleverly raises questions and recreates events that may never have occurred and, through mixing real footage with re-enacted footage in the same quality of film, manages to recreate a seemingly plausible series of events leading up to and following the assassination of Kennedy. With such a high profile movie directed by such a famous director and with a star studded cast, the public is

² E. Oliver, No More Heroes, *Living Marxism*, 41, March 92, p. 1

³ E. Oliver, *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁴ G. Andrew, *Bullet Proof*, *Time Out*, 1118, Jan. 22, 92; p. 58

⁵ Andrew G., *Ibid.*, p. 58

⁶ E. Oliver, *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁷ B. Case, *The Men Who Shot JFK*, *Time Out*, 1116, Jan 8, 92; p. 17

⁸ E. Oliver, *Ibid.*, p. 24

⁹ C. S. Stewards, *Review of JFK*, (JFK@WWW.cs.stewards.edu)

¹⁰ E. Oliver, *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹¹ Sheehan H., *JFK, Sight and Sound*, I/10, Feb 92; pp. 49

¹² E. Oliver, *Ibid.*, p. 25

presented with a version of the Kennedy assassination many would find impossible not to believe. The merit of Kennedy for Stone is that he died young and before the 'decline' began in America.¹³

Stone willingly distorted and invented history in order to validate his own theories on Kennedy's assassination and managed to convince a majority of movie goers that his theory was correct, despite the fact he invented history.¹⁴ Yet he mixed fact and conjecture so completely and perfectly that it is difficult for the average viewer to find the difference.¹⁵ His method in JFK was to cleverly present the movie as an accurate historical account when he has simply taken untruths and based them on a foundation of truth to make them more believable. The most horrifying of impressions the audience was left with was that President Lyndon B. Johnson himself was involved in the assassination plot. Despite the fact that many believed this allegation as a fact, Stone had no evidence either in reality or presented in the movie to support his accusation.¹⁶ Throughout JFK Stone adds fictional characters who, unless a person is educated in the details of the Garrison inquiry, many would not doubt as true characters.¹⁷ Kevin Bacon's character, a homosexual call boy who knew almost every single character in the plot and conveniently heard the assassination plans being discussed, was a fictitious creation of Stone.¹⁸ The group of anti-Castro Cubans are also fictitious and, the most important character of all, the Colonel X played by Donald Sutherland is also false.¹⁹ Even though Stone invents history and distorts the facts, his entertaining movie is believed by a wide audience to be the most accurate account of Kennedy's assassination and Garrison's investigation.²⁰

Ordinarily the meanings we assign to films vary widely, yet Oliver Stone's JFK has a singular meaning that cannot be mistaken.²¹ Stone clearly argues that there was a conspiracy to assassinate the President Kennedy and bases a majority of his argument on Jim Garrison's book *On the Trail of the Assassins*. Stone creates a complex theory of conspiracy that contradicts the Warren Commission's theory of a lone gunman, Lee Harvey Oswald. Stone cleverly creates a series of questions for the audience throughout JFK that cannot truly be answered and then answers them with his own anti-Vietnam war conspiracy theory which he recreates with chilling reality. The first question asked is "What if the Warren Commission was mistaken?" which is closely followed by "What if the Warren Commission ignored facts?" and then "What if Oswald was set up?" which finally leads to the question that Stone wants the public to accept, "What if the government, including Lyndon B. Johnson, was behind Kennedy's assassination?" The boldness of such questions brought people to see the movie in droves and many believed it to be a factual account and not just an entertaining movie. Thus, Stone succeeded in his objective to destroy the reputations of those behind Vietnam and the 'decline' of the later years of the 1960s. His skill as a

¹³ E. Oliver, *Ibid.*, p. 26

¹⁴ D. Quayle, *Oliver Stone's Disservice to History*, (Washington, Creator's Syndicate, 1996) p. 2

¹⁵ R. Ebert, JFK, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 20th December 1991 p. 18

¹⁶ D. Quayle, *Ibid.* p. 2

¹⁷ D. Howe, *Ibid.* pp. 22-23

¹⁸ D. Howe, *Ibid.* p. 22

¹⁹ A. Barker, *Cries and Whispers*, *Sight and Sound*, 1/10, Feb. 92; p. 24

²⁰ D. Howe, *Ibid.*, p. 22

²¹ Bordwell & Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1993) p. 49

film maker and the emotion created within the movie ensnare the audience as he destroys the Warren Commission with Garrison's conspiracy theory. Stone succeeded in his political aim to destroy the Warren Commission and the governments of Johnson and Nixon by placing the “what if?” questions in the minds of the audience.

Stone also uses the film as a pulpit from which he can attack what he believes to be immoral behaviour and as a result influences the beliefs of many of the audience towards those issues. One perfect example of this is the depiction of three gay characters caught up in a plan to kill the President.²² The film gratuitously explores the bizarre sexual activities of the three gay men but does not explore the sexual activities of the heterosexuals involved in the plot.²³ Jim Garrison is portrayed as the perfect American hero while the gay men are depicted as kinky, bizarre and pathetic creatures.²⁴ Such stereotypical images help create an unnecessary negative impression of the gay community which may be a secondary motive behind Oliver Stone's film.

Through the combination of real footage and re-enactments of the events surrounding Kennedy's assassination, Stone succeeds in producing an “eerie effectiveness”²⁵ that manages to create a rather convincing series of events that make compelling viewing whether they occurred or not. Through a process of overloading the viewer with imagery, dramatic music and dialogue, Stone manages to make his point clearly and succeeds in arousing strong emotions from the viewers. His combination of images, especially the dramatic real life footage shot by Abraham Zapruder's home movie camera just as President Kennedy is shot, the powerful music and dialogue bring out such strong emotions on a sensitive issue.²⁶ By mixing differing film stocks, from colour to black and white, and camera angles, Stone creates a confusing portrait of one of the most confusing events in the 20th Century.

JFK illustrates perfectly how powerful the film medium can be as it influenced a majority of the audience to re-examine the facts behind the assassination of Kennedy.²⁷ Stone pushed forward his view through film because of the popularity of film amongst a majority of the population and succeeded in creating a version of Kennedy's assassination that, although historically inaccurate, shall be the version that many will remember and believe as it is the only version presented to them on the movie screen with a cast of credible actors. Stone is not the only director to use the powerful medium of film to create a myth and a hero for the public to believe in but JFK is one of the most confronting and controversial of films.

Malcom X

"Lacking effective leaders or 'role models' today, many within the black community plunder the past to find their heroes. As a result, figures from the past are assuming a religious status. Malcolm X's biggest qualification for this role is that he is dead. Severed from reality, he has become a symbol for black

²² R. Scheps, Gay Community Concerned About Negative Characters Depicted in JFK, (Los Angeles, GLAAD Press, December 19th 1991)p. 1

²³ R. Scheps, *Ibid.*, p. 1

²⁴ R. Scheps, *Ibid.*, p. 1

²⁵ D. Howe, *Ibid.*, p. 23

²⁶ J. O'Brien, Oliver Stone: Our Greatest Director, (stone.htm@www.geocities.com) p. 2

²⁷ J. O'Brien, *Ibid.*, p. 2

aspirations...Malcolm X has become for the black community what John F. Kennedy is for liberals."
- Emmanuel Oliver²⁸

Unlike JFK, *Malcolm X*, directed by Spike Lee, is a film which is not based mostly on speculation and false history but provides an image of a historical figure and the events surrounding his life as close to the truth as Spike Lee could come. Yet, in doing so, Lee creates a convenient hero for the African Americans to admire when the African American community is lacking leaders and he uses his film to promote the political issue of black rights world wide. While Oliver Stone twists facts to convince the audience that his argument is correct, Spike Lee presents the facts and creates a powerful image that still manages to raise questions in the minds of the audience and clearly present his convincing arguments without much distortion. Again, just like JFK, it shall be the only version of the life of Malcolm X that many will see and thus Spike Lee has the potential to distort Malcolm X's life to advance his own agenda. Yet Malcolm X's life appears to make the point on its own without the need of speculation and false history. Spike Lee's aim in *Malcolm X* is to portray Malcolm X as a model for African Americans. Lee creates a Malcolm X who had the courage to believe in himself and where he came from without much regard for what others thought of him. Thus, Lee creates a hero for African Americans to admire and for white Americans to listen to in a time when race relations are still troublesome.

The much spoken of Malcolm X creates a deeply spiritual memorial to the human capacity for change. The captivating combination of history, myth and speculation creates a movie that truly depicts its subject's character and way of life from his younger days through to his death without too much distortion or fiction.²⁹ Despite Lee's great admiration for Malcolm X, he manages to resist the temptation to produce a complete myth about Malcolm X as a hero without faults and portrays him through the four most difficult stages of his life with all of his imperfections and his naiveties.³⁰ In truth, illustrating Malcolm X's darker side makes him, when reformed, even more likeable and makes his transformation towards the end of his life even more dramatic than if Spike Lee had only illustrated his heroic and public side. However, the movie is still used as a political tool from the beginning.³¹ *Malcolm X* addresses itself to all people as it reminds the audience without any subtlety, using the footage of the Rodney King beating during the opening titles, that the battle of the man Malcolm X is still being fought today.³² Thus the audience is not only seeing the life of Malcolm X but in the process they are being preached to by its director.

Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* does not make Malcolm X out to be a hero but a human being with the mortal weaknesses that all of us possess. The film is powerful in the sum of its parts. The power of the film is Malcolm X's defeat of his weaknesses, public admission of his mistakes, despite the fact that he faced death for doing so, and his working towards the healing of the damage that he helped create. The film takes us through his troubled youth, his conversion to Islam, his powerful yet dangerous ministry and his eye opening pilgrimage to Mecca where he realises the mistakes he

²⁸ E. Oliver, *The Resurrection of Malcolm X*, *LM*, 40, Feb 93, p. 2

²⁹ R. Kempley, *Malcolm X*, *Washington Post*, November 18th 1992, p. 23

³⁰ R. Kempley, *Ibid.*, p. 23

³¹ R. Kempley, *Ibid.*, p. 23

³² Alexander K., *Malcolm X*, *Sight and Sound*, III/3, Mar. 93; p. 47

has made with his black supremacist teachings. Unlike Oliver Stone, Spike Lee does not distort many of the facts to make his point or present his biased argument but instead presents the truth and in doing so makes a greater impact than any distortion could have created. Through the depiction of the darker days of Malcolm X's life with a zoot-suiter friend, his involvement with a white woman, his work with a crime lord who introduces him to cocaine and his days of robbery, we see the decline of Malcolm X, his weak resistance to temptation and his fiery temper. Here the audience is given the truth and this truth is far more powerful as Lee shows how this darkness and crime leads to Malcolm's arrest and eventual salvation through the religion of Islam.

Lee cannot resist playing the preacher, however, as the film draws to a close after the dramatic and emotional re-enactment of Malcolm X's assassination. After Martin Luther King's seemingly emotionless speech on Malcolm X's death, Lee adds Ossie Davis reciting Malcolm's eulogy, followed by Nelson Mandela's reading of one of Malcolm X's most famous speeches in front of many young school children. This ending is the pulpit from which Lee preaches a sermon already subtly spoken in the life of Malcolm X. His political ending takes away from the subtly placed message given throughout the film and assumes that the audience was too slow to pick up on the theme of black oppression and needed it spelled out to them as bluntly as possible.³³ Lee's weakness is in re-telling the audience a point after showing it to them. Instead of developing a subtle idea and leaving it subtle, Lee illustrates his point with unnecessarily forceful images. As Desson Howe describes it in his review of the movie in the *Washington Post*:

*“The man who at the beginning adroitly juxtaposes the scandalous Rodney King beating with an impassioned Malcolm X speech is the same one who clubs you senseless with overextended consciousness-raising at the end.”*³⁴

Lee borrows some of his ideas from Oliver Stone's *JFK*, showing Malcolm X's public life through the mixture of grainy newsreel footage, flashbacks and 8mm film. With such imagery Lee recreates for the audience the confusion and media excitement that followed Malcolm X from the moment he became the spokesman for the Nation of Islam. Like Oliver Stone, Spike Lee raises many questions for the audience in the film but unlike Stone he does not claim to have all of the true answers. Yet there are parts of Malcolm X's personal life, conversations and fights in the home and with friends, that Lee does portray without any hesitation as reality, despite the fact that he could not have known much of Malcolm X's personal life. This is one of the problems of the film. Malcolm X's personal life is presented to the audience as fact. The film advances numerous questions such as, "Was he an influential leader or a marginal black leader?", "Was he truly anti white or was his trip to Mecca the turning point in his life when he realised that reconciliation was the only answer?" and "Was he a political chameleon?", each of which are answered only by Malcolm X's own words and not those of Spike Lee.

There is no doubting that Malcolm X, just like *JFK*, was created for the audience to bring to light an issue that had been left in the dark for many years. Malcolm X brings the historical figure into the mainstream.³⁵ There is within

³³ R. Kempley, Malcolm X, *Washington Post*, November 18th 1992, p. 23

³⁴ D. Howe, Malcolm X, *Washington Post*, November 20th 1992, p. 24

³⁵ D. Howe, Malcolm X, *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Malcolm X some speculation that creates a myth which is presented to the audience as fact but it's factual basis is minimal. Oliver Stone brought the FBI and the CIA into the assassination of Kennedy and in the same way Lee ties the CIA and the FBI into the life of Malcolm X. The difference between Stone and Lee is that Lee says nothing of the identity of those who follow Malcolm X other than what Malcolm X says himself in his letters whereas Stone states bluntly that both agencies are involved in Kennedy's assassination. The influence of both is great on the audience and the power of such statements creates a myth about the government agencies many would believe as no other view is presented to them.³⁶ Film, being the powerful and popular medium that it is, is far more influential than a book or press release denying what a film suggests.

Parts of Lee's Malcolm X are distorted to illustrate more strongly to the audience the situation facing Malcolm X in the 1950's and 1960's and to demonstrate why Malcolm X turned to the Nation of Islam and just as radically turned away from it.³⁷ Many of the white characters are portrayed as almost cartoon like villains to present the attitude of a majority of white supremacists and the suppression that many blacks experienced in the post war years.³⁸ The portrayals of the white temptress, the mean teachers, the evil policemen and the CIA agents are just some of the examples of exaggerated characters presented to the audience. They are distorted yet vital to the purpose of the movie.³⁹ It is through such distortions that the oppression of four hundred years is personified and magnified to intensify the passion and create sympathy for the oppressed blacks. Despite these distortions, the virtues of the film in its entirety far outweigh the flaws within.

The power of Malcolm X upon the audience is evident when the commercial world outside the cinema is studied. There have been at least a dozen new books released on Malcolm X, the man, since the release of the movie.⁴⁰ Sales of Alex Haley's biography of Malcolm X have increased three hundred percent and editions of many of Malcolm X's speeches are selling quickly around the world.⁴¹ Such increases in the sales and publications of books on Malcolm X since the release of the film in 1992 illustrate how powerful a medium film can be and the influence that such films have upon the public. The combination of engrossing progression, accomplished story telling and powerful emotions has successfully created an image of Malcolm X as a hero for African Americans and has urged the public to discover more about the man who fought so hard for black rights.⁴² The film is not an assault upon white people but an explanation as to why Malcolm X acted and preached the way he did. Malcolm X is not aimed simply at the African Americans, but all races in the audience. Lee does not use the old political cliches to bring across his point to the audience but instead shows the truth behind the main characters, good and bad. Malcolm X places human beings on the screen for the audience to see, not heroes and villains as are portrayed in Oliver Stone's JFK. Malcolm X is the only version of the

³⁶ B. Case, *Malcolm X*, Time Out, 1172, Feb. 3, 93; p. 18.

³⁷ D. Howe, *Malcolm X*, *Ibid.*, p. 25

³⁸ D. Howe, *Malcolm X*, *Ibid.*, p. 25

³⁹ D. Howe, *Malcolm X*, *Ibid.*, p. 25

⁴⁰ E. Oliver, *The Resurrection of Malcolm X*, *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁴¹ E. Oliver, *The Resurrection of Malcolm X*, *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁴² R. Ebert, *Malcolm X*, Chicago Sun-Times, November 11th 1992, p. 18.

life of the man that many will ever see and, like Stone, Lee uses the characters and events to influence people to his own beliefs but also lets the story itself influence the audience. Yet, unlike Stone, Lee does not create a false history for the audience to believe. The only flaws in Lee's film are the comical villains and the bluntly political statements at its beginning and end. Otherwise Malcolm X is a historical film that possesses a political statement mostly untouched by falsehoods or lies.

Glory

"There is a segment of the American population that has been excluded from the national myth, and that should be redressed."

-Edward Zwick⁴³

In all historical films there is a mixture of fact and fiction that presents the story in the light the director wishes. In JFK Oliver Stone wanted the audience to believe that the CIA, FBI and even President Lyndon B. Johnson himself were involved in the assassination of Stone's hero Kennedy. In Malcolm X, Spike Lee wished to portray Malcolm X as a hero for the African Americans. In Glory, Edward Zwick wishes to create an impression within the audience that commonality between blacks and whites is possible and has occurred in the past in the most extraordinary of circumstances.⁴⁴

Glory, like JFK, is filled with fictional characters and incidents based around many connected historical events. It presents the audience with a convincingly emotional story of unity between blacks and certain whites during the American civil war but fails to inform the audience that only one character in the main plot, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, is non-fictional. What is presented as a historical movie is truly a fictional movie based upon one historical character and the history surrounding his leading the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first black fighting unit in the American civil war. Such a mixture of fiction and fact, although entertaining, can be misleading and create for the audience a false impression of the beliefs of those involved in the historical event itself. The dialogue is all a creation of one man, unlike Spike Lee's Malcolm X which is partly based on Malcolm X's own words, thus enhancing its historical accuracy.

As with Oliver Stone, the past has a powerful influence upon Edward Zwick's directing style and his passion for dramatisation is still evident in Glory. Before moving to direct Glory, Zwick was the co-creator of Thirtysomething and director of the film About Last Night.⁴⁵ Zwick's history as one of the minds behind the popular daytime drama Thirtysomething has provoked a great deal of criticism of his talents as a serious historical film director.⁴⁶ Yet the movie possesses a great deal of emotional power that makes it hard for the audience not to feel sorrow and anguish for the fictitious characters cleverly created by script writer Kevin Jarre and Zwick himself. Despite the criticisms of Zwick as a daytime 'soapie' director, his talents in creating the emotion and terror of battle and the struggle for equality between blacks and whites are still very powerful and successful. Like Lee, Zwick follows a black

⁴³ M. Perry, *Glory director Edward Zwick discusses motivations behind the film*, The Tech, Vol. 109, No. 60, Jan 24th 1989, p. 11.

⁴⁴ M. Perry, *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁴⁵ M. Perry, *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁴⁶ M. Perry, *Ibid.*, p. 11

character, called Trip (coincidentally also played by Denzel Washington who would play Malcolm X in Lee's film three years later), from the rebellious stage through to his redemption as standard bearer of the regiment. This theme adds to the emotional impact of the film and creates sympathy for Trip and the other characters when they charge into battle and are slaughtered at the hands of the Confederates.⁴⁷ To stir the audience during such emotional scenes, Zwick uses remarkably moving music as a tool to manipulate the feelings of the viewers, just as Stone has done in JFK. This powerful tool has added a great deal of power to the imagery and dialogue that has stirred many audience members to tears.⁴⁸ Yet such power over an audience has helped create a myth about the relations between the blacks and whites in the union which is not entirely accurate.⁴⁹

Despite the fact that the movie *Glory* is based mostly upon speculation, Zwick defends his movie as an accurate historical account of the events surrounding the 54th Regiment. In defence to the many criticisms of *Glory*, Zwick claimed that, despite the fact that the black characters were not actual soldiers, the general framework of the plot is based on fact.⁵⁰ His historical framework is that of two novels on the 54th Regiment, Lincoln Kirstein's "Lay This Laurel" and Peter Burchard's "One Gallant Rush".⁵¹ Despite the historical novels used in research and the many different associations that helped in the recreation of the battle scenes, critics claim that the central characters that make *Glory* the film that it is are fictitious and the historical information only assists in the setting of the scenes and not the building up of the characters. As a result, the audience is confronted with characters that are the invention of the script writer Kevin Jarre, whose previous credits include *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (another fact that had brought about criticism from many reviewers and historians alike), and Zwick.⁵² With the history of such a script writer and Zwick, the audience is presented with the only version of the 54th Regiment they will probably ever see and as a result there is created a myth about the regiment that many audience members believe to be truth.⁵³ The myth is one of a regiment led by a white man, portrayed either accidentally or purposely (this is never made clear) as a weak man, who leads them into battle.⁵⁴

Zwick has, however, through dramatising the story of the 54th regiment, created in the minds of the audience a strong image of the oppression of blacks in America during the civil war. In an attempt to illustrate the bravery of the blacks as they stood up for their right to freedom from slavery and the bravery of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw for leading those men, Zwick has succeeded in captivating the audiences. Despite the fact that a majority of the characters are fictitious and that for many audience members *Glory* will be the only version of the civil war battles they will ever see, Zwick has successfully portrayed the plight of the black Americans in

⁴⁷ M. Perry, *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁴⁸ R. Ebert, *Glory*, Chicago Sun-Times, 12th January 1990, p. 19

⁴⁹ R. Ebert, *Glory*, *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁵⁰ M. Perry, *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁵¹ D. Howe, *Glory*, Washington Post, January 12th 1990, p. 18

⁵² D. Howe, *Glory*, p. 18

⁵³ M. Perry, *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁵⁴ D. Howe, *Glory*, p. 18

the American civil war. Yet his film is still flawed and the images that the audience see are still black men under the control of a white man.

The power Zwick possesses over the audience is that he can portray the scenes in whichever way he wishes to create his image of the events and, unlike Lee, he does not use primary sources such as letters from the soldiers to create a solid foundation for his black characters. As a movie it is emotional and entertaining but as a historical movie it is misleading the audience, many of whom know no better than to believe that the movie is historically accurate. *Glory* is a weaker attempt at creating heroes for contemporary African Americans and promoting political issues relevant in popular culture today and is not as effective in its cause as *Malcolm X* or *JFK*. Yet, just like *JFK* and *Malcolm X*, it creates a myth about the past that many of the audience members will accept as reality.

Film is an extremely powerful medium which can be manipulated to influence the audience to whichever viewpoint the director wishes. It can create a legend such as *Malcolm X* or destroy a political figure such as President Lyndon B. Johnson through simple suggestion. The rise of historical films has created the perfect opportunity for directors such as Spike Lee and Oliver Stone to manipulate facts to present their own political views and opinions and create heroes for the public to admire and villains for the public to hate. Oliver Stone created a myth in *JFK* that the historically uneducated public has taken as fact. He has succeeded in raising questions to destroy the reputations of those he believes are behind the Vietnam war and such power is part of the danger of film. Stone has succeeded in turning audience members towards his beliefs and created a hatred for those behind the Vietnam war. *Malcolm X* also possesses a certain amount of influence over the audience yet, unlike Oliver Stone, Spike Lee has created a historical film that is mostly close to the truth. In many historical films created in Hollywood the judgement of characters and events has not been left up to the viewers but to the directors and writers of the movies themselves. Not only has the mixture of fact and fiction created a myth of the director's making but it has promoted that myth as a reality. Oliver Stone is not alone in the manipulation of facts but he is the most obvious example. Spike Lee created the rebirth of the famous black activist *Malcolm X* when only a year before people would have asked "Malcolm who?" and director Edward Zwick recreated another moment in history with political overtones in his American civil war film *Glory*. Through such historical films there has not only been the creation of a myth or legend but the promotion of a political view point that the director wishes to make. In movies such as Oliver Stone's *JFK*, Edward Zwick's *Glory* and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* the director has an audience far greater than any documentary and therefore it is the only version of the stories that many will ever see. The directors of such films, knowing that they have a captive audience, can therefore choose which facts that they place in their film to create the myth or message that they wish to create and leave out the facts and events that destroy the myth they wish to create. Those directors who somehow manage to entertain the masses and make an argument are rare and extremely talented. Oliver Stone, Spike Lee, and Edward Zwick to a lesser degree, are three directors who possess the talent to entertain and present an argument successfully, making it difficult for others to argue against their views. Such directors cleverly create myths to promote their own beliefs and the average movie goer, faced with no other opinion on the screen, generally believe that myth as reality.

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