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The Films of Denzel Washington: Various Readings

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ABSTRACT

For two decades positive Hollywood images of blacks have preceded the actual progress of blacks in American life. This paper examines those images with respect to Academy Award winning actor Denzel Washington. The present essay complements my essay "The Films of Morgan Freeman: Various Readings," *The Journal of Hokkai-Gakuen University* (No. 142, December 2009). It also expands on my earlier work, "Role Reversal in Hollywood: The Noble Black vs. the Fallen White Male," *The Journal of Hokkai-Gakuen University* (No. 107, March 2001).

Introduction

For over 20 years, when Hollywood has sought a youngish black actor for a role exploring white racism and black empowerment, Denzel Washington has topped the list. In 1987's *Cry Freedom*, for example, he played South African anti-apartheid martyr Steve Biko. In 1989's *Glory* he played an escaped slave who joins the Union army in the Civil War. In 1991's *Mississippi Masala*, Washington's character falls in love with an immigrant from India in racist Mississippi. Washington's big breakthrough, however, was his title role in the 1992 Spike Lee film *Malcolm X*. In 1999, Washington played the title role

in *The Hurricane*, about boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, unjustly imprisoned for the 1966 murders of three New Jersey whites. Other race-charged Washington films include *The Siege* (1998), *Training Day* (2001), *Antwone Fisher* (2002), *Déjà Vu* (2006), *American Gangster* (2007), *The Great Debaters* (2007), and *The Book of Eli* (2010). Regarding the theme of the rise of the black man at the expense of the white man, however, two of Washington’s films stand out: *Crimson Tide* (1995), directed by Tony Scott and produced by Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, and *Remember the Titans* (2000), directed by Boaz Yakin and produced by Jerry Bruckheimer.

Washington is a talented actor, having won Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor in *Glory* (1989) and Best Actor in 2001 for his lead role in the film *Training Day*. Having determined to become an actor, Washington attended Fordham University at Lincoln Century and earned a B.A. in Drama and Journalism. He spent the next year making use of a scholarship to attend graduate school at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. Like most other actors, Washington paid his dues, slowly working his way up the acting ladder. In 1977, he appeared in the made-for-television movie *Wilma*, while his first Hollywood appearance was the 1981 film *Carbon Copy*. The following year, he won a Distinguished Ensemble Performance Obie Award for playing a soldier in the racially charged off-Broadway Negro Ensemble Company production “A Soldier’s Play.” Following this came a solid professional achievement, a six-year role as Dr. Phillip Chandler in the TV drama *St. Elsewhere*. From there it was on to Hollywood, where the majority of his roles have featured white racism and black resistance to that racism.

Ideological Import of Denzel Washington's Roles

The folly of viewing a social phenomenon in isolation is well known. Thus, any attempt to understand the totality of Denzel Washington roles without first situating them in a proper field of understanding is bound to disappoint. The argument here (as explicated in the essays already noted) is that there is a revolutionary takeover of America underway, one in which the cultural elite of traditional America has been replaced by a different one.

Three decades ago, Hollywood insider Ben Stein analyzed this situation and gave us an insight into what was happening. In his 1976 essay "Whatever happened to small-town America?" he explored television's pronounced hostility toward rural Americans. Stein identified a television elite and argued that this elite imagined that small-town Gentiles naturally meant harm to such liberal types. "As a result, when he [a TV writer] gets the chance, he attacks the small town on television or the movies." Because of this, he concluded, "A national culture is making war upon a way of life that is still powerfully attractive and widely practiced in the same country." The upshot is that "in the mass culture of the country, a hatred for the small town is spewed out on television screens and movie screens every day."¹

Twenty years later, Yale University computer science professor David Gelernter made a similar (but blunter) point when he argued that in America "the old elite used to get on fairly well with the country it was set over. Members of the old social upper-crust elite were richer and better educated than the public at large, but approached life on basically the same terms." The new elite, however, is not only different from the masses, "it loathes the nation it rules."² The result has been that for over half a century this new and hostile elite has worked

to transform the United States from an overwhelmingly white Christian nation into a multicultural nation made up of peoples from all corners of the globe. Or to put it another way, this elite has worked to both dismantle the hegemony of white Christian society and replace it with diffuse centers of power, one being that of African Americans. An observer has described the process this way:

There are various names for the ideology of the elite. Some call it “political correctness.” Others call it “Cultural Marxism.” But the labels don’t matter as long as one understands what is going on: the ruling elites are waging a cultural and racial war against Western values, Western civilization, and particularly Western man, i.e., the white man. In the name of the feel-good mantras of diversity and multiculturalism, all the values of traditional white civilization have been declared bad and everything opposed to them declared good. Every idea, attitude, and institution that protects the white race and promotes its continued existence is being destroyed, as a precondition for the physical destruction of the race itself. No arena of life is spared this agenda’s icy grip. Every movie, television show, news story, book, and sermon must advance it, under the watchful eye of an army of censors and snitches demanding unyielding fidelity to the agenda. No argument or evidence is allowed to challenge it.³

This Gramscian campaign has encompassed civil rights activism, court cases, education, and most particularly manipulation through popular culture. Arguably, film has been one of the most influential sources of this social engineering. Film scholar Robert Sklar, for one, has written about the vast power of movies to influence society. In *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, he argued that by the late 1930s, Hollywood’s ascendancy in the cultural realm was already widely recognized. Many academics and literary

types regarded moviemakers with “respect, awe and even envy, as the possessors of the power to create the nation’s myths and dreams.” Scholars and writers of the day acknowledged that “movies had taken over cultural functions they themselves had exercised, or aspired to, in the past,” a theme upon which Sklar expanded:

In traditional American society the task of describing the world and communicating that vision to its members had belonged, with different emphasis at different times, to the clergy, political statesmen, educators, businessmen, essayists, poets and novelists. There had never been a totally uniform cultural expression in the United States, there had always been schisms and struggles, alternatives and counterviews, but in general the combatants had come from similar ethnic and class backgrounds and had utilized the same means — the written and spoken word. Now for the first time power to influence the culture had been grasped by a group of men whose origins and whose means were different.⁴

In addition, Stanley Rothman, as director of a large study on leadership and social change in America, has been associated with a number of books which examine the impact media has had on American culture. In *Hollywood’s America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures*, Stanley Rothman is joined by Stephen Powers and David J. Rothman in a work that stresses that “Hollywood’s creative leadership impacts the larger society even as it is influenced by that society.” The authors, in noting the fact that “films are made by a relatively small number of people, who ... tend to share a common outlook,” argue that “over time, motion pictures have had an undeniable impact on the beliefs, lifestyles, and action of Americans.” By way of illustration, they write, “There is little reason to believe that a

single film or even group of films significantly influences audiences' views over the long haul. However, if large numbers of motion pictures portray businessmen or Jews as thieves, blacks as violent or stupid, women as weak or clinging, and the military as corrupt, as a matter of course, it is reasonable to believe that such presentations will affect audiences to a significant extent ..."⁵

Margaret Miles, author of *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, expands on the theme that the power of movies comes from their repetition of an image:

No one film has iconic power, but the recurrence of similar images *across* films weaves those images into the fabric of the common life of American society, influencing everything from clothing styles to accepted and expected behavior. Filmic conventions, of which most spectators are never consciously aware, cumulatively affect Americans' self-esteem, expectations, attitudes, and behavior in relationships.... The answer to my question concerning the power of film, then, is that, to a greater or lesser extent, "we [as a society] are what we look upon and what we delight in," or, in less elegant language, what you see is what you get. But we "get" (the cultural message, as Roland Barthes said), or *are*, what we see not once but repeatedly. We get, at a subliminal and hence utterly effective level, not the narrative but the conventions of Hollywood film.⁶

In practice, Hollywood functions as part of a quasi-coordinated, highly sophisticated propaganda machine, and to the extent its message bolsters the greater narrative decided upon by the elite, the effect on the population becomes all the greater. Jacques Ellul fully understood the power of propaganda, as can be seen in his ground-breaking 1965 work, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Realizing that

“man is terribly malleable, uncertain of himself, ready to accept and to follow many suggestions, and is tossed about by all the winds of doctrine,” Ellul set out to offer an encompassing exposé of how propaganda works and what its goals are.⁷

One of his greatest insights was realizing the need for repetition of the propaganda message. At first, it takes great effort to sway men from their set thinking, but, Ellul writes,

once the individual has been filled with and reshaped by propaganda, the smallest dose now suffices. It is enough to “refresh,” to give a “booster shot,” to repaint, and the individual behaves in striking fashion — like certain drunks who become intoxicated on one glass of wine. The individual no longer offers any resistance to propaganda; moreover, he has ceased to believe in it consciously. He no longer attaches importance to what it says, to its proclaimed objectives, but he acts according to the proper stimuli. The individual is arrested and crystallized with regard to his thinking.⁸

This argument can be restated in a more folksy way, as Jack Shaheen does when writing critically about the consistent Hollywood denigration of his fellow Arabs when they appear in film. Turning to an old Arabic saying, Shaheen tells us that “*Al tikrar biallem il hmar.*” Translated, “By repetition even the donkey learns.”⁹ The donkey in this case is presumably the American people, who, like any other mass of people, are susceptible to sustained manipulation.

While this campaign is widespread and encompasses far more than just film, I will limit my discussion to film alone, and then mostly to consider how Denzel Washington’s characters have been employed to further the deliberate strategy described above. Again, with respect to blacks, the approach is twofold. First, the black male character is

elevated. Second, the white male character correspondingly loses status. They go hand in hand. For this propaganda to be effective in the real world, the American people need to picture a more elevated black minority — through images of achievement, as moral exemplars, or as deserving victims — before they can embrace it as a reality. This is the process by which African Americans have been elevated in the American mind. Freeman, Denzel Washington, and to some extent Samuel L. Jackson are used in this respect: repeatedly they are shown in favorable roles, and the American public has been duly “filled with and reshaped by propaganda.”

This process has been so obvious to some that it has garnered nicknames. Richard Brookhiser, for one, a writer for *The National Review*, dubbed this image “the Numinous Negro.” Here he defines “numinous” as a Roman term for “the presiding divinity ... of a place.” It also means “spiritually elevated.” The Numinous Negro, for Brookhiser, presides over America, “and contact with him elevates us spiritually.”¹⁰ I have already discussed in depth the example of Morgan Freeman in films such as *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Deep Impact* (U.S. President) and *Bruce Almighty*, (God Himself). Steve Sailer, the film critic for *The American Conservative* magazine and website VDARE’s special Sunday columnist, adds other nicknames, calling Freeman America’s “Spiritual Presence-in-Chief.” Tongue in cheek, Sailer explains further, noting how millions of Americans “want Will Smith to be their Hero-in-Chief” while others “want James Earl Jones, the Lion King himself, to be their Father-in-Chief.”¹¹ For his generation, Denzel Washington is the chosen Numinous Negro.

Before addressing the content of Washington’s films, I would like to add here that I am adhering to the school of thought that believes blacks alone in America did not lift themselves from their lowly

position in society, nor have they played even the primary role in their emancipation. Rather, they have been for well over a century helped by the forces that later became the new American elite. As noted in previous essays, Kevin MacDonald, E. Michael Jones, and Hasia R. Diner have all written on this subject, drawing into question the degree to which American cultural elites were acting selflessly in their efforts to empower blacks.¹² Putting it bluntly, MacDonald writes that “Very intelligent Jews from the very best schools have used their abilities to engineer the Potemkin village of Black and Latino accomplishment.” Because civil rights laws alone did not result in equal outcomes in America (due to hereditary differences in intelligence and other mental traits, in MacDonald’s view), “The result has been affirmative action designed to magically create a non-White elite with all the same skills as the people they are displacing accompanied by massive propaganda featuring brilliant Blacks and stupid Whites.”¹³ The Denzel Washington arm of that propaganda is the substance of the present essay.

Hollywood’s role in this contrived elevation of blacks and attempts at dispossession of whites should be taken seriously, for as Plato said, “Those who tell the stories rule society.” Now that America has its first African American president (and first Latina Supreme Court Justice — an not even one WASP), a pundit like Peter Brimelow can be taken more seriously when he writes, “The plain fact is that the Obama Administration has very shallow roots in historic America. It is, to put it brutally, a minority occupation government.”¹⁴ As with Morgan Freeman’s many characters, the substance and impact of Denzel Washington characters have long played a role in preparing the ground for this minority occupation government. I make no claim whatsoever that Washington has played this role wittingly, but from a wider perspective it is clear that his films have had a powerful impact on

perceptions about race held by Americans and are therefore worth studying.

The Films of Denzel Washington:

It is fitting that Washington's first film role involved black-white relations. As The Internet Movie Database tells us, this first film, the 1981 *Carbon Copy*, is about a "white corporate executive [who] is surprised to discover that he has a black teen-age son who can't wait to be adopted into the almost-exclusively-white community of San Marino, California."¹⁵ It was one of the few comedies Washington made, and rarely in the future were race relations the topic of levity. The humor eventually ends, however, for "The final ten minutes makes the transition from comedy to drama, where Walter has to either accept that Roger is his son, or alienate him and give into his racist society in order to salvage his position in society."¹⁶

Later that year Washington appeared in an Off-Broadway play that was far more representative of how central racial conflict would be for Washington's characters. Entitled *A Soldier's Play*, it revolved around racism as experienced by a group of black soldiers in the U.S. Army based in the Deep South during World War II. Here it appears there was more depth and complexity surrounding the treatment of race, including the divide among blacks of varying degrees of darkness, than would be seen in his later films (with the exception of *Mississippi Masala*).

In 1984, Canadian director Norman Jewison directed and produced the Hollywood version of the play, changing the title to *A Soldier's Story*. Though the script was rejected by many studios, Jewison finally convinced Columbia Pictures to back the film, under a tight budget of

only \$5 million. The film became a commercial and critical success, reaping over \$22 million and winning the New York Drama Critics Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Theater Club Award, and three Village Voice Obie Awards. Its three Oscar nominations were for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Screenplay Adaptation. Briefly, the plot revolved around a light-skinned sergeant who loathes fellow blacks who come across either as Uncle Toms or as fools. This drives him to torment the negroes under his command, leading to the suicide of one of them. In response, one of his men shoots him, and the sergeant's dying words are "They still hate you." Suspicion extends to the local Ku Klux Klan and other Southern whites, but in fact the murderer was a black man. The dead man's last words reflect a realization that white racism is so entrenched that even exemplary black behavior will not change white attitudes.¹⁷

In *Cry Freedom* (1987) Washington played Steve Biko, an anti-apartheid activist who died at a police station in South Africa. Thus was joined a familiar set of Washington images: righteous rebel against injustice and noble victim of white racism. Rita Kempley of the Washington Post, presaging the Numinous Negro designation, wrote that Washington gave "a zealous, Oscar-caliber performance as this African messiah, who was recognized as one of South Africa's major political voices when he was only 25. Biko was unflappable, logical and witty in life, and Washington conveys that solidity onscreen."¹⁸ Others agreed, for Washington was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.¹⁹

The next two films in which Washington appeared helped establish the inside agency that his characters generally possess. Whether it be the military or police department, these positions align him with legally constituted authority and, importantly, allow him to assume the power

of the gun under the color of law. Both films were released in 1989. First, in the mystery thriller *The Mighty Quinn* he plays the chief of police on a small Caribbean island whose friend is suspected of homicide. I have not seen this film, so I cannot comment on what, if any, racial politics it contains. Reviewer Roger Ebert, however, gave the film high praise, which must have been important at this early stage in Washington's career:

The Mighty Quinn is a spy thriller, a buddy movie, a musical, a comedy and a picture that is wise about human nature. And yet with all of those qualities, it never seems to strain: This is a graceful, almost charmed, entertainment.... The film stars Denzel Washington in one of those roles that creates a movie star overnight. You might have imagined that would have happened to Washington after he starred in "Cry Freedom" as the South African hero Steven Biko. He got an Oscar nomination for that performance, but it didn't even begin to hint at his reserves of charm, sexiness and offbeat humor. In an effortless way that reminds me of Robert Mitchum, Michael Caine or Sean Connery in the best of the Bond pictures, he is able to be tough and gentle at the same time, able to play a hero and yet not take himself too seriously.²⁰

In *For Queen and Country*, Reuben James (Washington) is a loyal soldier in Her Majesty's Armed Forces, serving both in Northern Ireland and in the Falklands War of 1982. Despite honorable and heroic service, he receives no recognition in his East London neighborhood and is beset by problems with racist policemen. Also, a rare point in this film is the fact that he has a white girlfriend (played by Amanda Redman). Despite his physical presence and great charm, rarely has a Washington character been given an open romance with a white woman. In any case, the plot develops a revenge theme when

two of James's friends are murdered by a racist cop. James gets his revenge during a riot, using the melee as an opportunity to assassinate his target. The film ends just as a police sniper fires at James.

In his third 1989 film, Washington appeared in *Glory* as an escaped slave who joined the Northern army during the Civil War. Here we see the two Numinous Negroes together, for Morgan Freeman appeared as Sergeant Major John Rawlins and built on his role as a wise old man, in this case, acting as elder advisor to hot-headed former slave Private Trip (Washington).

The year 1990 saw Washington appear in two more films, *Heart Condition* and *Mo' Better Blues*. In the former, Washington appears as a lovable ambulance chasing lawyer who is murdered in a drive-by shooting. There are undertones of the 1981 *Carbon Copy* in this comedy in that Washington's character in a sense stalks a flustered white character, this time police sergeant Jack Moony, a racist cop. Poetic justice is served when Moony has a heart attack and receives a heart transplant — from none other than lawyer Napoleon Stone. Now irreparably linked to Stone, Moony sets out to solve the lawyer's murder. The film failed at the box office, making it the last full-blown comedy Washington would make. *Mo' Better Blues* was Washington's first collaboration with African American filmmaker Spike Lee, who, as in many of his other films, also appeared in the film (along with Wesley Snipes). The story of fictional jazz trumpeter Bleek Gilliam, *Mo' Better Blues* confines itself to the personal dramas of the black band members involved. As with his previous hit *Do the Right Thing*, Lee is unafraid to expose the raw violent side of parts of black life.²¹

A year later, in 1991, Washington was again cast in his signature role as cop/soldier, in this case a cop. In the film *Ricochet* he plays a rookie policeman and law student, Nicholas Styles. When he manages

to arrest violent drug dealer Earl Talbot Blake (John Lithgow), he begins a fast ascent up the department hierarchy. Blake, however, nurses a grudge against Styles and hatches a plot to undo Styles's comfortable life. Incidentally, the prison scenes feature members of the "Aryan Brotherhood," which sends a message to viewers about the existence of this violent and racist group.²² In addition, we have the further contrast of the upright but victimized black character and the psychopathic white killer Blake. There is also interracial sex when Blake concocts a plan to frame Styles by filming him drugged having sex with a white prostitute. Another racial angle in the film comes with the appearance of rapper Ice-T as Odessa, shown as a drug dealer in South Central L.A. In the climax of the film, however, Odessa and his men aid Styles in defeating and dispatching the murderous Blake.

Following *Ricochet* came one of Washington's best roles and performances in *Mississippi Masala* (1992), an innovative look at interracial romance and hostility to such romance as seen through lenses of black (African American) and brown (immigrants from India via Africa). Directed by Mira Nair, this film allows the reality of a sometimes cruel, capricious and even racist world to exist on its own terms with no simple condemnation of it. It is also rare in that it examines racism for an American audience through the prism of groups that are both racist and victimized by racism. In other words, it is not about cardboard characters, invariably only white, who victimize innocent blacks only because they are black. Further adhering to a realistic view, it shows characters evolving over the course of the film.

The film begins by showing the turmoil of 1972 Uganda as Idi Amin and his troops evict non-Africans from the country. Jay, the patrician of a third-generation Indian clan there, enjoys a spacious home with gardens and a wide patio. Because they are not African, however, they

are evicted, and in the process his wife Kinnu comes close to being raped by government soldiers. Jay can do nothing to help. They relocate to Greenwood, Mississippi, which of course has its own legacy of racism, none of which has anything to do with Ugandans or Indians. The main drama of the film revolves around the improper crossing of racial boundaries when Demetrius Williams (Washington) becomes romantically involved with Jay's daughter Mina (Sarita Choudhury). Avoiding platitudes, the film explores how both sides of the family handle this transgression.

Initially, there is a superficial appeal to solidarity. "As long as you're not white, you're colored," says one of the Indian men. "All us people of color must stick together — united we stand." Under the circumstances, though, this is simply not possible. When Williams and Mina plan a tryst at a motel in a neighboring town, her relatives (who also employ Williams as a carpet cleaner at their own motel) chance upon the couple and confront them violently, though in a comical way. Given the racial politics of the area, Williams is the one arrested, prompting his father to admonish him, "Don't you know the rules?" His brother also chimes in, mockingly adding, "He thought he got himself a white chick."

The real tension, however, exists at the motel run by Mina's family, where her parents refuse to condone the relationship between Mina and Williams. When Williams persists, Jay finally talks to him. Wearily, he observes to the younger man, "The world is not so quick to change." As he gazes into the distance, he recalls life back in Uganda where he had been a defender of blacks. Yet he was still jailed when the British left and a new regime took power. Sometimes, Jay realizes, individuals are simply powerless to control their fate, no matter what they have or have not done. It is this hard-won wisdom that he tries to

impart to both Mina and Williams, but the fact remains that they are part of a younger generation living in a time and place that plays by more liberal rules. Jay comes to terms with this when he returns to Uganda to dispose of his former property. Despite the heartache caused by his eviction from his “homeland,” he still loves Africa and its people, as we see when he embraces a black child upon his letting go of any remaining property ties to Africa. This opens the way for him and his wife to finally allow their daughter to make her own choices; we later see her and Williams attired in African garb as they enjoy their honeymoon.

What makes this such a strong film — and so rare for a Washington character — is that Demetrius Williams is such an ordinary black man, a young man with ambitions of running a successful carpet cleaning business (and yes, the white banker is racist and calls in his loan). Williams does not need to be an authority figure such as a policeman or district attorney to be an effective character. Washington’s presence and acting skills alone make his character believable, rich, and sympathetic, just as Morgan Freeman was at his best as an illiterate chauffeur in *Driving Miss Daisy*. In both instances, the actors are allowed to *act* and draw us into their human drama using their own talents. This was perhaps the last time either man took on such a mundane role. Ever since, both have been deployed in a larger ideological battle.²³

Mississippi Masala was immediately followed by Washington’s most ideologically successful collaboration with Spike Lee to date, *Malcolm X* (1992). The film is a straightforward bio-pic of Malcolm X’s life, and it is remarkable how well Washington morphs himself into the role. In short, this long movie tells the story of Malcolm Little, who grows into a young man headed for a life of petty crime. Eventu-

ally imprisoned, he converts to Islam and becomes a follower of Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm's stance is in stark contrast to that of Martin Luther King, Jr, whom Malcolm X often calls an "Uncle Tom." Malcolm X represents the "hard" side of the black civil rights movement, one which does not reject violence as a response to endemic white racism. Throughout the film, Washington mouths harsh sentiments towards and pronouncements against white America.

In one speech, he confidently predicts that if America does not accept racial segregation, "then the house is gonna explode." Malcolm X was famous for his antipathy toward integration dreams, often mocking Dr. King for the issue. In another scene, he appears on a television talk show with a light-skinned older black man, one who calls Malcolm X "a demagogue." Malcolm then goes on to calmly explain why he takes the strong stances he does. For starters, his name "X" was adopted because it represents the unknown, unknown because as slaves kidnapped from Africa, blacks in America had lost their real names and taken on the names of their masters. He also explains the difference between a field nigger and a house nigger, the latter being so identified with the master's interests that when he refers to the master he always says "we" rather than "you." At three hours and twenty minutes, there is ample time to also cover Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca, an experience that convinces him that simple racial conflict is not the sole reason so many blacks in America have problems. Soon after, however, he is assassinated while giving a speech. His popularity within the Nation of Islam had engendered jealousies, and he was killed by members of his own group. Flashbacks using real footage reinforce the seamlessness of the real Malcolm X and Washington's enactment of him. Likely, most viewers are easily led to believe they are watching the real Malcolm X.²⁴

Making two films in 1992, including what must have been a grueling schedule for *Malcolm X*, was the norm for Washington, who did not hesitate to keep up such a pace, completing three more films in 1993 — *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Pelican Brief*, and *Philadelphia*. The first is a Shakespearean drama in which Washington plays the part of Don Pedro of Aragon, while *The Pelican Brief* is an adaptation of a successful John Grisham novel. Interestingly, in the novel the protagonist reporter, Gray Grantham, is white, but Washington was cast in the role for the movie. While there is no romantic relationship with the female star (Julie Roberts), there is a strong bond between the two. This is the beginning of a new theme in many Washington movies. Previously, he was often given authority roles such as a soldier or policeman, but now movie audiences are being exposed to the meme that only black males can protect white females. This is true for *Virtuosity* (1995, protecting Kelly Lynch's character), *Courage Under Fire* (1996, playing Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Serling protecting the reputation of Meg Ryan's character, a posthumously honored soldier), and *Man on Fire* (2004, protecting a young white girl). Regarding the plot, *The Pelican Brief* is a legal/suspense thriller which begins with the assassination of two philosophically divergent Supreme Court Justices. While the public speculates about who may have killed them and why, the main character, Darby Shaw, a Tulane University law student, follows a hunch and researches the two justices' records and cases pending before the Supreme Court. After all, the murders could have been the result of sheer greed rather than politics.

Her findings prompt her to write a legal brief speculating that the assassinations were committed on behalf of an oil tycoon named Victor Mattiece who wants to drill for oil in a Louisiana swamp. The problem for Mattiece is that the swamp is a major habitat of an endangered

breed of pelicans, thus the brief becomes known as the “Pelican Brief.” Employing the courts, he files suit to gain access to the land. Expecting the case to arrive at the Supreme Court, Mattiece needs the two environmentalists on the Court removed. Darby shows the brief to her law professor, Thomas Callahan (who is also sleeping with her and acts as her mentor). Callahan in turn shows it to his FBI lawyer friend. Given the high stakes, it is no surprise when both men are killed by Mattiece’s forces. None of this is lost on Darby, who goes on the run. To get the information out, she contacts *Washington Herald* reporter Gray Grantham, and together they work to publicize this information. Eventually, the story appears, the villains face justice, and Grantham and Darby celebrate their victory (and survival). As Grantham, Washington represents Darby’s protector.

Philadelphia (1993), a saga about the plight of a closeted gay man dying of AIDS, plunges more deeply into the narrative of modern multiculturalism, using the opportunity to educate viewers in this sophisticated piece of propaganda. Starring Tom Hanks as successful young lawyer Andrew Beckett, the film cleverly uses reverse bias to show the audience how inhumane it is to have any prejudices at all. Washington appears as B-grade lawyer Joe Miller, a macho African America who despises homosexuality. The irony set up by this plot is obvious: of anyone, a black man should know the evils of prejudice and discrimination. His own education becomes the viewer’s, as we witness how an imperfect man can overcome his unenlightened prejudices, in stark contrast to the rich white lawyers whose bigotry continues unabated.

Initially repulsed by the presence of a potential client who has AIDS, Miller nonetheless agrees to represent Andy, who has been framed by his elite white co-workers at his former law firm. As the

trial progresses, Miller is forced to deal with his own prejudices (for instance, he nearly gets into a fight with a gay black football player who propositions him in a drugstore) as well as the more serious prejudices of white society at large. Recognizing how racist those ideas are, he comes to terms with the realization that not just blacks but all victims of prejudice deserve respect. As in many Washington films, this one speaks loudly and often about the evils of racism among whites. It also groups racism with other hatreds such as sexism and homophobia. This becomes clear when the wealthy and powerful lawyers in Andy's firm make consecutive jokes in the sauna about women and "faggots." In the end, Miller wins his case for Andy, and the white law firm — representing on screen white society — is forced to pay high punitive damages. Andy dies a martyr in the end.

Nineteen-ninety-four was a rare year in that no Washington movie appeared, but 1995 was productive as usual. Washington first appeared in *Crimson Tide*, a subtle approach for taking a stand against white power and privilege. Power is central in *Crimson Tide*, as emphasized by the opening statement that the commander of a nuclear ballistic missile submarine is one of the three most powerful men in the world, following the leaders of Russia and the United States. The film also harks back to racism in the Deep South because it is set on a nuclear ballistic submarine named the *USS Alabama*. The struggle between slave and master is exemplified in the rivalry between the Executive Officer Hunter, played by Washington, and Captain Ramsey, played by Gene Hackman. The stage for a confrontation is set early in the film when a fire breaks out in the galley, and Hunter leads the effort to extinguish it. The captain, meanwhile, takes this opportunity to run a missile launch drill. Because of the stress of the drill immediately following the fire, a black cook succumbs to a heart attack. Hunter

protests the decision to run a drill at such a risky moment, but Captain Ramsey refuses to accept any blame.

This initial black vs. white confrontation quickly escalates into a major showdown. The submarine receives ambiguous transmissions seeming to order the launch of nuclear missiles against targets in the former USSR. Ramsey, who has risen through the ranks of the Navy the hard way, favors an immediate launch. Hunter, an Annapolis Naval Academy graduate and alum of Harvard, insists upon confirmation of the order before possibly precipitating World War III. Though Ramsey attempts to remove Hunter from his post so that he can unleash the missiles, he fails in his efforts by losing his temper and impulsively straying from standard operating procedure. The cool-headed Hunter then takes advantage of this lapse and has the captain himself relieved of command. Both men jockey back and forth for control of this powerful vessel of war. In one tense moment on the con, the racial dimensions of the conflict come into the open, as Captain Ramsey offers this salvo:

“Speaking of horses, did you ever see the Lippizaner stallions? From Portugal. The Lippizaner Stallions, the most highly trained horses in the world. They’re all white.”

“Yes, sir.”

“*Yes, sir*, you’re aware they’re all white? Or *Yes, sir*, you’ve seen them?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve seen them. Yes, sir, I’m aware that they’re all white. They’re not from Portugal, they’re from Spain. And at birth they’re not white, they’re black. Sir.”

Hunter’s intellectual one-upmanship is amplified by Captain Ramsey’s simplistic espousal of a brutal form of leadership: the best way to train — horses, in this case — is to “stick a cattle prod up their

ass... it's a simple matter of voltage." Hunter turns out to be right about the origins of the horses, implying that his knowledge and judgment are more sound than the captain's. Clearly, Hunter's more intelligent and sophisticated approach to leadership is preferable to that of the white captain; in the end, Hunter's actions save the ship from launching its missiles and war is averted. When the captain is forced to acknowledge this, he announces it to the entire crew. He then relinquishes command and walks off the stage, old and tired. Metaphorically, this can be interpreted as an attempt to read white males out of the story of a new America, one in which blacks are set to assume their turn at the pinnacles of power.

The same year, 1995, Washington appeared in two more films. One was *Virtuosity*, a science fiction tale in which Washington is Parker Barnes, a cop going after a computer program killer played by Russell Crowe. Barnes protects Kelly Lynch's character from the white madman and saves her and her daughter. The other film, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, is a "neo-noir" film set in Los Angeles right after the Second World War. The tagline used to market the film sums up its racial politics: "In a world divided by black and white, Easy Rawlins is about to cross the line." Washington plays Ezikeal "Easy" Rawlins, an African-American World War II veteran who loses his job at the inner tube factory. To make ends meet, he begins work as a private investigator, though he has no training. His first job is to help a man find a missing white woman assumed to be hiding somewhere in L.A.'s black community. It turns out she is partly black, and if this fact becomes known, it will sink the political ambitions of her white lover. Imagine *L.A. Confidential* with a major racial twist to it.

Courage Under Fire came a year later. Here Washington stars with Meg Ryan, Lou Diamond Phillips and Matt Damon in a story

about the first Iraq War. Like the Akira Kurosawa film *Rashomon*, *Courage Under Fire* presents a series of recollections, in this case about a firefight and rescue effort in which the female Captain Walden character is killed. Washington's character, despite intense pressure from above, strives to unravel what really happened out there in the desert, and in the process protects Walden's honor posthumously.

What can we say about Washington's second 1996 film *The Preacher's Wife*? Perhaps the most prominent point about this film is that the film treats the black Christian community with respect. For Hollywood to openly respect Christianity is rare, particularly when it comes to whites practicing their Christianity.²⁵ In the film, Washington plays an angel named Dudley. While not as elevated as the God role Morgan Freeman played in *Bruce Almighty*, it is still a huge step up in the American imagination for a black man. A remake of the 1947 film *The Bishop's Wife*, starring Cary Grant as the angel and David Niven and Loretta Young as the title characters, *The Preacher and His Wife* is a suitable multicultural translation of the original, where black replaces white. Finding Washington in the middle of this transformation is almost predictable.

Nineteen-ninety-eight was yet another busy year for Washington, as he made three more films. First came *Fallen*, where Washington is again cast under the cloak of authority, this time as Detective John Hobbes. The film opens with him apprehending a (white) serial killer, who is executed for his crimes. It turns out that a demon had possessed the killer, and the film becomes a thriller in which Hobbes must comprehend the demonic nature of the crimes he investigates and must eventually confront the demon himself. Next was *He Got Game*, the story of Jesus Shuttlesworth, a high school senior who excels at basketball. Needing to make a decision on which top university to attend —

or whether to go straight to the NBA — he is assisted by his father, Jake (Washington), who, unfortunately, is in prison for killing Jesus's mother. This film is Washington's third collaboration with director Spike Lee. This time, however, the racial politics are muted and Lee turns his critical eye on the process of college recruitment of (largely black) athletes. As one reviewer wrote about Washington's acting, "The reliable Washington renders solid work in an uncharacteristic role, one that may not be as ambitious as the title part in *Malcolm X* but is certainly more arduous and rewarding than the lead in *Mo' Better Blues*."²⁶

Perhaps the most important film Washington made that year was *The Siege*, which continues and expands upon the theme of removing white males from the positions of power they have historically occupied in America. It does this by using a female CIA agent, an Arab agent, a mixed cast of federal investigators and most importantly Washington as FBI special agent Anthony Hubbard. While Arabs in general play the role of untrustworthy immigrants at best and murderous terrorists at worst, there is also an important sub-theme of the white male as threat. Due to growing Arab terrorism in New York City, the Army is called in, led by Bruce Willis as the commanding general. Sealing off Brooklyn in search of terrorist cells, the army arrests Arab males, and the general is responsible for the torture death of one. Washington's Hubbard then confronts Willis as army general and gives a moving lecture on true patriotism. The white male general submits, and a Denzel Washington character once again emerges as the voice of reason, the moral center, and the hero of the film.

Next came *The Bone Collector*, a thriller pairing Washington with Angelina Jolie. Based on a crime novel written by Jeffery Deaver, it concerns the quadriplegic detective Lincoln Rhyme. Unlike the movie,

however, the book posited a white Detective Rhyme. In brief, the story is similar to *Kiss the Girls* (1997) where Morgan Freeman stars as savant Dr. Alex Cross, a forensic psychologist who solves serial killings committed by white men.

Washington's subsequent film, the 1999 big-budget drama *The Hurricane*, can be seen as a sequel to *Malcolm X*, for it takes the actual story of an African American hero and allows Washington to animate it with his powerful acting and ability to crusade for justice. As mentioned above, the film follows the well-known plight of boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, imprisoned for the 1966 murders of three New Jersey whites. Bob Dylan popularized this story with a ballad about Carter in his 1976 album *Desire*. After viewing opening scenes of Carter's boxing career interwoven with the shooting and arrest, we are taken back to Carter's upbringing in Paterson, New Jersey, where white racism was the rule. The racism of the police is shared by a white pedophile who attempts to homosexually molest one of the childhood friends of the young Carter, who heroically fends off the attack with a bottle. Angered, the white man grabs him, yelling "Black bastard, you, goddammit!" He then threatens to throw the boy over a steep cliff, whereupon the boy defends himself with a knife and stabs the attacker. He is then sentenced to a home for delinquent boys, railroaded by white cops who see nothing but "a nigger with a knife."

Later, unjustly imprisoned as an adult, boxer Carter writes a book about his life, *The Sixteenth Round*. Some years later in Canada, a black youth happens upon the book and begins reading: "Carter is the slave name that was given to my forefathers who worked in the cotton fields of Alabama and Georgia and was passed on to me." This youth, Lesra Martin, learned to read with the help of three white Canadians,

the righteous whites in the film. As with his performance in *Malcolm X*, Washington's performance here very much revolves around a fight for justice. When he watches the violence of white policemen visited upon black civil rights demonstrators, for example, he discusses his impulse to strike back in revenge. When a white reporter prints this, anonymous whites throw bricks through the windows of Carter's house. Up until his exoneration, Carter's life is aptly summed up by these words he utters: "Everything I lost, I lost at the hands of white folks." This is true until the three righteous whites agitate on his behalf. Eventually, Carter is freed after spending 22 years in prison, the judge proclaiming that white racism had resulted in this miscarriage of justice against a black men. Justice against racist white society has prevailed.

By now, Washington was really hitting his stride when it came to displaying righteous anger toward the purportedly endemic racism found in white America. His next movie, *Remember the Titans* (2000), took this project to the next level by showing that racism but upstaging it with a larger tale of black victory over it. This victory comes through the use of the technique of replacement: deserving blacks replace undeserving whites. Ostensibly a heart-warming tale about a group of high school football players working to overcome racism in turbulent times, the barely buried subtext is that whites should gladly — altruistically — hand over everything they value to blacks. Here, the football team represents American society in microcosm, black, white, and tense. Subtlety is not this film's forte.

The film opens in the present with a mixed group of well-dressed blacks and whites arriving at a cemetery. A voiceover tells us that in 1971 their school in Alexandria, Virginia had been forced by the school board to integrate. The action then fades back to that time. As

Hollywood routinely does, it depicts violence coming only from whites, with the narrator telling us that a white store owner has killed a black youth, precipitating violence in town. Bill Yoast, the white coach of the all-white football team, establishes his credentials as a moral person when he prevents his boys, including his star quarterback who hates these “black animals,” from heading into town to protect the white store owner.

Into this tense situation comes a new black coach, Herman Boone (Washington), who moves his family into an all-white neighborhood. At the recently integrated school, the men find out that Boone will replace Yoast as head coach, a proposition that the white coaches find unpalatable. The white players, too, object, threatening to boycott the black coach. Yoast, however, convinces them that the right thing to do is play ball. Play they do, beginning with a bus trip to summer camp. To no one's surprise, the bus scene is used to highlight segregation and the attempt to solve it through school busing. Coach Boone is eager to establish his dominance and does so when Gary, the white quarterback, tries to act as master of the coach. Boone neatly turns this around by humiliating Gary (and all the white parents watching), badgering the boy with taunts of “Who's your daddy?” Meekly, Gary gives in and rides the integrated bus.

Upon arrival at the camp, Boone demands that white and black players share rooms. Clashes erupt over tastes in music as well as responses to a poster of black athletes using the Black Power salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. An obese white lineman (Ethan Suplee) confesses to all in the cafeteria that he is too stupid to go to college. To remedy this, a brilliant black player volunteers to tutor the grateful white, who acknowledges that he is nothing but “white trash.” Injecting historical seriousness into the film, Boone runs his

charges through the dense woods, coming upon a fog-shrouded battle-field cemetery. He then speaks of the background of the Civil War and its attempt to erase the wrongs of slavery. Let us not, he intones, forget those goals and sacrifices, nor let those past hatreds persist.

The second white character to become a moral center for this film is Gary, the quarterback. Unlike Coach Yoast, however, Gary harbors racist feelings toward blacks. He will be one of three examples of whites who come to terms with the new conditions in America, finding it unthinkable at first but slowly coming to see both its inevitability and rectitude. After sharing a room with a black teammate, Gary returns to town more open-minded. His girlfriend, however, remains a segregationist and refuses to shake hands with a black player. She, too, will change, though, becoming another white character on screen to lead reluctant whites in the theater audience to make the same transition.

At the Titans' first game, one in which the whites in the stands segregate themselves, the mixed Titans defeat an all-white team. Celebrating after the game, Gary's non-athlete white friends expect him to join them for some fun, but Gary sticks with his black and white teammates. Hungry, they look for a restaurant. A newly arrived teammate from California promises to treat them at a local restaurant, but the black players balk. Finally, they all enter, whereupon the simian-looking and unshaven white owner refuses to seat them at any of the open tables. After all, this is the segregated South. Meanwhile, back in school, the issue of interracial dating is hinted at but is quickly turned into an opportunity to castigate whites for their racism. When a black player moves in close to a group of white girls, teasing them about who's good looking, white students begin a scuffle. Gary, growing ever more certain of the evils of racism — including white solidarity — steps in to threaten his former friends.

Yoast's young daughter is the third major character to revise her feelings toward blacks. At first she sees Coach Boone as a black interloper who is taking her daddy's job. Later, she reluctantly allows that Boone isn't such a bad coach. Later still, after befriending Boone's daughter, she is at the Boone home when racists throw a brick through the front window. Now she too takes sides, going so far as to tell her father that she hates living among "rednecks." The racial conflict grows in intensity. For instance, a white player deliberately misses a block during a game, resulting in an injury to a black player. Again taking the movie-constructed moral position, Gary ignores white solidarity and has the white player thrown off the team. Next, in the regional championship, the opposing coach and referees are openly racist, making ridiculous penalty calls, but still the Titans prevail. In the line-up after the game to shake hands, though, the other team's white coach refuses to shake hands with Boone.

By this point in the film, the proper position for the audience to espouse has been firmly established. From here on out, characters either get with the program or get relegated to the realm of the hopelessly racist. Gary's girlfriend is one of the first to repent, coming down to the field during a game to shake hands with a black player. Her boyfriend, Gary, however, takes the symbolism to a new level: that of Christ-like martyr for the sake of his black teammates. Driving his '69 Chevy Camaro through town after another Titans victory, his car is broadsided by an old pickup truck, and he is permanently paralyzed from the waist down. In the hospital, Gary watches on TV as his team fights its way to victory in the Virginia State Championship. Director Boaz Yakin sets up a shot where white light from above shines over the prostrate Gary, who then lifts his arms into a Christ-like pose. He has given everything so that his black teammates may play.

In the film's climax, the Titans are losing. At halftime, Coach Yoast makes a rousing speech, telling the team that they have taught him that people really are to be judged by their character, not race. Fired up, the boys return to the field to do battle. Another white player then gives up his starting position to a black teammate voluntarily and without prodding. The decision turns out to be the right one, for the black player recovers a fumble, then later sprints seventy-five yards downfield for the winning touchdown, while the new white quarterback blocks for him. No opportunity is missed to show that the world is a better place when blacks replace whites. The lesson for American society in general is clear.

Washington switched gears for his next film, *Training Day* (2001). The film may appear at first blush to be an exception to the heroic roles Washington usually plays, but given the rise of hip hop culture and corruption at many levels of modern society, Washington's role as decorated LAPD detective Alonzo Harris is "bad" while also being thoroughly mesmerizing. Thus, it is no surprise that Washington earned a Best Actor Oscar for this role. Though corrupt, he is still the center of the film and drives the action, particularly with respect to his mentoring of the white greenhorn cop played by Ethan Hawke. Just as in, say, *The Godfather I & II*, the mafia characters played by Marlon Brando and Al Pacino are objectively negative roles in that they are criminals involved with crime and murder, in *Training Day* Alonzo Harris is a crooked cop, so he is objectively a negative character. Still, he exercises power and probably has the audience's sympathy, at least until the end when hubris sets him up for the inevitable fall.

The following year, Washington appeared in the hostage drama *John Q.*, in which he plays the working class father of a young boy in need of an immediate heart transplant. In this film, the issues of race

and racism are nearly invisible. The only possible references to them might be that a) John Q.'s family is poor and lacks adequate health insurance and b) the health bureaucracy that withholds a heart transplant is mostly white. Also, there is the annoying fact that the morbidly obese security guard at the hospital is white and stupid. He's played by Ethan Suplee, the same actor who appeared in *Remember the Titans* as the obese and stupid lineman. One might also mention that here again the filmmakers positively portray the Christian faith of blacks, including a church scene, and another where John Q.'s wife, when asked to comment on bureaucrats, holds her tongue, saying, "I'm a Christian woman." As in Clint Eastwood's *True Crime*, this black woman is shown wearing a cross when appearing in a scene meant to elicit our sympathy and pity. When Hollywood gives a white character a crucifix to wear, it is to associate them with evil, as was done with Kathy Bates's character in *Misery* and Charlie Sheen's in *Under Pressure*. All in all, however, the film is far more one of class conflict, with an unsubtle message that America's lack of universal health care is a travesty. As one reviewer summed it up, "Washington's performance rises above the material, but *John Q.* pounds the audience over the head with its message".²⁷

In *Antwone Fisher*, also 2002, Washington, making his debut as director, plays U.S. Navy psychiatrist Jerome Davenport. The film revolves around the anger a young black sailor named Antwone Fisher feels, especially toward perceived white racists. For instance, when the film opens, Fisher is aboard a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier. When a white sailor engages in some locker-room banter with him, Fisher takes it as a racist attack and starts pummeling the man. Later, when forced to visit a Navy psychiatrist, he explains how racism surrounds him. To his credit, Washington uses this directing opportunity to

move beyond cardboard white racist men victimizing hapless blacks, instead showing that blacks can also be the source of other blacks' trauma.

Washington's next film was the 2003 thriller *Out of Time*. Washington is Police Chief Matthias Lee Whitlock. His problem is that he loves two women, his estranged wife and one Ann Merai Harrison, wife of an abusive (and white²⁸) retired football star. When Whitlock learns of Ann's terminal cancer, he steals nearly a half million dollars slated to go to federal authorities. Unfortunately, soon after stealing the money, Ann's house burns to the ground and bodies likely belonging to her and her husband are in it. Whitlock must now prove his innocence. In *Man on Fire* (2004) we find Washington playing a tired CIA agent who protects a rich (white) Mexican girl, bolstering the black-man-to-the-rescue theme seen more and more commonly in recent Hollywood movies. The same year, Washington appeared in the remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*, but there was no overt racial message to the film.

Inside Man (2006), however, is a different beast. Once again, Washington was working under the direction of Spike Lee and this time shared the bill with Hollywood star Jodie Foster. Washington appears in a familiar role that gives him command of the action, that of police detective Keith Frazier. The film is used to tie the promotion of black male images with another popular Hollywood theme — the Holocaust and its victimization of Jews at the hands of the Nazis. As with the 1976 Dustin Hoffman film *Marathon Man*, this film posits a German who has stolen diamonds from Jews. In this film, there is also a Cartier ring which belonged to a Jewish friend whom the German antagonist had sacrificed for money. Remorseful, he has since led a life aimed at making amends with Jews.

The same year, Washington was again an officer of the law, this time ATF agent Doug Carlin in *Déjà Vu*. The film accesses Americans' memories of three traumatic events — the Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina, complete with its overtones of white racism. Like executed Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, the villain in *Déjà Vu* is a young white “patriot” and this time he has planted a bomb on a New Orleans ferry, killing 543 innocent Americans in the process. The central victim is Claire, a beautiful young African American woman who was actually killed prior to the ferry explosion. Carlin falls in love with her as he voyeuristically watches her through a kind of limited time machine. Carlin was distraught when he first viewed Claire's lifeless body, still drenched in the same kind of gasoline as the victims of the ferry bombing. The fingers on one of her hands are missing, apparently sliced off in the explosion. In an effort to prevent Claire's death and the ferry bombing, Carlin studies the actions of the bomber and travels back through time to thwart him. It is here that we see Claire's demise in real time. The fanatical white bomber is played by James Caviezel, who previously had portrayed Jesus in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. To throw investigators off, he attempts to inflict injuries on Claire that would be consistent with injuries sustained in the ferry bombing. Here we see the demonic as enacted by a white man upon a helpless black woman.

Claire is tied to a chair, arms behind her back. Then, in preparation for her immolation, the bomber pours gasoline over her hooded head. Next, he sadistically brandishes pruning shears as he approaches the thrashing black captive. As she screams through her hood, the bomber slowly picks up her hand and prepares to cut off her fingers. Hence the missing digits. Once again Hollywood portrays a

white man doing unspeakable harm to a helpless minority, while a Numinous Negro attempts to save the day. Meanwhile, Hollywood is almost completely silent on what various non-whites are doing to whites on a routine basis.

The next year saw Washington in two more films, *American Gangster* and *The Great Debaters*. In the former, he plays the role of Harlem drug kingpin Frank Lucas. Disciplined and ambitious, Lucas pioneers a new form of heroin distribution by directly smuggling pure heroin from Southeast Asia in the coffins of American soldiers killed in Vietnam. In contrast to, say, *Inside Man* or certainly *Déjà Vu*, here Washington dons the mantle of a criminal character, in contrast to the obvious protagonist, an honest cop (Russell Crowe).²⁹ His unostentatious character also differs from the swaggering character he portrayed as a corrupt cop in *Training Day*. Still, it would be wrong to say Lucas is a role model, for the film opens with him executing a rival or underling in the worst way. Dousing him with gasoline, he sets him afire, then administers the *coup de grâce* with a pistol. Later, he cold-bloodedly shoots a rival in the head on a crowded neighborhood street. This, however, is balanced with some positive qualities, beginning with sobriety. While other blacks around him are undisciplined when it comes to alcohol and drugs, Lucas stays sober. He is also rational and patient, two qualities not always in surplus in the Harlem of the time. Finally, he exercises filial piety, buying a beautiful big house for his mother and family. It probably remains up to the individual viewer to decide whether or not Lucas is a positive character or not. To the extent that he wields great power and is rich, he is likely a positive character, particularly in an oppressed area like Harlem.³⁰

The Great Debaters is an undiluted race film, pitting a team of debaters from a historically black college against students from Har-

vard (in real life it was the University of Southern California). As the debate coach, Washington leads his team against the pervasive prejudice blacks found in the American South in the 1930s. Based on a true story, the film was produced by Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Productions and directed by Washington. As the daughter of one of the original debaters commented, the film "successfully projects episodes of cruelty and blatant hatred against blacks by the white South of 1935."³¹ Not surprisingly, an instance of this blatant hatred is portrayed when the debate team, driving through the night to a contest, witnesses the aftermath of a just-concluded lynching. Fleeting images of the charred corpse powerfully reinforce the message that white racism is lethal, if not diabolical.

The year 2008 uncharacteristically brought forth no new Washington films, so audiences had to wait until 2009, when *The Taking of Pelham 123* appeared. This is far less of a race film than most Washington vehicles, if it is one at all. Like previous films *Crimson Tide*, *Man on Fire* and *Déjà Vu*, Washington works with director Tony Scott on *The Taking of Pelham 123*, a remake of the 1974 film of the same name. Washington plays MTA employee Walter Garber, temporarily reassigned from his position as assistant chief transportation officer because of a possible bribery scandal. The acting is solid, but the film just does not touch on race.

The Book of Eli (2010) returns to the more common Washington role, that of Numinous Negro. As one reviewer wrote, "The hero, Eli, a kind of Black Jesus figure, is set upon by a gang of brutal, stupid, sub-humans, who just all happen to be White men. But he is protected by the Lord, or else he is just one hell of a shot, because he nails every single one of them." In this film, "the Whites in the movie are uniformly subhuman, savage, and beyond salvation. To a man they are abso-

lutely repulsive. No subliminal programming here! Hollywood's war on the White male continues unabated." In one desolate town, the evil character (played by Gary Oldman) is the cold and calculating Carnegie, "evil personified." He is "a sickly, and pockmarked White man. The very name Carnegie suggests power and its abuses. And in keeping with the evil White man stereotype, he abuses his woman and sends her daughter out to whore." His goons "are physically repulsive, violent, stupid and to a man, White."³² In contrast, Eli is the Savior figure, bringing "The Word" to his destination, Alcatraz Island, which is now a library. Yet again Washington is the moral exemplar in a film.

Unstoppable (2010), the latest Washington film to be released, fits squarely in the sub-category of the Numinous Negro action flick. Just as the aging Morgan Freeman was cast as a sage opposite a young white male protégé (*Seven*, for instance), Washington now gets such roles. *Unstoppable* pairs him with Chris Pine as Will Colson, newly-hired conductor for the Allegheny and West Virginia Railroad (AWVR). Washington plays veteran engineer Frank Barnes and they've got a problem, this one caused by recurrent Washington-movie-loser Ethan Suplee as "Dewey." Dewey has misconfigured the train's controls and then stupidly steps out of the cab to tend to a switch. Soon he has a runaway train on his hands. The rest of the film deals with Colson and Barnes's attempts to stop the train. As usual, a Washington character to the rescue.

Conclusion

Because Denzel Washington serves as a Hollywood Numinous Negro, the conclusion to this essay is the same as for my Morgan Freeman essay. On the surface, it may appear that this tactic of

elevating black characters to central and heroic positions is an honest attempt at creating role models for a historically downtrodden group. Such may be the case, but only to a degree. In addition, the flip side must be considered as well — the concomitant denigrating of whites in contemporary Hollywood film. As one writer argues, this “campaign of demonization of the European American Christian majority and its culture that we see in the media” is real. “We have been publicly demonized as ‘racists’ and deliberately conditioned by the media *not* to respond at all. Our inertia ensures our decline... [W]e are being demonized, dispersed and impoverished until we are no longer a threat.”³³

Seemingly, majority whites have lost the power to control the image their own society constructs of them. Increasingly, whites have been on a downward slope when it comes to their media image. “The images have remained primarily fixed and have only been changed in the sense that they have become more vindictive and damaging.” The intent here is that “the images help enforce policy.”³⁴ Based on the patterns emerging from Hollywood these last few decades, one might conclude that there is in fact an intent, if not a policy, to diminish the place of whites in film, beginning with the public face of white authority, the white male.

Hollywood is creating the reality tens of millions of Americans internalize. In this scripted reality, contemporary viewers are unlikely to ever see the blood-curdling violence of true crime by black males on innocent white victims in cases such as the Wichita Massacre (five young whites raped and/or murdered), the Knoxville slayings, or the pre-Christmas murder of a family of four whites by a slightly built black man in Ithaca, NY. Instead, the news media focus far more on the bogus crimes of white men, as in the Duke Lacrosse rape hoax or

the Jena 6 fraud.³⁵ How Hollywood spins its powerful tales of good and evil, and how those tales invariably present and reinforce racially-coded messages, is a long and complex story. But it should give one pause that in a society that was created and once dominated by whites, a consistent message is emitted portraying white males as so often vile, evil or just plain incompetent. Not only are minorities who identify with the film victims of white mayhem likely to internalize a desire for revenge, but many whites themselves will subconsciously respond by wanting to punish the white evildoers. This process of white “altruistic punishment”³⁶ can be likened to a body’s immune system going haywire and destroying its own healthy cells.

American audiences are instead treated to a “bait and switch” tactic, one in which the violent criminals are white and victims non-whites. That so many Denzel Washington movies elevate him to positions of authority, both moral and physical, and feature him nobly confronting racial injustice, is all part of a larger intellectual strategy to dethrone whites from a majority position in America, if not to dispossess them altogether. As Ben Stein told us, “movies are not telling it ‘like it is’; instead they are giving us the point of view of a small and extremely powerful section of the American intellectual community — those who write for the mass visual media.”³⁷ Denzel Washington is but a cog in that great “reality” machine, though he is an important one. Having just reviewed his entire body of cinematic work, the reader may now better understand the ideological import of Washington and his films.

Appendix: Denzel Washington's Filmography

A Soldier's Story (1984), *Power* (1986), *Cry Freedom* (1987), *The Mighty Quinn* (1989), *For Queen and Country* (1989), *Glory* (1989), *Heart Condition* (1990), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Ricochet* (1991), *Mississippi Masala* (1992), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *The Pelican Brief* (1993), *Philadelphia* (1993), *Crimson Tide* (1995), *Virtuosity* (1995), *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), *Courage Under Fire* (1996), *The Preacher's Wife* (1996), *Fallen* (1998), *He Got Game* (1998), *The Siege* (1998), *The Bone Collector* (1999), *The Hurricane* (1999), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *Training Day* (2001), *John Q* (2002), *Antwone Fisher* (2002), *Out of Time* (2003), *Man on Fire* (2004), *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *Inside Man* (2006), *Déjà Vu* (2006), *American Gangster* (2007), *The Great Debaters* (2007), *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010) and *Unstoppable* (2010).

NOTES

- ¹ Benjamin Stein, "Whatever happened to small-town America?" *The Public Interest*, Summer 1976, 22. Soon after, he developed this thesis into the book *The View from Sunset Boulevard: America As Brought To You By The People Who Make Television* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
- ² David Gelernter, "How the Intellectuals Took Over (And What to Do About It)," *Commentary*, March 1997, 33–37.
- ³ See J. B. Cash, "The Racial Caste System in Sports," *The Occidental Quarterly* online, <http://www.toqonline.com/2009/04/the-racial-caste-system-in-sports/>. William Lind provides further analysis of the phenomenon. See "Who Stole Our Culture?" (http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=55833).
- ⁴ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 195. Again, note that like Stein and Gelernter, Sklar was aware of the fact that a new elite — at least in

Hollywood — had prevailed in America.

- ⁵ Stephen Powers, David J. Rothman, and Stanley Rothman, *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 10, 287.
- ⁶ Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 190–191.
- ⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Random House, 1965), xvi.
- ⁸ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 184.
- ⁹ Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, Massachusetts, 2001), 1.
- ¹⁰ Richard Brookhiser, “The Numinous Negro — His importance in our lives; why he is fading,” *National Review*, August 20, 2001.
- ¹¹ See http://www.vdare.com/Sailer/080330_obama.htm; and http://www.vdare.com/Sailer/080330_obama.htm.
- ¹² See Kevin MacDonald, “Jews, Blacks, and Race,” in *Race and the American Prospect: Essays on the Racial Realities of Our Nation and Our Time*, ed. Samuel Francis (Mt. Airy, MD: The Occidental Press, 2006); E. Michael Jones, *The Jewish Revolutionary Spirit and Its Impact on World History* (South Bend, Indiana: Fidelity Press, 2008); and Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), respectively.
- ¹³ Kevin MacDonald in Foreword to Michael J. Polignano, *Taking Our Own Side and Other Essays* (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2010), v–vi.
- ¹⁴ http://vdare.com/pb/091006_race.htm.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082138/>.
- ¹⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carbon_Copy_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carbon_Copy_(film)).
- ¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Soldier%27s_Story.
- ¹⁸ Rita Kempley, *Washington Post*, November 06, 1987.
- ¹⁹ There was, however, criticism of the film in that it focused more on Woods, the white journalist who sought to publicize Biko's story, than on Biko himself. This kind of film falls into what I call the “righteous white” category, which, while condemning the hopeless racism of white society in

general, still focuses on one or few whites willing to ignore their own interests or the interests of whites more generally in favor of standing on principle and working for the interests of blacks (or Asians, Native Americans, etc.). See my essay "Falling Down: Images of the White Majority in Peril," *Journal of Hokkai-Gakuen University*, No. 111 (March 2002).

²⁰ See review of February 17, 1989, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19890217/REVIEWS/902170302/1023>.

²¹ Lee's portrayal of the two Jewish club owners, however, was apparently too raw, at least by the standards of the Anti-Defamation League et al. Lee's two minor characters Josh and Moe Flatbush are Jews who exploit the black musicians in the film, leading the Anti-Defamation League to say that the characterizations "dredge up an age-old and highly dangerous form of anti-Semitic stereotyping." As E. Michael Jones shows in "Lejzor and Fiszal Sing the Blues: Chess Records and the Black-Jewish Alliance," however, perceptions among black musicians that they were being cheated were common (*Culture Wars*, vol. 28, no. 3 [February 2009], 20-33). Lee (somewhat) defused the controversy by writing an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, "but the whole thing still makes him mad when he thinks about it. And the truth is, he's not sorry about portraying Mo and Josh Flatbush as Jewish bloodsuckers, feeding off the talents of black musicians. 'Here's the thing, though: It's more than being a stereotype,' says Lee. 'In the history of American music, there have not been Jewish people exploiting black musicians? In the history of music? How is that being stereotypical? For me, that's like saying, like the NBA is predominantly black. Now, if that makes me anti-Semitic ...'" (Ariel Levy, "The Angriest Auteur," *New York Magazine*, Aug 13, 2006).

²² This imagery is a Hollywood staple. See how I addressed Hollywood's portrayal of white nationalists in the films *Betrayed* and *Arlington Road*. ("Hollywood Considers White Nationalism: Two Films," *Journal of Hokkai Gakuen University*, No. 146, December 2010.)

²³ Morgan Freeman admitted as much when he said, "I've been sucked into a kind of mold of a good guy and that's actually almost beyond my ability to control." (See <http://www.biography.com/articles/Morgan-Freeman>-

9301982.)

²⁴ Incidentally, Norman Jewison was originally slated to direct the film, but outrage over having a white director do this film led to Spike Lee becoming the director. This also accounts for its length. Regarding the film's unusual length, Lee's insistence on doing it his way caused the project to be shut down in post-production. Being financially threatened, Lee turned to fellow African Americans, and they donated to the film, giving Lee his way. These contributors included: Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Janet Jackson, Prince, and Peggy Cooper Cafritz, founder of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_X_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_X_(film)).

²⁵ I made this argument in my essay "Role Reversal in Hollywood." More pointedly, see the almost unanimous hostility Hollywood directed at Mel Gibson and his film *The Passion of the Christ*. For references, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Mel Gibson's Passion and Philosophy: The Cross, the Questions, the Controversy* (Chicago, Open Court Press, 2004).

²⁶ See <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117477426?refcatid=31>.

²⁷ See http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/john_q/.

²⁸ Technically, Cain (born Dean George Tanaka) is one-quarter Japanese. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dean_Cain.

²⁹ *The New York Times* noted that Crowe's honest cop character was Jewish. The real-life character, who went on to become a lawyer, said of his depiction in the film, "A lot of people are drawn to the idea that a black man was able to rise to that height over a white man — the Mafia — because of his brains. That's fine. I'm Jewish, and part of me thinks that Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky were pretty cool guys because at a time when everybody thought that Jews were wimps, these guys rose to the heights of the Mafia. Part of me does feel that. But the other part of me recognizes that this is ridiculous; these guys are killers, not to be admired. It's the same thing with Frank. In truth, Frank Lucas has probably destroyed more black lives than the K.K.K. could ever dream of." (Richard G. Jones, "A New Jersey Crime Story's Hollywood Ending," *New York Times*, November 1, 2007).

³⁰ Scholar E. Michael Jones argues specifically that the pimp and drug

dealer were engineered to be role models in the ghettos after the civil rights movement had petered out at the end of the 1960s. See “Pimping the System and the System of Pimping,” *Culture Wars*, Vol. 29 No. 10 & 11 (October and November 2010). An overview of the Jewish role in the civil rights movement can be found in seven chapters of Jones’s *The Jewish Revolutionary Spirit*.

³¹ http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=bd4739cf29b29cb13e297967e8a97a95.

³² Penelope Thornton, “Hijacking Jesus on the Way to the Apocalypse,” <http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/2010/06/hijacking-jesus-on-the-way-to-the-apocalypse/>.

³³ Richard Faussette, “Niche Theory, Population Transfer, and the Origin of the Anti-Semitic Cycle,” *The Occidental Quarterly*, 6 (4); and “The Book of Genesis from a Darwinian Perspective,” *The Occidental Quarterly*, 7 (2).

³⁴ Tom Perry, “Critic accuses Hollywood of vilifying Arabs,” *Reuters*, May 1, 2008.

³⁵ For background on these actual — as opposed to scripted — acts of interracial violence, see, beginning with the Wichita Massacre, Pat Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 67–8; Frederic P. Vandome, Agnes F. McBrewster and John Miller, *Murders of Channon Christian and Christopher Newsom* (Alphascript Publishing, 2010). The online book description reads: “Hugh Christopher Newsom, Jr., 23, and Channon Gail Christian, 21, were a couple from Knoxville, Tennessee. They were both raped, tortured and murdered after being kidnapped early on the morning of January 7, 2007. Their vehicle had been carjacked. Five suspects were arrested and charged in the case. The grand jury indicted four of the suspects on counts of murder, robbery, kidnapping, rape and theft. Three of those arrested, Letalvis D. Cobbins, Lemaricus Davidson and George Thomas, have been convicted on multiple charges including several counts of felony murder. Another has been convicted of federal charges as accessory after the fact to carjacking.” See also Nicholas Stix, “The Knoxville Horror: The Crime and the Cover-Up” (http://www.amren.com/mtnews/archives/2007/05/the_

knoxville_h.php); Rebecca H. Cofer, with David McElligott, *Good Cop/Bad Cop: A True Story of Murder and Mayhem* (Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon Press, 1994, [2007]), 36, 60, 65-66. Evidence in the Ithaca massacre showed that the black perpetrator raped 16-year-old Shelby. As Cofer writes, "Once she is undressed Kinge shoves her into the master bedroom and covers the windows with towels for privacy as prison inmates do. He dresses and undresses her in the taffeta gown, tormenting and toying with her, which gets him more sexually excited. He finds a jar of Vaseline to help him sexually assault the virgin.... Kinge keeps the sock in Shelby's mouth; so he doesn't have to hear her screaming. He continues to rape and sodomize her. The torture goes on for a long time" (272-73); Stuart Taylor Jr. and KC Johnson, *Until Proven Innocent: Political Correctness and the Shameful Injustices of the Duke Lacrosse Rape Case*, (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2007); and Jared Taylor, "The 'Jena 6' Fraud: 'Civil rights' for the 21st century," <http://www.amren.com/features/jenaFraud/index.html>.

³⁶ Kevin MacDonald has discussed this concept in the Preface to his book *Culture of Critique*. See <http://www.kevinmacdonald.net/books-Preface.html>.

³⁷ Stein, "Small-town America," 22-23.