

America First

NAMING THE NATION IN US FILM

edited by

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American History X

(1998)

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The Gates of Time

Before the attacks of 9/11, the most significant terrorist event on American¹ soil arguably had been the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, when 168 people died at the hands of right-wing extremists, notably Timothy McVeigh. The Oklahoma City National Memorial that opened in 2000 now commemorates that attack. It is an interestingly literal monument. Built on the exact site of the downed building, it features two large portals called The Gates of Time, one at each end of the site and serving as entrance and exit to a park and a reflecting pool. Over the bronze-clad granite mass of the gates are engraved the time before the bombing at one end – 9.01 – and at the other end 9.03, the time when (according to the National Park Service who run the monument) people's lives 'were changed forever'.²

The memorial shares something with many American monuments: it commemorates an important event without expending any effort to explain or even recount the history of that event. The bombing is treated as a punctual phenomenon – two minutes of history treated as if they had no causal roots and given no contextual clarification or analysis. The event simply happened, it would seem, killing scores of people and changing many other people's lives. Thus, the on-site museum begins its ten-chapter storyline of the bombing two minutes *after* it occurred, offering an account only of the aftermath and of the people who died, survived or were otherwise affected by the blast. The right-wing terrorist perpetrators are not mentioned, of course, and the nature of their cause is totally unacknowledged. An unknowing visitor could not, in other words, glean from the site any reason for the attack.

It would perhaps be overreaching to suggest that such a monument could be built only in America. But it is striking how consistently the nation's monuments are inflected by the same gesture – the shearing away of history in the very moment of memorialization. It will be interesting to see how the planned memorial at the site of the World Trade Center will compare in this regard, but the signs are not auspicious, and it seems likely that it will follow in the style of two of the more recent memorials on the Mall in Washington, DC – the Second World War and the Vietnam War memorials. The latter, however moving its meticulous roll-call of the names of the American dead might be, offers no sense at all of the history of the conflict. Similarly, the former – in my view, a frightening reminder of the architecture of the defeated enemy in the Second World War – fails to specify any important detail of the war. What we have in these and many other cases is, I think, a kind of contradictory exercise which suits the way in which American cultural life habitually proceeds: American culture is capable of remembering events and people without feeling the need to know history or context.

This contradiction in the culture could perhaps be explained away by the old saw that proposes that America actually has no history. Even if that statement is patently silly, it is nonetheless how Americans frequently understand themselves and their nation, broadly speaking. Something of how this works could clearly be seen in the aftermath of 9/11 when it was considered at best irrelevant or at worst unpatriotic to try to contextualize the attacks in any historicizing fashion. Such distaste for history and for historical analysis normally operates in America in such a way as to validate not just specific punctual moments, but equally importantly, individual experience of those moments. This is certainly true of the Oklahoma City monument I've been describing: the museum curators have painstakingly collected some piece of evidence or some small material token to represent each individual life lost, but the exhibit cannot admit the slightest sign of a broader historical stroke. This cultural habit is replicated daily in the mainstream media where the individual eyewitness account of this or that event is usually made to stand for the event itself; or where the meaning of events is reduced and limited to the affect of some observer or participant. Thus, the individual anecdote comes to stand in for historical analysis; collections of individual anecdotes take on the role of collective experience; and the Gates of Time can frame only two minutes of the duration of history.

History in America is, then, by and large withheld, elided or otherwise ignored, and in that sense it is true that America has no history. The quality and significance of events is assessed by their impact on individuals, and anecdotal individualism

takes on a central explanatory function. With these general propositions about American cultural life in mind, I want to look at the film *American History X*, which was released in 1998, three years after the Oklahoma City bombings, and which tapped into what was then an active cultural and political anxiety about domestic right-wing terrorism.

American History X tells the story of a lower middle-class family in California, caught up in the racial antagonism and violence fostered by a local white supremacist gang. The eldest son of the family, Derek (Edward Norton), is a skinhead who has attained some importance in the gang. After his father, a fireman, is killed on the job by a black drug-dealer, Derek becomes an efficient recruiter and rabble-rouser for the white supremacists; he is shown, for example, instigating and leading a skinhead attack on a supermarket staffed primarily by immigrant workers; he also orchestrates a confrontation with a black gang, expelling them from his local basketball courts. Derek's younger brother, Daniel (Edward Furlong), is still at high school and seems to be about to follow in Derek's neo-fascist footsteps. Derek, however, goes to prison after brutally killing three black men who had tried to steal his car. In prison he undergoes a change of heart. He becomes disillusioned with the behaviour of the prison's white brotherhood and simultaneously learns to respect the black convict with whom he works in the prison laundry. His antagonism towards the Aryan brotherhood leads to his being punished by them – he is raped and beaten by the white supremacists and then ostracized. When he is released, he is ready to break all ties with his old neighbourhood gang. His efforts to do so, while also bringing his family back together and turning Daniel away from the gang, seem auspicious. But the film ends with Daniel being shot dead by a black kid at school. Derek, then, is 'saved', but his younger brother is not.

This rather simple narrative is complicated by a number of different devices. The film's diegetic present is the day of Derek's release from prison, up to the death of Daniel the next morning. This timeline is shot in colour, while the back story – the history of Derek's path to becoming a skinhead, his racist activity and violence and his time in prison – is shot in black-and-white sequences which are interspersed among the colour ones. The order of their interspersing is dictated by Daniel in a voice-over as he reads an essay he has been assigned by Sweeney (Avery Brooks), the school's black principal. Sweeney is a central character – he has been Derek's teacher as well as Daniel's and is determined to turn both the brothers away from their racism. Part of his effort is to make Daniel write an essay in which he will 'analyse and interpret all the events surrounding Derek's incarceration . . . how these events helped shape your present perspective concerning life in contemporary America, and their impact on your life and the life of your family'.

Daniel's essay assignment in fact gives the movie its name: this is a school course, a special topic class, or an independent study in American History, 'American

History X'. There are perhaps other ways of interpreting the 'X' here. Graphically, it has a rough resemblance to the swastikas that are tattooed on Derek's body. Or else, it could be a reference to the film's extremely graphic violence and excessive bad language – though in the US context, 'XXX' would be the more common designation for such features. Equally, the 'X' might be a reference to the unknown part of American history, in the way that the 'X' in Malcolm X's name was adopted to refer to his unknown non-white origin. But given that the film is structured around Daniel's special school assignment, and given the film's overt pedagogical intent, it seems more likely that 'X' marks the special course, a course that demands the production of Daniel's individualized sense of history.³

When it was released, the film was notable for a number of reasons. First, it had had a chequered production history, with its nominal director Tony Kaye causing a media stir by attempting to have his name taken off the final cut with which he was not content. Citing his right to free speech, he unsuccessfully sued New Line and the Director's Guild for not allowing him to do so. Kaye was a first-time director, who had made his name as a director of commercials in Britain (British readers might remember his sleeping penguin advert for British Rail, or his exploding bus in a well-known Volvo advert). It was perhaps his inexperience in Hollywood that had led him to assume that he would have final cut, but Kaye claimed that the film that New Line released did not represent his own vision of the story. Kaye described the final cut as 'nothing to me but an embarrassment. A total embarrassment.'⁴ and claimed that the film had been weakened as a direct result of studio interference and Edward Norton's influence.

It is difficult to comment on the meaning of this controversy between Kaye and the Hollywood institution – except perhaps to note that Kaye has not made a general release movie since that time. Indeed, he has described himself as being sequestered in 'Hollywood jail' and prevented from making new films (although he is apparently now working on a new one, *Reaper*, for M8 Entertainment⁵). At the same time, it has been reported that New Line and Kaye intend to release a DVD set of *American History X* which would include Kaye's cut and also his own documentary about the making of the film. If and when such a product is available, it might become easier to discern what different kind of film Kaye had envisaged. In the few interviews he has given since the release of the film, he seems keen to avoid giving details of a film he says he 'found' only in the final stages of his own editing. He spends rather more time attacking the film that was actually released. Even then, his criticisms are largely unspecific about the film's content – though he has been quoted as deeming the final cut 'preachy'.⁶ Rather, his complaints are more general and concern the fact that the film was taken out of his hands and given to Edward Norton for the final cut.

By all accounts, Norton was indeed largely responsible for the edit that New Line eventually released. This is the film's second notable feature, then: it

constituted a major step forward for Norton's career. Before *American History X* he had not been well known (despite his Oscar nomination for a supporting part in *Primal Fear*, 1966). By Kaye's account at least, Norton also greatly enlarged his own role in the film when he was given control of the final editing, and one result was Norton's being nominated for a Best Actor Oscar.⁷ As I've said, it is not easy to see what kind of film Kaye had imagined and equally unclear how Norton's intervention changed that. However, some sense of how Norton changed the film can be gleaned from a version of David McKenna's screenplay that has appeared online.⁸ This version of the script varies in a number of important ways from New Line's final cut. It does use the device of Daniel's essay project, but the essay's content is scarcely quoted and, in any case, appears to differ in significant respects from the final cut. (I'll return to this below.) In the final cut, the essay and Daniel's voice-over are used to guide the dispersal of the flashbacks to Derek's racist career, but the script confines those flashbacks to one central and unified sequence.

The biggest discrepancy, beyond that different organization of the film's time frames, is that the script calls for much more attention to be paid to the events after Derek's release from prison. It projects an extended confrontation between Derek and his former colleagues in the gang, particularly Cameron Alexander (Stacy Keach), the group's sinister leader. Over the course of several scenes not included in the final cut,⁹ the political beliefs and violent actions of the gang are explored and set against Derek's new-found anti-racism. This part of the script is radically truncated in the final cut, and the film thus forgoes the chance both to exhibit and critique the details of a racist organization. It is perhaps worth speculating, for the sake of my argument in this essay, that the way a British émigré and Jewish director might treat the topic of American racism would be somewhat different from the point of view of a white American actor – or, indeed, from what New Line might expect. This elided part of the film might well have given play to Kaye's different sense of history – a sense gained, as he has said, from both his own knowledge of the National Front in Britain and his willingness to be in direct contact with Tom Metzger, leader of the White Aryan Resistance group in the USA.¹⁰ It is possible that Kaye's version of the film would have been less 'preachy' and more exploratory. As it was released, however, the film's narrative falls firmly within the parameters of a typically American structure of sin and redemption; it exhibits the kind of displacement of history into personal experience which I have talked about above; and it displays the structure of a consistently American liberal view of race issues which I will discuss later in this essay.

One way in which the film does arguably break the mould of the standard Hollywood product, however, is the third feature that garnered it a lot of attention on its release – its uncompromising representation of racial violence. It should be said that not all the violence is physical – an especially nasty sequence shows Derek in full racist flow when his mother invites her Jewish boyfriend (Elliot Gould) over

to dinner. One of the most powerful sequences in the film is the attack on the supermarket. Derek has prepared his gang with a speech about the evil of immigrant workers and this is followed by a frightful assault in which the entire Latino and Asian staff is brutalized and humiliated. But the most harrowing scene depicts the crime for which Derek is imprisoned. When he shoots the black men who try to steal his car, Derek is shown almost naked in order to highlight his body, buffed and heavily tattooed with swastikas and white-power mottos and emblems. One of the victims he shoots remains alive until Derek kills him by setting his mouth on the curb of the pavement and stomping on the helpless man's neck. The violence is shocking in and of itself, but the spectacle of Derek's neo-Nazi body and his gloating reaction to his own violence – all in black and white of course – is particularly hard to watch.

That kind of violence perpetrated by that kind of body would have had a compelling effect in 1998 when the nation still had Timothy McVeigh and various right-wing groups and militias on its mind, and when that home-grown kind of terrorism was considered the main threat to America. *American History X* appeared at the right moment, then, midway between the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, the initial thing to be said about the relation between the two events is that the second has superseded the first. Despite its rather clumsy memorial, the Oklahoma City bombing has probably faded from the memories of most Americans because now, of course, all terrorists are radical Muslims. The feared Aryan terrorists of the 1990s are forgotten, Timothy McVeigh has been executed, and his convicted collaborator Terry Nichols has been imprisoned. Nichols's sentencing for his part in the Oklahoma bombing took up only a few paragraphs of space in the *Washington Post* in 2002, and this was one of many signals that the various right-wing groups and militias that exercised the nation so fully just a little while before were no longer of interest. Those groups are scarcely to be heard from – perhaps they have been safely neutralized, or perhaps their racist desires have been satisfied by President Bush's murderous policies at home and abroad, or perhaps they simply cannot get the airtime any longer as the mainstream media have time for only the newest terrorists. In media representation, the white supremacists have been reduced to nothing, or less than nothing. Once mightily feared, domestic white supremacists now appear in *The Grid* (a film about international terrorism made by the BBC and TNT and aired as a mini-series in the USA in 2004) as nothing more than hapless and helpless yokels, around whom the real terrorists easily run rings.¹¹

History Lessons

American History X, then, is already a kind of memento, a ghostly remnant of a pre-9/11 moment which has slipped into insignificance. Ironically enough, one of the

more interesting – not to say laudable – efforts of the film is to counter this trend in American cultural life – the forgetting of history. Such a didactic project is announced clearly enough in the film's very title. But, in the end, the title itself also indicates a problem, a contradiction. While the film (nobly enough) wants to address American history and counter its forgetting, the title essentially admits that in American culture history can be addressed only as a special case – the independent study, the class with one student, American History X. That is, the intent of the story and the meaning of its title are set into a contradiction that the film can never resolve. The teaching of history can only be a one-on-one effort. Sweeney says of Daniel at one point, 'I will not give up on this child'; his determination, however benevolent, will condemn him to repeating the individualized gesture of the special course, one student at a time. That is, making Daniel remember and analyse his brother's story of violence and imprisonment specifically fails to break the cycle of racial violence that the film abhors, precisely because not everyone can be taught in this tailor-made fashion. To deliberately render the lesson of history an individual matter is to guarantee the limits of the lesson; it can only last for its allotted few minutes. Sweeney further compromises his project by granting access to such lessons to whites only: the black student who eventually shoots Daniel, Little Henry (Jason Bose Smith), is apparently never afforded the same exceptional treatment.

However, such a debilitating and inbuilt contradiction scarcely troubles this film, which appears to be completely unembarrassed by its own didactic stance. From the moment that Sweeney assigns Daniel the analytical essay, right up to the moment at the end when Daniel's voice dutifully announces that he has learned the lesson, someone somewhere is always trying to teach someone else something. Sweeney is the prime example here. He is the literal pedagogue, the strong and indomitable black teacher, evoking all the images we saw in the 1990s of the salvational minority father figure whose strictness and moralism were supposed to inspire minority kids to greater things. But even so, Sweeney is all wrong in this film: his energy is spent on the extremist white kids, and even the skinhead leader, Cameron, calls him an Uncle Tom. Certainly, we never see him dealing with a black student. In that simple fact, one of the film's central lapses begins to make itself apparent, namely that through its delimited, specialized, X approach to the history lesson, in the end the film cannot or will not address history as a black issue, but only as a white one.

I'll return to this point later on, but for now I want simply to stress that all the lessons in this film are learned by white people because it is they who are, to say it this way, the subjects of history. Certainly they are the mobile subjects of the film's drama while the black characters remain in a kind of stasis. Sweeney, despite his central role in the narrative, is stuck in an endless struggle with each generation of racists. Little Henry remains caught in the cycle of violence which is produced

by the ethos of racism. Derek's black friend in prison, Lamont (Guy Torry) remains incarcerated for stealing a television even after Derek has been released from his punishment for a much more serious crime.

Among the film's white subjects, Derek is clearly the most progressive learner. He is the perfect subject for the tragic version of a 'sin and redemption' narrative whose simplistic moralism is then duly transmitted to his younger brother, albeit too late. The way in which he himself learns his lesson is the gist of the film's flashback sequences (and thus contrasted with Daniel learning his lessons in the colour sequences) and is scarcely very complicated – indeed, it is formulaic and unconvincing in the end. In prison, Derek sees how his supposed allies and compadres, the prison's white brotherhood, compromise their supposed racial superiority in the context of inmate politics: he is appalled, for instance, that these purist Aryans buy drugs from Latino prison dealers. His conclusion that 'they don't believe in anything' turns him away from them. Meanwhile, his work in the prison laundry brings him into permanent contact with Lamont, and the two develop a bond which ensures that Derek will be protected from potential harm at the hands of other African-American prisoners. His learning process is more or less completed when the Aryan group punish him by way of a brutal rape in the prison shower which leaves him badly injured.

Clearly there is almost nothing in this learning process that would absolutely require Derek's conversion from his white separatist convictions at the political level. In fact, the film struggles to render the conversion a matter of Derek's actual beliefs and politics; disapproval of the white prisoners is scarcely a compelling motive. Rather, Derek's conversion is given as a simple matter of personal choice. The choice is begun in his laundry-room conversations with Lamont and is later encouraged by a visit from his mother and a reminder of his obligations to his family. And the process is completed during a visit from Sweeney, who asks him to consider whether anything he has ever done has made his life any better. Derek concludes that it has not and his lesson, then, is that his political beliefs must yield to his self-interest, the conditions of his own existence. However obnoxious and dangerous the politics that Derek turns away from, the lesson the film ultimately offers is a repudiation of politics altogether: political views must be seen as separate from and ultimately secondary to one's own life and self-interest.

If this is the lesson Derek learns and that his story proffers, Daniel's lesson is, overtly at least, more profound and indeed is presented as the very structure of the film. Forced to write the essay for Sweeney, in the film's colour sequences, he dredges his memory to produce the black-and-white scenes of Derek's story. But there is little in his effort that could respond to Sweeney's instruction that he should 'analyse and interpret all the events surrounding Derek's incarceration'. Instead of analysis and interpretation, there is simply a narrated set of memories. The only analytical or explanatory part of those memories involves the brothers'

father, whose death at the hands of a black drug-dealer had at first been given as the proximate cause of Derek's racial outrage and radicalization. But part of Daniel's lesson is his realization that his father had himself been an outspoken bigot. In a scene over the dinner table he is shown discouraging a younger Derek from taking seriously the 'bullshit' he is learning at school through Sweeney's curriculum.

More than even his memories of Derek's violent crimes, this memory of the father seems to be the crucial one in making Daniel realize his own lesson. But ultimately, his memory produces only the merest analysis in the form of an implied idea: namely, that Derek's racism has been inherited from his father more than it has been caused by Derek's own thought and experience. Daniel's childhood memory thus hypostatizes the issue of racism, removing it from its political context and locating it instead in the private realm of the family.

If the lesson that Daniel learns is that racism is passed on as a kind of patrilineal curse, then of course its solution will be less political than personal – a matter of individual responsibility and personal benevolence rather than anything more structural. Thus, in essence, Daniel's lesson is parallel to Derek's. The realization opens the way for Daniel to conclude his essay with some sententious, not to say sentimental, thoughts about the need us for us all to overcome anger and hostility and for the races to get along. And the film attempts to evoke some portentous irony by having Daniel's voice-over performance of his essay finish only after we have already seen him shot and killed. Addressing Sweeney directly, he thanks him for helping him and ends his essay with a quotation from 'someone you'll like'. This turns out to be Abraham Lincoln (although the reference is not actually made in the film) and Daniel quotes, almost accurately, from the final words of the 1861 Inaugural Address, which originally went as follows:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

It may well be that Sweeney would indeed have approved of a quotation from Lincoln, the president routinely credited with having freed the slaves – but perhaps not this particular speech. Lincoln spoke on the eve of the Civil War, and his words are generally understood as a last-ditch effort to persuade the Confederate States to remain in the Union. Indeed, in exchange for Southern support of the Union, Lincoln actually offered the continuation of slavery, and his speech is a crucial part of the deal that white America attempted to broker over the bodies and beings of its slaves. Far from a call to unify the races, as the movie would have it sound,

Lincoln's speech intended to facilitate the continual subordination of the one to the other. Thus, in the context of this film and its didactic attempt to have history remembered, this is an egregiously inappropriate citation. As I've suggested, the lessons the two brothers learn in this film have something in common. Both lessons displace the politics and analysis of the central topic of race violence onto the scene of individual memory and personal narrative: the brothers' stories offer memory without history, narrative without analysis. And what we can call the historical misprision of Lincoln's speech finally emblemizes the film's loss of history.

In this regard, the film becomes an exceptional instance of the conventions and habits of the American media and, indeed, of the culture at large, where the difficult task of transforming memories into history and personal sentiment into analysis is continually foreclosed and where historical detail is effortlessly traduced. If these are generalized characteristics of American media products, the apology is often offered that film is 'just entertainment' and should not be held responsible for its politics. This excuse is no more than a reflection of the industry's vital interest in sustaining the fiction that its products and their provenance are not politically motivated in any way at all. But that kind of argument cannot be employed to defend a film like *American History X* which, as I've already indicated, avowedly sets out to be a pedagogical exercise, a didactic excursion into one of the most pressing social and political issues of its time. What I'm suggesting, then, is that the particular narrative and diegetic habits of the industry are incompatible with a didactic or political project; indeed, those habits actually negate the historicization and the political analysis that would be necessary for anything but the most atomized and individualized form of a history lesson.

Bodily Memory

So *American History X* signally flunks its assignment of analysis and interpretation as a direct result of its immersion in the narrative and ideological habits which seem to inflect (or infect) the whole of the American media. But this is a film that also exhibits in a spectacular fashion one of the chronic corollaries of those habits or of the tendency to displace history into individual experience. That is, one consequence of this displacement is that filmic narratives need to be written across the isolated and atomized bodies of the (preferably white) male actor. We are familiar with how this works in action movies, for instance, where the preparation, punishment, repair and final vindication of the action-hero body mark exactly the sequence of action-movie narrative – the body *is* the diegetic frame for such narratives.¹²

American History X indulges in this kind of diegetic habit in an astonishingly literal way. That is, Derek's body is spectacularly decorated with tattoos marking him

indelibly as the neo-fascist. From the start, the film wastes no opportunity to show Derek stripped down – playing basketball, for instance, or being roused half-naked from sex with his girlfriend when he kills the black thieves. Some of the film's most disturbing and memorable shots picture this emblazoned body gloating and smirking under the police lights as they arrest him after the murder. When the Aryan gang assault and rape Derek's naked body in the prison showers, the spectacular markings on their bodies set up a striking visual trope: in each moment of their display the swastikas and white separatist emblems act as an obvious and literal displacement of politics onto the individual body.

There is, no doubt, some homoerotic aspect to the display of Derek's body. It has been reported that Norton went to some lengths to buff his physique for this movie, and the camera focuses on that physique remarkably often. The film is perhaps attempting to invoke some popular assumptions about the latent homosexuality of fascist groups by foregrounding Derek's muscular definition. But for the most part the significance of this body lies in its very whiteness (enhanced by being shot mostly in black and white) and in the tattoos and emblems that bespeak threat and violence more than sexuality. But the extravagant and frequent display of Derek's body eventually leaves the film with a problem. That is, even when Derek recants his extremist past, the tattoos remain as the mark and the memory of that past. Other signs can be removed: the neo-Nazi decorations in the family house can be taken down; Derek can grow his hair and dress more conventionally and smartly. But (unlike the body of the action hero) Derek's body itself cannot be recuperated, cannot erase the stigmatic marks. Thus, the film is caught between contradictory propositions: on the one hand, Derek's racist past can be redeemed in terms of the narrative, but on the diegetic level the very same violent politics cannot be forgotten. Those politics remain visible, written indelibly onto the body.

It could be claimed that the film does in fact resolve, or at least attempt to resolve, this contradiction. In one of the more interesting shots that underscore Derek's conversion and his new life after prison, he is dressing after a shower and catches sight of his own body in a mirror. His response to the sight of the now-offensive marks of his past is to place his hand over his heart, momentarily hiding the giant black swastika on his chest. The gesture is momentary, to be sure, but it is unmistakably what any American would recognize as that normally accompanying the Pledge of Allegiance. Thus, Derek's conversion is completed in the most hackneyed fashion, his redemption signalled by the one of the most evocative but sentimentalized signs in American cultural life. More importantly, for my purposes here, this is also the moment when the film itself confirms and guarantees its belonging, its own allegiance. That is, the case is closed on the politics and history of domestic fascism in the simple movement of the hand. But it is, of course, just a sleight of hand inasmuch as the swastika still remains beneath the gesture as a memory whose history has merely been foreclosed.



Figure 6 *American History X*.

Forgetting

In an interview with the *Guardian* in 1998, Edward Norton offered his own version of the way – or the reasons why – *American History X* follows the path it does in relation to race and racial violence in America:

In America, racism is much more a gang phenomenon, growing out of a need for a sense of belonging. It does not have the political underpinnings it seems to have in Europe. So I felt like [*American History X*] was an American tragedy . . . Contemporary urban society breeds frustration, and often the snapping point becomes race.¹³

(Gristwood 1999: 19)

One real American tragedy, perhaps, is that the poverty of mainstream analysis is such that Norton's words could easily pass for a thoughtful and even accurate view of the problem of race. Norton at least offers some sort of explanation, however avowedly apolitical it might be, and part of my point about the movie has been that it totally fails in this regard. But the implications of what Norton says do in fact find their way into the film in particular ways. First, it amplifies the idea that racial division is in some ways merely epiphenomenal and that the central issue is something more general in the constitution of contemporary society and the way

it produces 'frustration'. Second, the film, like Norton himself, somehow manages to construe an absence of 'political underpinnings' to the question of race in America. The least that can be said, about Norton's statement or about the film itself, is that such suggestions should perhaps constitute the beginning of an analysis rather than be taken as conclusions. But the absence of serious analysis of conditions, and the absence of the historical consciousness that such analysis would necessarily involve, constitutes in large part the very 'American-ness' of this movie.

I want to claim, by way of a concluding provocation, that the absence of those things helps constitute the structure of contemporary racism in America. In the post-civil-rights era (and we should note how that phrase has by now become ambiguous), the epiphenomenal features of racism have evolved in such a way that a central fact about contemporary racism is that it is bound to deny itself. That is, racism exists alongside of, or covered over by, the claim that it in fact does not. We might see this development as part of what Carter Wilson calls the 'meta-racism' of our day, where all the functions of overt racism have been camouflaged. Or, with Steve Martinot, we might see this as a function of the contemporary 'rule of racialization', whereby race as a category is produced and bestowed upon people (rather than found on their bodies) and proceeds from hegemonic notions of whiteness which are granted universality.¹⁴ What either of those terms attempts to point to is in part exemplified by exactly the enunciative position of *American History X*, where the question of race and the constitution of the racial other are construed a priori from a white perspective.

In America, this racialized perspective is crucially construed by the imputation of equality to all subjects in a 'colour-blind' way. America's 'rhetoric of equality',¹⁵ as Manning Marable disparagingly calls it, has the aim of willing equality into existence or simply asserting its existence in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. We have recently witnessed, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the fragility of that ideological structure – it temporarily fell apart at the point where the empirical conditions of racial inequality were exposed. But the mere fact that that exposure appeared to be so shocking to American culture underlines the hold that rhetoric of equality normally has.

While this structure of denial is probably operative to some degree in all racially mixed societies in the North, it has special force in the USA, I'd suggest, and it is clearly subvented by the ideology of personal freedom and responsibility that is so deeply embedded in and reliably reproduced by the culture. If all American subjects are assumed to be endowed with equality, then anything bad 'they' do is a result of their own choices, and the question of what structural or historical forces might make 'them' do those things need never be asked. The spurious presumption of equality allows the bases or causes of actual inequality to remain unacknowledged, and what is necessary for such an act of will is exactly the abrogation of any analytical view and the shearing away of history.

American History X certainly makes some attempt to address crucial questions of race in the USA, and the film's effort overtly invokes the crucial role of history in helping things change. But in the end, the film does little more than replicate the very conditions it hopes to ameliorate. Its vapid invocation of Lincoln's 'mystic chords of memory' – already a misprision of history – does not really help in a land where memory cannot become history and where the dramatic Gates of Time in Oklahoma City stand as entrances only to an absence of historical and political consciousness. Those gates are a reminder, so to speak, that their drama of eliding, withholding, and otherwise forgetting history plays to packed audiences every day in contemporary America.

Notes

- 1 I have to say, from the outset, that I am one of those who feel some discomfort with the chronic use of 'America' and 'American' to apply exclusively to the United States of America. In a slightly more ideal world it would be recognized that not all Americans are of the USA and not all of America is in the USA.
- 2 See <<http://www.nps.gov/okci/home.htm>>.
- 3 One contribution to an on-line discussion of the film notes the probable origin of the 'X': 'As a college student, I see this often. When the university starts a class and it is still in the experimental stage, it is given a course number followed by an X . . . for instance, CompSci403X. The X indicates that it is a new course and that changes are still being made. I think that Sweeney was thinking of this method when he named Danny's class "American History X". Danny's class was new, experimental, individualized, and certainly not a part of his original curriculum', see <<http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Club/3036/faq.html>>.
- 4 'The Fade-In Interview: Tony Kaye', *Fade-In*, fall 1998, p. 37.
- 5 See 'Reaper is Director's Ticket out of Hollywood Jail', *Entertainment News*, 6 November 2005, <<http://www.entertainment-news.org/breaking/38528>>.
- 6 R. Welkos, 'The Thin Line Between Fear and Hate', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 October 1998, <<http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Club/3036/analyse1.html>>.
- 7 See M. Maurer, 'A Quick Chat with Tony Kaye', *kamera*, September 1998, <<http://www.kamera.co.uk/interviews/kaye.html/>>, and S. Gristwood, 'Edward Norton is up for an Oscar. But Who is He?', *Guardian*, March 19, 1999, <http://www.film.guardian.co.uk/The_Oscars_1999/story/0,,36397,00.html>. See also the web site, 'The First American History X Page', <<http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Club/3036>>.
- 8 See <<http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Club/3036/script.html>>. No details are given for the origin of these scripts, so their authenticity and status in relation to the film's shooting are unclear. The date given, 6 February 1997, is close to the beginning of shooting.
- 9 Excerpts from three of the extra scenes are included on the US DVD release of the film.

- 10 'The Fade-In Interview: Tony Kaye', *Fade-In*, fall 1998, p. 39. For the web site of Metzger's group, see <<http://www.resist.com>>.
- 11 Some white-supremacist groups did appear briefly during the aftermath to Hurricane Katrina in September 2005, conducting Internet aid and relief scams designed to help whites only. See the Anti Defamation League's report: <http://www.adl.org/main_Extremism/Hurricane_Katrina.htm>.
- 12 This point and several other aspects of my argument in this essay are dealt with at greater length in my *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- 13 S. Gristwood, 'Edward Norton is up for an Oscar. But Who is He?', *Guardian*, 19 March 1999.
- 14 C. Wilson, *Racism*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996; S. Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2003. The latter is perhaps one of the most challenging books on race and US society to have appeared in the past few years.
- 15 M. Marable, *Speaking Truth to Power*, Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1996.