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Is This the Most Radical Film Ever Produced by Hollywood?

"Judas and the Black Messiah" is the rare Hollywood film to explore a vision of Blackness that has nothing to do with white audiences.



Daniel Kaluuya as Fred Hampton in "Judas and the Black Messiah."

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"Judas and the Black Messiah" is a very good — nearly great — movie about the charismatic Fred Hampton and the way the Black Panther Party was targeted by the United States government. Yet neither the standout performances from Daniel Kaluuya and Lakeith Stanfield nor the sensitive and insightful direction by Shaka King are the most remarkable aspects of the film: Not since Spike Lee's 1992 biopic *"Malcolm X"* has there been a mainstream American film this thoroughly Black and radical.

Black History Month was a mystery to me as a kid. I could never understand why we were taught some Black history but not nearly enough, not even close. We would learn about Frederick Douglass but not Nat Turner. Booker T. Washington but not W.E.B. Du Bois. Our teachers made a point of telling us about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. but completely neglected Malcolm X. With this approach, they tacitly

communicated that only the Black historical figures who included white people doing the work of Black liberation were the ones worthy of remembrance. This was especially true when it came to Black radicals. The Panthers, who were important to my community when I was growing up, and the Black power movement were never part of the narrative at school. The same can be said of Hollywood.

Hollywood has long told Black stories from the perspective of white people. Think of Oscar-winning dramas like “The Blind Side” (a white adoptive mother comes to the aid of a Black football player), “The Help” (a white journalist awakens to the injustices Black maids face in the civil-rights-era South) or “Green Book” (a white chauffeur helps a Black classical pianist): Instead of exploring what Black characters endured, these movies catered to white audiences, giving them lessons on how to better perform their whiteness while in proximity to Blackness.

This tradition of making Black films about white people thus makes the mere existence of “Judas and the Black Messiah” shocking and exhilarating. The movie, available on HBO Max and distributed by Warner Bros., is not exactly hostile to white people, but for a mainstream movie likely to garner Oscar attention, the version of Blackness it depicts, one rooted in an unapologetic love of the descendants of enslaved people, is rare. Surprisingly, it does not apologize for Hampton’s embrace of Blackness nor his deep suspicion of capitalism. It also does not sugarcoat the depiction of the Judas of the title, the F.B.I. plant Bill O’Neal. In another era, if a studio film tackled the material at all, Hampton would have been secondary in the story of a sympathetic informant. Instead, King is intentional about putting us on the side of the Black radicals, and we see the government for what it was: a destructive force.

The movie isn’t perfect. Hampton was a fiery speaker, yes, but to fully understand him and his appeal, one must see him in action — a vantage the movie does not afford its viewers. What made him a legend in Chicago was his organizing skills and his undeniable charisma. But his most important achievement was bringing together the Rainbow Coalition, an alliance of the Black Panthers; the leftist, mostly white Young Patriots Organization; and the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican gang that was concerned with human rights. This is not really given much screen time. Instead, the film shows us a Hampton who has already reached his zenith — it does not show us the work he did to get there. Obviously, a film is not a history lesson, but a bit more time could have been devoted to Hampton’s ideas.

Recent documentaries like Stanley Nelson’s “The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution” and Göran Olsson’s “The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975” have examined the Panthers’ history and what they stood for. There have been a handful of features about the Panthers, most notably the beautiful and intimate “Night Catches Us” (2010), which depicted what happened to former members who tried to make a life outside the party. Perhaps the drama that comes closest to what “Judas” has achieved is a movie about Black nationalism, Lee’s “Malcolm X.” The politics of the two films are similar in that they both depict men who are vocal in their vision of Black self-determination. Yet “Judas” is more explicit about how Hampton married his racial critique with an economic one.

It’s clear why we finally got a film like this. Black protesters have forced this country and its cultural creators finally to pay attention to its vicious legacy of white supremacy. Not only have people been in the streets for the past few years chanting

“Black Lives Matter,” but Hollywood has also been an explicit target for criticism. It was only a few years ago that #OscarsSoWhite forced the academy to do some serious soul searching about how the industry marginalizes Black talent. More still needs to be done to make the industry an equitable place for all stories and creators, but the work so far is already having an impact.

And it's important to see a film telling a story about Black figures who have been neglected by America's history books. If nothing else, the movie might inspire viewers to dig deeper and learn more about the Black radicals it depicts. Hampton and the Black Panther Party were always heroes to me; this is a film that does justice to their memory.