

Comment by Franziska Günzel (13e)

“American History X” is a profound and stirring drama about the consequences of racism as a family is torn apart by hate. A graphic examination of extremism in America, the film follows one man’s struggle to reform himself and save his brother after living a life consumer by violence and bigotry.

Written by David McKenna and directed by Tony Kaye, American History X is produced by John Morrissey and not based on a book and convinces the audience. The story unfolds through the eyes of Danny, who idolizes his older brother Derek. Seeking retribution for his father’s murder and burning for a way to want his rage, Derek finds himself transformed by a philosophy of hate as he turns into a charismatic leader of a local white power movement. Despite his indisputable intelligence, his incendiary actions culminate in a brutal murder and, ultimately, a prison sentence.

Three years later everyone awaits Derek’s return: His mother Doris who prays for his safety, his girlfriend Stacey who longs for his return, and most Danny, who is desperate for his brother’s love and guidance.

One the day of Derek’s release from prison, Danny hands in a book report on “Mein Kampf”. Enraged, the school principal demands that Danny writes a new paper on the circumstances that lead to Derek’s incarceration. Through the narrative of this new assignment the audience explores the events that haunt and define two brothers.

But unbeknownst to Danny, Derek is a changed man. Fresh from prison, he no longer views hatred as a badge of honour. Ashamed of his past, he is now in the race to save Danny and his family from the violence he has brought down upon them.

This movie is real deep in its meaning and gives the Movie Theatre visitor a lot of stuff to debate. Especially the following aspects are discussable.

Violence is in form of emotional, verbal and psychological, as well as physical violence brutally shown in this movie. Probably even too much!? Is that much of violence needed, to show what’s going on in reality? In the film there are unnerving scenes of racial violence: of black youths kicking a helpless white student in a high school restroom; of a Korean-owned grocery store terrorized by skinhead thugs; of an African American whose skull is split open by a skinhead who orders him to lie face down on a curb. Is this shocking the people who need to be faced with this? Mainstream America sees this sort of right-wing neo-Nazi movements (presented in the movie by the D.O.C. (Disciples of Christ) and the White Power Movement) as being a part of a fringe, part of an extreme. They do not see that as a part of their life – they do not want to see it or think they can march against it. Actually this problematic need to be faced by people who have the power of changing things in society like politics have. They need to change things with their given power because they able to.

In its early years, Hollywood rarely dealt with racial and religious prejudice, although there were notable attempts in such films as “Crossfire”(1947), “Gentleman’s Agreement” (1947) and “To kill a Mockingbird” (1962). But now there is a question: Does society benefits when Hollywood tackles such difficult subjects as bigotry and hate? Is this the way people will accept that there is no sense in crime, hate, violence and intolerance? Probably some will understand the film message – but mostly it does not want to be seen. Racism begins with being intolerant and disliking people just because of looking different or praying for an other god. So with rise of Nazism and the Holocaust the swastika (which is an important symbol in this movie – in the first shown with a lot of power and last trying to be covered up by Derek) has been recast by hate groups into a 20<sup>th</sup> century symbol of racial intolerance, persecution and fear. It was a good idea to show this symbol – as a tattoo on the part of the body everyone’s heart is placed – real dramatically.

The film viewed by the cast and stars is real good – the reviews in black and white gives them and antique touch – present in colour, which makes it being alive. The actors play their role convincing and show a lot of emotions in all different ways (from hate to love). So is drown clear that there is just a thin line between fear and hate. In fact Edward Norton was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor and won a Golden Satellite in the same category.

But in the end is still the question: Was Derek's turning right ? His brother is still killed in the end. So Tony Kaye points out that the past is not returnable. Following, why should a member of an racial movement leave his group. The sense of having a better future in doing this is less shown (– just in dialogs between Sweeney and Derek). But it's not only about having a better future, but a better present time – not only for yourself, but for people loving you and be loved by yourself.

Derek and Danny at least see all the destructions that hate causes, not only to society at large, but also to his own family. Therein lies the lesson: Everyone suffers from hate crimes. So we'll take the same last quote as Danny did – actually mentioned first by Abraham Lincoln:

"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 cords of memory will swell when again touched as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature."

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