

# DA 5 Bloods: When Films Reimagine Visual Histories

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GSC COLLECTIVE



Mumbai  
2020

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*"War is about money. Money is about War."*  
(Stormin' Norman)

**M**oving images, over the years, played a decisive role in shaping and reshaping the public discourses on political issues as well as articulating the dominant political narrative of the present and of the times past. Often, this complex process influences people's understanding of different aspects in the socio-political realm. In a visual age, characterised by an abundance of moving and still images, politics and history are widely presented, consumed and negotiated through multiple visual forms. Even though the new forms of visual expressions in the digital age democratised the visual scape to a more significant extent, the flow of images is controlled and regulated by the historic bloc through its robust institutional network and other channels of power. One of the key aspects here is the politics of visibility and invisibility. Films are historically used as a medium of propaganda, legitimisation tool, and most importantly normalising a distorted view of history – all directly or indirectly related to the question of visibility and invisibility.

Jacques Ranciere conceptualises the idea of "distribution of the sensible" which he defines as, "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Ranciere 2013). Films certainly influence distribution of the sensible. From a visual politics perspective, while engaging with moving images, the spectator's inquiry into how the visual imagines history and how it conceals and legitimises a distorted historical narrative, backed by the interests of the dominant class, is significant in the subsequent discourse that follows critical viewing of films. Roland Bleiker in the context of "distribution of the sensible" looks at, "how in any given society and at any given time, there are boundaries between what can be seen and not, felt and not, thought and not, and, as a result, between what is politically possible and not" and how images "frame or reframe the political, either by entrenching existing configurations of seeing, sensing and thinking, or by challenging them" (Bleiker 2018). Films, particularly those directly confront mainstream historiography and defy the dominant political narratives, demand intellectual scrutiny in the broader context of visual histories.

What is 'visual histories'? Moving images are considered documents of particular time/space. When George Floyd Killing happened in Minneapolis, an immediate trigger that sparked massive outrage across the globe was the widely circulated video which depicted the police brutality. Many people immediately connected the incident with the 2013 film *Fruitvale Station*, directed by Ryan Coogler, which portrayed the last day of Oscar Grant who was shot to death by a police officer at Oakland in 2009. Many films and series that criticised the corrupted justice system in the United States inspired the protest movements. *When They See Us* directed by Ava DuVernay, based on the infamous Central Park Jogger Case, *Just Mercy* directed by Destin Daniel Cretton which depicted the legal battle against the wrongful conviction of Walter McMillan in Alabama, and *Marshall* directed by Michael and Jacob Koskoff focussing on *State of Connecticut v. Joseph Spell* are among the films that ignited new debates and discussions surrounding the treatment of BIPOC community by the judicial system in the U.S. Following these developments in the public discourse, many independent journals published curated lists of films that are considered significant in understanding nuanced dynamics of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement. It included films and series that reflected upon topics such as slavery, Civil War, Jim Crow Laws, racial segregation, Civil Rights Movement, Black Pride Movement, so and so forth that shed light on the black experiences and lived realities. In a way, these curated lists archive the visual history of the African-American community. Along the same lines, it is possible to curate indexes on different issues in history that range from World War to Class Divide. The main argument here is that visuality works within the historical framework it embodies and denying or foregrounding this inherent essence of the visual is a political act.

'Distribution of the sensible' influences visual histories. By intertwining aesthetics and politics, Ranciere argues that "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (Ranciere 2013). Two perilous concerns about the moving images are, a) visual consumed and articulated as authentic and objective depiction and b) visual metaphors, stripped out of context, concealing the underlying politics. Look at how D.W Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* painted a racist history of Civil War and Reconstruction eras which led to the resurgence of Ku Klux Klan outfits in the early twentieth century (K.S 2019). Similarly, numerous films and series showcased American history through a racist lens; most of those films were accepted as authentic depictions of history. One of the most celebrated visual metaphors in the recent times is the image of 'Joker' popularised initially by comic books and later by several superhero films. *Joker* directed by Todd Phillips is set in the 1980s New York (named as imaginary Gotham city in the film) plagued by the neoliberal economic policies. Even though the film

narrates the story of Arthur Fleck, who later becomes the icon of anti-establishment protests, in the background of social unrest following social security cuts, the visual narrative does not enter a terrain where it shows how the system that upholds neoliberal policies is the antagonist in the larger scenario. Instead, Joker as a visual metaphor, stripped out of context, becomes an icon of the popular demonstrations against the discriminatory system across the world from Chile to Lebanon.

By analysing 'aesthetic avant-gardes'<sup>1</sup> Ales Erjavec argues that, "the aesthetic is inherently political and that aesthetic avant-garde art is essential for political revolution" (Erjavec 2015). Moving images hold the potential to pave foundations for political movements and reframe the ideas of social transformation. This is not to say that only films play the crucial role in political formations in society. As Ken Loach puts it, "a film is one small voice among other large ones. The film is a tiny part of the discourse. You do what you can but under no illusions of what a film can do." Moving images can register their solidarity towards significant progressive political movements. At the same time, the true potential that moving images hold through its broad reach and accessibility is unimaginable in the contemporary world. Now the question is how visuality can alter the visibility/invisibility layers of the existing visual scape. Once Godard said, "the best way to criticise a film is to make another film." For the last three decades, through his films, Spike Lee has been fighting against visual-historical narratives and the system that supports the racial discrimination assimilated in the American cinema and society. In his twenty-fourth feature film premiered on Netflix this year, titled *Da 5 Bloods*, Lee continues his fight against the tide. Lee, known for his critically acclaimed films including *Do the Right Thing*, *BlackKKlansman*, *Malcolm X* and *Crooklyn*, attempts to subvert the postulations and symbols of white supremacy, racial superiority and racial prejudices embedded in the mainstream American historiography and Hollywood cinema. His films are revisionist visual histories that disclose the socio-political history of an oppressed community.

Four African-American soldiers, who were part of the U.S. Army, have decided to revisit the battlefield in Vietnam where they fought a war against Viet Cong in the 1960s. Paul, Otis, Melvin and Edie meet at a hotel in the present-day Ho Chi Minh City. They are back in Vietnam for two reasons. One is to collect the physical remains of Stormin' Norman who they fondly remember as "he was our Malcolm and our Martin", and the main purpose of the visit is to locate a 'treasure' they secretly buried in the valleys during the War. The C.I.A transported 'gold biscuits' worth millions

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<sup>1</sup>Erjavec (2015) defines those artists and their art which "aims to transform society and the ways of sensing the world through political means."

in an exclusive war helicopter for the South Vietnamese fighters who supported the U.S. Army during the War in Vietnam. However, Norman and his peers instead decided to bury the 'treasure' without the knowledge of anyone. They knew that after fighting relentlessly in the War, when they go back to their home country, black soldiers were treated as second-class citizens. They intended to ask this money as reparations and to use it for the upliftment of the African-American community.

*Da 5 Bloods* begins with the footage of an interview recorded on 26 February 1978, at Chicago, in which Muhammad Ali says, "My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud, for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me *nigger*. They never lynched me. They didn't put no dogs on me. They didn't robe me of my nationality." Ali was arrested and his World Championship Title among other boxing achievements was stripped off following his refusal to go to Vietnam and his comments criticising U.S. involvement in the War. Following this clip, Lee shows a powerful historical montage that includes several footages, posters, images and short clips that reflect the socio-political tensions and pivotal moments during the War period. Lee's 1991 film *Malcolm X* began similarly including the footage taken by George Holliday which shows police officers beating unarmed Rodney King, an African-American construction worker in Los Angeles.

The historical montage at the beginning of *Da 5 Bloods* include images of African-American soldiers fought in the War, footages from the media coverage, the image of Apollo 11 launch in 1969 followed by Neil Armstrong's words and the protests against it, Malcolm X's speech given at Chicago on 1962, Black Power Salute by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at Mexico Olympics in 1968, mass demonstrations against government in the background of unemployment crisis, the lives of African-Americans from Harlem in the 1960s, "America has declared war on Black People" speech by Kwame Ture in 1968, Angela Davis's speech at Oakland in 1969, U.S. forces spraying chemicals as a part of Operation Ranch Hand, Kent State Shooting of May 4 1970, John Filo's image that captured Mary Ann Vecchio's emotional breakdown near Jeffrey Miller who was shot at Kent, Jackson State Killings of May 15 1970, Malcolm Browne's photo of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation at Saigon against Ngo Din Diem's government in June 11 1963, the 1968 Democratic National Convention held at Chicago and the anti-war demonstrations, "War Criminal" placards raised against Lyndon B. Johnson during protests, the image and video of Nguyen Van Lem who was summarily executed by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan in 1968 at Saigon captured by Associated Press' Eddie Adams and NBC's Vo Su, Napalm Bombing of 1972, Richard Nixon's resignation, and the image of "boat people" or the Vietnam Refugees. This historical montage by

itself is a political statement that brings back the memories of a crucial period in history and informs the present about its intensity.

The last part of this historical montage which includes a historical speech given by Bobby Seale at Oakland in 1968 acts as an introduction for the political content of *Da 5 Bloods*. Seale, who co-founded Black Panther Party with Huey P. Newton, reminds that "In the Civil War 186,000 black men fought in the military service, and we were promised freedom and we didn't get it. In World War II 850,000 black men fought, and we were promised freedom, and we didn't get it. Now here we go with the damn Vietnam War, and we still ain't getting nothing' but racist police brutality." Moreover, we know, this police brutality continues to date. In one memorable scene in the film, when the soldiers have decided to hide the gold, Norman says, "We were the very first people that died for this red, white and blue. It was a soul brother, Crispus Attucks at the m\*\*\*\*king Boston Massacre. We been dying for this country from the very get, hoping one day they'd give us our rightful place. All they give us was a foot up our black asses. I say USA owes us, we built this b\*\*\*\*". These words are rooted in a history of oppression against African-Americans in the U.S.

In a conversation scene in the film, one character mentions Milton Lee Olive, who sacrificed his life at the age of 18 by smothering a grenade with his own body to save his fellow soldiers. Olive was the first African-American soldier to receive Medal of Honour awarded by the U.S. state. In a poignant scene, by portraying a similar incident, Spike Lee depicts the human cost of that sacrifice. In another instance, Lee includes, the images of people carrying the placards displaying quotes like "Nixon is a Murderer", and 'Nixon Must Pay in Blood." In the flashback scenes, all of the main characters, except Norman, are shown in their present age. Lee indicates that these flashbacks are living memories of the Bloods more than traumatic memories from the past. After all these years, Bloods' behaviour reveals how deeply their experiences in the war affected their lives and how it took away something that is not replaceable. "War never really ends," Vinh, who assist the Bloods in their journey, comments in one scene. We also see landmines that were used during the War exploding in a couple of scenes.

Paul, who has a red MAGA Cap, supports Trump and his anti-immigrant policies. He hates the French, the Vietnamese, almost everyone, and at some points, he hates the viewers too. He has his reasons to behave indifferently from others. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a central leitmotif in the film, is presented through Paul's character. Spike Lee films always visualised the contradictions within society through his characters and their experiences. Lee does not propose solutions to these

contradictions in his films; instead, he contextualises them in his narrative in order to represent the complicated socio-political reality. He does not hide the fact that though a large section of African-Americans opposed Trump at the time of Presidential election, 13% among the community, according to multiple surveys, supported the incumbent President. Another contradiction in the film is about the return of four U.S. soldiers who end up fighting with the Vietnamese people again. From the perspective of the Vietnamese people, these soldiers are back to take gold from their lands.

Hedy (a French citizen engaged in humanitarian demining) tells David (Paul's son) about the colonial rule of Bouvier family in search of 'White Gold' and the imperialist exploitation of natural resources through rubber plantations by France in Vietnam. The history of 'plantation exploitations' by imperial powers in the Third World extends across Latin America to Indochina. "Uncle Sam did no better in Vietnam than the French did," prompts Desroche in one scene. The U.S. involvement in Vietnam begins after the defeat of France in the First Indochina War. "American war turned Vietnamese family against the Vietnamese family," Vinh's words summarizes the pain of post-war Vietnam. Vietnamese people refer to the War as the American War. Though it is known as the Second Indochina War in some writings, the American usage of 'Vietnam War' gained popularity and is widely used by media. When Vinh says, "We have Ho Chi Minh, just like you people have George Washington," Otis replies, "Uncle Sam owned 123 slaves." Throughout the film, dialogue exchanges filled with such subtle commentaries on American history questions many of the received notions about American history.

Many Hollywood films set in the backdrop of the War in Vietnam are often criticised as American attempts to win a war on the screen, which they failed in reality. We also know that mainstream American Cinema worked closely with the state establishment during the Cold War era to make propaganda films that carried vested interests of corresponding governments in power. Almost all of the so-called 'Vietnam War films' narrated the adventures of 'white soldiers' on the battlefield. "African-Americans represented approximately 11 percent of the civilian population. Yet in 1967, they represented 16.3 percent of all draftees and 23 percent of all combat troops in Vietnam. In 1965, African-Americans accounted for nearly 25 percent of all combat deaths in Vietnam," Gerald F. Goodwin notes in his Opinion piece titled "Black and White in Vietnam" in *the New York Times*. How many films that narrated the African-American experiences in Vietnam were made in Hollywood? *Dead Presidents*, directed by Hughes Brothers, adapted from the experiences and memories of Haywood T. Kirkland in the book *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by*

*Black Veterans* written by Wallace Terry, is one film that presented a portrait of African-American experience. The character Larry Fishburne in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and the flashback scenes of the War in the NBC series *This is Us* acknowledged the presence of Black people on the battlefield. Frank McGee, American Journalist, spent almost a month in Vietnam and made a documentary for NBC titled *Same Mud, Same Blood* in 1967 which was based on an army unit headed by Lewis B. Larry, an African American Commander.

Washing' of American characters is common in most of the War films made from Hollywood. Similar to the case of War in Vietnam, it is equally challenging to find African-American narratives in films set in the backdrop of the Second World War. In 2008, Spike Lee made *Miracle at St. Anna* which explored the history of black soldiers in Italy during the World War. *Mudbound*, directed by Dee Rees adapted from Hilary Jordan's 2008 novel of the same name, conducted similar enquiries. Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* was criticised by some film critics citing the absence of African and Indian soldiers. In *Da 5 Bloods*, Spike Lee ridicules some of the Hollywood films based on War in Vietnam. In one conversation scene, a character scoffs at films like *Rambo*, *Missing in Action* and *The Green Berets*, that share 'Prisoner of War' trope, as "Holly-weird". Danny Milson and Paul de Meo wrote the screenplay of *Da 5 Bloods*, initially titled *The Last Tour*, as the story of four white soldiers travelling to Vietnam. When Oliver Stone withdrew from that project, Spike Lee and Kevin Willmott redrafted the script and four decades post-Vietnam, finally we have a film that primarily focuses on African-American experiences in Vietnam.

Newton Tomas Sigel, who previously worked as cinematographer for *X-Men Series*, *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Drive*, shot *Da 5 Bloods* in four screen aspect ratios. The scenes in the background of Ho Chi Minh City are shot in an ultrawide ratio (2:39:1) and flashback scenes are captured in 16 mm (1:33:1) resembling the television footages of the past. The scenes in the forest and valleys of present-day Vietnam are shown in OTT screen ratio (16:9) and the footages taken by Eddie with a Super 8 Camera are also included. The shifts in screen aspect ratios are instrumental in marking screen transition of time and space in the visual narrative. Recently, Wes Anderson used multiple screen aspect ratios effectively in his film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Sigel also uses 'double dolly shots', a Spike Lee signature. The low-angle shot capturing Norman's short speech after the soldiers hearing the news about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. from the radio is one among the many remarkable shots in the film. Paul's monologues are almost shot in close-up angle. The final scenes take place in the remains of an ancient Buddhist Temple in Vietnam. There is a striking frame in which David and Hedy are speaking, and we see the light entering behind the Buddha, which reflects on the gold. Adam Gough's notable



editing made the main narrative coherent amidst multiple real-life footages, which sometimes appear in between two scenes, and the screen aspect transitions. Sigel and Gough create magic in an unforgettable scene in which when Paul meets Norman, we see changes in colour-palette and lighting in harmony with their conversation.

Terence Blanchard, a frequent collaborator with Spike Lee, created an impressive soundtrack for *Da 5 Bloods*. Lee released the playlist in Spotify prior to the release of the film. In that, Spike Lee says, "All the music in this film is very important to me. The power of music with images, music is another character, it's another voice." The soundscape of the film includes songs from Marvin Gaye's album *What's Going On*, Freda Payne's "Bring the Boys Home" and "I'm Coming Home" by The Spinners – all meant to evoke memories of the times past. Lee and Blanchard pay tribute to *Apocalypse Now* by playing Richard Wagner's "Ride of Valkyries" in an early scene. It is worth mentioning that the songs of the rock band Creedence Clearwater Revival are not used in *Da 5 Bloods* which was a constant in almost all 'Vietnam War films'. Delroy Lindo, who plays Paul, gives his career-best performance and all the other actors, portrayed their characters with honesty and real emotional understanding.

Lee is an influential voice in the American public sphere as well as in the cinema. He made his political stance clear, through his films and his frequent interventions in society, against Donald Trump's anti-immigration and white supremacist politics. His previous film *BlacKKKlansman* ends with the footages from white supremacist rallies in Charlottesville. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Lee released a short-video *New York, New York* using Frank Sinatra's song of the same name in the background and included visuals from New York City to show his solidarity to the working-class people in the city. The short-video shot with a Super 8 camera was dedicated by Lee as, in his own words, "Love Letter to the New York and its People." He said in an interview given to *the New York Times*, "All of us, and humanity as a whole, have to learn to think about more than just ourselves. If the pandemic has shown us anything, it's that we've got to support one another. We can't go back to we were doing in B.C., before Corona, with great inequalities between the haves and have nots" (Ugwu 2020). Lee was on the forefront when the Black Lives Matter protests sweep across the U.S. following the Killing of George Floyd. He released a short-film called *Three Brothers* which put together the footages of Eric Garner, George Floyd and a scene from his film *Do the Right Thing* in which a character named Radio Raheem faces similar police brutality.

In an article titled “*Spike Lee and the Battlefield of American History*” by Reggie Ugwu published in *New York Times*, the author quotes Spike Lee saying, “Novels, movies, T.V., they’ve all pushed a false narrative: the white mythic heroes... Look at the films John Ford made with John Wayne, which dehumanise Native Americans as savages, animals, and monsters. It’s been the same story with black people, women, gay people – we’ve all been dehumanised.” Spike Lee’s words should be understood within the realm of visual histories and the larger historical narratives. Most of the films set in the background of the Civil War aligned with the Confederates (Jones 2015) and ‘classics’ like Victor Fleming’s *Gone with the Wind* and D.W Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* were explicitly racist. Kevin Willmott, co-writer of *Da 5 Bloods*, says, “The thing that’s been consistent with him is the idea that the past is not just the past but has a connection to today. I think he believes that our country has been damaged by films that misconstrue history, and that we, especially as minorities, have a responsibility to tell truth as we see it” (Ugwu 2020). By foregrounding the lives of African-American soldiers during the War in Vietnam, Spike Lee does what Willmott calls a responsibility to narrate how they understand history.

*Da 5 Bloods* ends with footage of Martin Luther King Junior’s speech recorded on 4 April 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, in which he quotes the lines from Langston Hughes’s poem *Let America be America Again*,

"O yes, I say it plain  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath,  
America will be!"

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