

VOL. 3 | JANUARY 2021

# ARTS & CULTURE

HATE, RACE AND  
INSTITUTIONS

**THIS MONTH  
AFFAIRS**

**AMERICAN HISTORY  
X**

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THE POLITICS OF HATE

**LA HAINE**

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A STORY OF A FALLING  
SOCIETY

 AWARENESS



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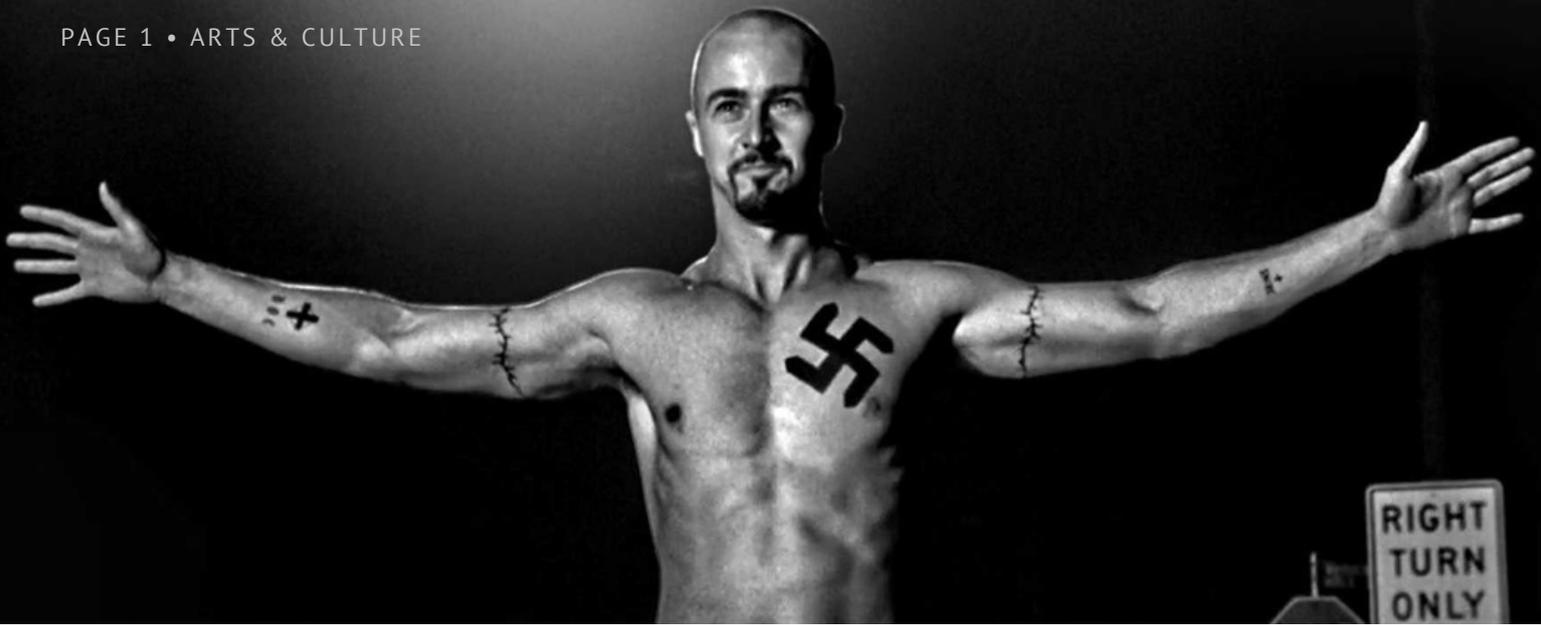
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# AMERICAN HISTORY X: THE POLITICS OF HATE

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BY JOÃO OLIVEIRA

## TEETH ON THE CURB

The most memorable scenes in cinema have the power to either make you surrender yourself to a blissful chamber of amazement and wonder, or to make you fall in the abyss, when you witness such a horrid, vicious, and poisonous reality – you are led to question all the certainties you once may have had, as only the raw, real objects of displayed pain exist. You abandon your mind, and with it, the structures of a reality that holds sense.

When I watched a burly man in his underwear, holding a gun in his hand, with a swastika tattooed on the left-side of his chest, shooting a gang-member who attempted to rob his car and proceeding to place the mouth of the robber on the curb of the road, shivers travelled down my spine. However, the truly gruesome moment was when the man stomped the head of the gangbanger, with his teeth placed on the curb. The sight of it was hideous, but the sound it made - that, indeed was

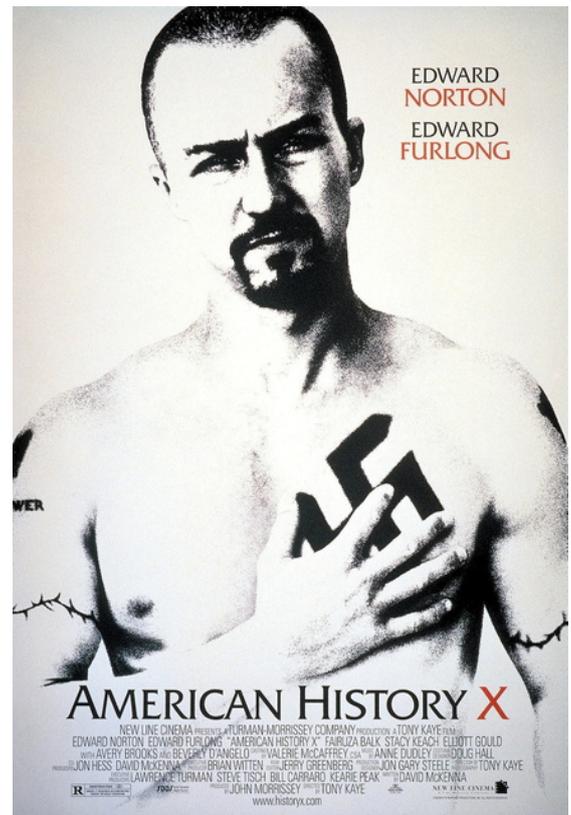
sincerely haunting. It had not had been simply a murder, it was a testimony of hatred.

That man was Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton), the protagonist of *American History X*, the 1998 film directed by Tony Kaye and written by David McKenna. It is no easy job to write a movie on race and hate which describes the deep nuances of such a complicated topic. The work I am writing about does so in an extremely human, but coarse, approach – by portraying the narrative through the point of view of a white-supremacist, who hates immigrants and blacks and believes in the idea of a lawful, respectful ethno-state. The thread that connects the motifs of racial tension and its resolution is made through the influence Derek has on his younger brother, Danny. Ultimately, the conclusions may be eye-opening – whether we look at them coldly and with rancour, or with a pinch of hopefulness, as the painted phenomena still reign in today's politics and still call for our concern.

## HATE AS A LENS, RACE AS A WEAPON

It had not always been like this. No one is born hating. Derek Vinyard had once been interested on racial equality and black literature, influenced by his African American English teacher, Murray. It is not easy to realize what shifted his thought process. It was perhaps seeded in the discussions his father had at the dinner table about how non-whites in the US were parasites, leeching on the work of those who contributed to society and engaging in all sorts of evil deeds. Its full amplification was perhaps made when his father was killed by a gang member, while in office as a fireman. It is clear that hate is built gradually, through layers of ignorant narratives, emotional anchors, one-sided perspectives, and fuming conflict. It builds walls – and just like any wall, it can protect us from the world, but it deeply isolates, in thought and action. Pain ends up coming from it.

Looking back at Derek's past, we understand how his view of reality mobilizes him. Encapsulated by his beliefs, he starts organizing movements against the "parasites of society". In a street basketball match, he and his skinhead gang play against a group of young black men, where victory meant the definite claim for that specific court. Derek wins the match – he starts being perceived by his peers as a white-supremacy messiah. He later organizes and leads neo-Nazi movements throughout California – he plans robberies on immigrant-owned shops, vandalization of non-white territory and overall, he intends to make his, and many more voices heard. As he builds this white-leader persona, he starts hurting his family and damaging their livelihood. He is aggressive towards his sister and mother and his ideas influence Danny, who seems to be going down the same path as he did.



Ultimately, after the curb-stomping event, Derek is sent to jail for three years for his crime. While in jail, his brother is put under the wing of the brain behind the Arian movement, Cameron Alexander and the operation continues to expand, with Derek incarcerated. Murray, the aforementioned teacher attempts to save Danny from the same destiny but is met with resistance of a quasi-unbreakable structure of hateful ideas inside him. The take here is the sequential nature of hate – it is fortified through events and paths we end up going. It blooms on disinformation and lack of perspective and it is also contagious. It can be used to construct an idea and move people, because it often tells simple easy-to-believe stories that shadow the complexities of convoluted, difficult topics.

## ETHNO-POLITICS

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There seems to be, as far as I'm concerned, a rather direct transposition from the narrative of *American History X* to the political landscape we face nowadays. Derek is influenced and posteriorly influences everyone around them – the spread of the idea is endemic, but it blossoms, as it appeals to the worst in each of ourselves, our prejudices, our ignorance, and the eye-patched limitations of our social bubbles.

These narratives are part of the political discourse nowadays, an essential characteristic of far-right movements throughout Europe and the United States. Financial globalization and worker's migration are the main causes for modern racial tensions. Unemployment, poverty, alienation, gentrification, all these conditions perpetuate an environment, where tensions are bound to be explored by charismatic politicians, who preach national identity and the preservation of the purity of culture.

Whether it is a president businessman claiming that Latinos are rapists bringing crime and drugs, or a gipsy-hating Portuguese who intends to solely be the president “of the Portuguese of good”. A Brazilian thug, or a French lady with no love for refugees. All around us, the politics of hate and fear, the manufacture of the narrative of “us against them”, the birth of the scapegoats of society, have become an integral part of the rhetoric emanating from our TV screens. Through them, it flows, its contagious nature getting these apparent anti-establishment politicians elected. We are told “they say the truths we all think” – but quite often, they fabricate the truths many recipients unquestionably accept.

The fundamental dilemma is how such a disease is to be confronted. Hate is an everlasting destructive weapon. It wrecks everything around us, while we get deeper into beliefs of nothingness, so well-built under prejudice. To overcome it, men need to face the ultimate reality check, first as an individual realization – afterwards as a collective unity movement.





## DEREK'S REDEMPTION

It is during Derek's incarceration that the modifications within himself occur. The motivations for the changes in his world view come about as a result of being betrayed by the Nazi prison gang, after affiliating with them at an initial stage, as well as the befriending of a black prison inmate, with whom he had to do prison chores with. The details are not of extreme importance. The fundamentals reside in an inner conflict, where Derek had to look back and gaze at the consequences of his actions. As the English teacher asks him during a prison visit - "Has anything you've done made your life better?".

One of the technical features which add up to the overall brilliance of the movie is the use of black and white. Scenes that occurred before Derek's release from prison are all shot in black and white, whilst his post-incarceration life is shot in colours.

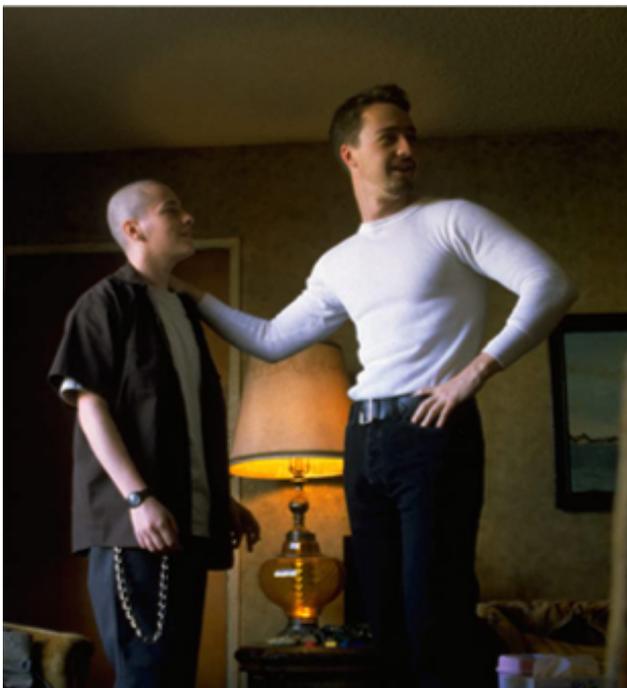
The past and present scene flow interchangeably throughout the narrative, to contextualize Derek's redemption, while having a glimpse of how his hateful mindset came to be. The absence of colour in past scenes display his narrow viewpoint, incomplete, looking at things as good and bad, black and white, lacking the vivid taste of hue and enlightenment. Scenes in the present exhibit the tones of his new-found clarity.

However, his struggles after prison seem to be to clear that wreckage caused by his past-self. For once, he needs to provide for his family, who are not facing a good financial situation. But most importantly, he has to prevent his brother from engaging in the path he did - this means that he has to confront his past associations and mistakes. Perhaps, the hardest part of redemption is picking up the pieces you once tore apart. That is simultaneously the pinnacle, but also the pit of a changed individual.

## HATE IS BAGGAGE

The tragedy of *American History X* lies in its cyclicity. During monologue scenes, the directors choose to shoot frames of waves coming in and going away and I believe that was not unintentional. The cycle of hate will not end, even after Derek's changes, even after the tragic ending. It is something so encrusted in our circumstances, it is actually hard to imagine ourselves, as a collective, free of it. However, I believe that the narrative is built for us to gather a piece of hope – because even the most ill-minded and heart-tainted can see another side. To finally look at each other as humans, different in circumstance, different in body but equal in dignity.

The reason for such a hopeful approach is in understanding at last that hate is artificial – and just like a manufactured gun it can be extremely powerful – however it can also be disarmed. We hate because we are taught to hate, by people, by events, by ourselves. Yet, unteaching it is not only impossible, but in the reality we are facing nowadays it is also an individual and collective responsibility.



Neither I, nor *American History X* intends to provide the tools on how to stop hate. Hate exists and will continue to exist – in our neighbourhoods, in our workplace, in the political rallies we see on T.V, and in the offices of the highest-command politicians. Hate as action, hate as a figure of speech, hate in protest, hate in race, hateful words, and hateful people. It loops and has looped throughout the history of mankind.

It would be distasteful to end this piece on a negative note. The acceptance of the predicament of hatred might be a hard pill to swallow for some, or an indifferent take to others. In the words of Danny, in the ending scene:

***“Hate is baggage. Life's too short to be pissed off all the time. It's just not worth it.”***

Some have to deal with that baggage all their lives. Others might have been fortunate to get rid of it. Ultimately, we will always have to deal with it at some point – deconstructing it, individually and as a whole, might sound utopic. However, the movie shows that it may be possible – and the political paradigm of 2021 tells us that it may be urgent.



## LE HAINE (**HATE**): A STORY OF A FALLING SOCIETY

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CLARA PEREIRA

LA HAINE (1995), DIR.: MATHIEU KASSOVITZ

*'It's a story of a man falling from a building. The man, in the course of his fall, kept reassuring himself: "So far, so good...", "So far, so good...", "So far, so good...". But what counts isn't the fall... it's how you land.'*

*La Haine*, with a plot in which cause and effect are weakly intertwined, is not so much a work of fiction as it is one of realism. It is a portrayal of social structures and relationships within the Parisian *banlieue*, through the lens of three young men who represent somewhat archetypically the inhabitants of the housing projects: Vinz, Jew; Hubert, of Afro-French origin; and Saïd, a North African Muslim. Although unrelated to their racial profiles, the characters serve as representations of the consequences of the alienation and ghettoification imposed through classist institutions. Vinz is resentment; Hubert is purpose; Saïd is obliviousness. However, no matter the standing of the characters, they are all cursed to shaping their existence and that of others under the omnipresent force of hate. Along with its ubiquitousness, the metaphor of the falling man repeated throughout the film sheds light on another tragic truth of being pushed off the ledge by hate – path dependence. When going over the edge, all the conditions surrounding the man had been set for him – there is nothing he can do to change his trajectory or the fact that he *will* land.

The movie is ultimately successful in staying faithful to this thesis – from black and white shots, to constant senseless violence – it never dares to show us a glimmer of hope. Even Hubert, who serves as a petty drug dealer to support his family’s expenses and his own boxing gym, is never granted the illusion of a chance to escape. The one time he expressed this desire to his mother, she doesn’t give it a thought, responding: ‘If you see a grocery, buy me a lettuce’.

The force of hate – whether towards oneself or directed at another – is as much of a crucial theme in 1995 as it is now. In the year it came out, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of France’s far-right party, condemned the film and called out for the imprisonment of its creators. Twenty-five years later, Marine Le Pen, his daughter and leader of the same party, is attaining astronomical popularity, feeding on the France of anxiety and neglect – the hard workers in the countryside – for victimhood and pitting the abandoned youth in the banlieue, a fertile recruitment zone for jihad terrorism, as scapegoats.

## ***"LA HAINE ATTIRE LA HAINE"***

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Hate is a beast who feeds itself. What *La Haine* looks at deeply is how this hate perpetuates and paints a vivid portrayal of the experience of being hated as an individual for the reputation of the collective "you", as perceived by society. The inhabitants of the *banlieue* are hated (and this may be in a subconscious sense, too) by the institutions around them. They are hated by their government, who has housed them in poor conditions, isolated, deprived from economic life and chances of betterment. They are hated, consequently, by the public, armed with data of correlations between race and criminality shown on the 8 o'clock news. Tragically, this society spawns hate groups whose mission is eliminate the other, in a perverted messianic effort to cleanse and protect their version of reality. In a phase of late stage hate society, these groups may even infiltrate the forces sworn in to protect you, the individual.



The film shows, because it needn't argue, that this cycle is not innocuous – it is as deadly as it is repetitive. This immanence hangs upon the viewer from the first minutes: out of apparent whim, an Arab friend of our trio of protagonists is killed in the *banlieue* by the police. Later, in civilized central Paris: Hubert and Saïd are racially targeted and brutalized by police officers. Hanging upon the viewer the entirety of the film, this scale ceases to be shocking, but merely uncomfortable. It is a fact of life on a regular day.

The debate – and this is perhaps the only quasi-ideological confrontation in the film – is how such hate is to be dealt with. In this setting, we are presented with the opposing voices of vengeance-prone and protest-bolstering Vinz, and the stoic and logical Hubert. It is no coincidence then, that the identifying motifs of each character so usefully present and deconstruct the positions of each.



Throughout the film, Vinz carries around a gun he had vowed to use against a police officer if his friend were to die. He speaks of how the hated cannot keep turning the other cheek, a type of cynical bravado. However, later in the film, when his gun is pointed at a skinhead for whom they are the object of avowed hatred, he cannot bring himself to pull the trigger, even as Hubert teases "There are some good cops. But a good skinhead is a dead one". It is with this matter-of-fact attitude that Hubert operates within the systems of hate. His fighting, as presented through his boxing, is contained, realistic, and follows a set of extremely well-defined rules. It is also not a coincidence, then, that it is this exact character who presents us with the falling man metaphor: he understands his limitations – that he is falling and may not be able to change this – and the nuances of his environment. What he desperately tries to make Vinz understand, however, is that 'la haine attire la haine' (hate attracts hate) – it will only quicken your fall and worsen your landing.



## LA ATTERRISSAGE

The end of the film is, ultimately, a sour truth on the byproduct of animosity. Even as the encounter with the skinheads has a somewhat cathartic effect on Vinz, who in renouncement hands his gun over to Hubert, it was too late. Like the falling man, his actions have no effect of the fact that he is falling, and some day will land. Kassovitz reinforces masterfully, ending the film with the shot it had opened with, just with a little more scarring than before.

Although deterministic and comfortably hopeless in nature, *La Haine* never feels grim. Although it argues that a falling society can do little to change itself, it takes on the important task of shedding light on the Sisyphean lives of those most affected by our systems of hatred. The film filled an important gap in the overromanticized French cinematic paradigm, creating a genre of banlieuefilm that has brought much needed social realism to our screens for decades to come. With the rise of the far-right and endemic social inequality, it is really time to question how we, participate in and are affected by the mechanisms of hatred perpetuating in our society. ***"What counts isn't the fall, it's how you land"*** Let us make sure it is not fatal.



# SHAPING ON

## *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, by Kendrick Lamar

The second album by the Compton rapper, released in 2012, was met with overall great critical and commercial success. Its very visual style of storytelling equates this record to a short film, with a vivid description of growing up in a dangerous neighbourhood environment. Through refined sound and banging beats, Kendrick weights in with no fear and stellar emotion on the adversities of the physical and psychological circumstances of his habitat.

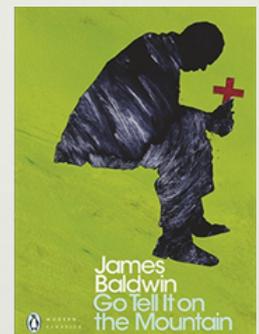


## *When They See Us*, by Ava DuVernay

This 2019 TV miniseries for Netflix, provided four long episodes regarding the Central Park jogger case, where five young boys were falsely prosecuted on charges of rape and murder. Staggering imagery, full of visual and emotional appeal, describe how such accusations came to destroy their adolescence and adulthood. An incredible illustration of a racially biased and broken judicial system and its repercussions on individuals and their families.

## *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, by James Baldwin

A seminal work in American literature, James's Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is a harrowing story of resentment and abandonment of the family of a black Pastor in 1930's Harlem. This important work, with realistic family dynamics and vivid descriptions of religious trance, successfully details the struggle for racial, sexual, and personal self-determination within the confines of religious thought and a segregating culture, in the strive for true redemption from the hate of others, and ones one.



## *BlacKkKlansman*, by Spike Lee

Lee is a master on the topic of race, and *BlacKkKlansman* is no exception. This biopic is a witty exposition of the motivations of those who group up to hate, and the absurd and dangerous consequences of doing so. Without ever being one sided, this film draws the viewer close to the experience of those who, as direct objects of the KKKs hate, face the danger of trying to dismantle it from within.