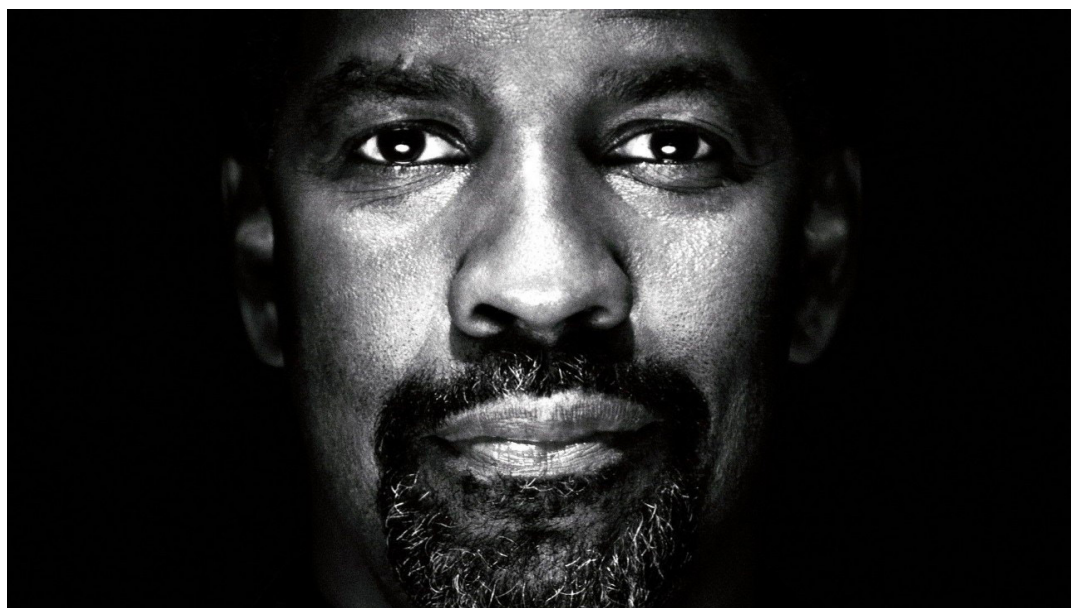


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presents

DENZEL WASHINGTON
AMERICAN
PARADOX

A 52' Film Directed by Sonia DAUGER
Produced by BRAINWORKS



THE PITCH

In 30 years of a deeply committed career and 50 roles, Denzel Washington, double Oscar winner, placed the figure of the Black man in all its complexity at the heart of the American paradoxes: from Black activist, rebel soldier to gangster torn between violence and charity.

SYNOPSIS

Voted best actor of the 21st century by the New York Times a few months ago, Denzel Washington, 65, has risen to the top of American cinema. Actor, director and producer, he has shaken up a "color line" as immutable as it is subtle. Often identified with his characters, he reveals himself to be disconcerting and paradoxical. As if he were holding up a mirror to America in which all of its contradictions and failings were reflected.



THE OBAMA MIRAGE

January 2009. A new page in American history is being written live: Barack Obama has just been elected 44th President of the United States. Denzel Washington delivers his speech and conveys the political message of the new President: America is finally at peace, it has overcome the racial question.

But does he really believe what he is saying on the microphone that day (“We are one”)?

From the beginning of his career, **Denzel Washington has slipped through the cracks in the great national narrative, giving heart and soul to the unspoken side of America and embodying the “grey area”**. This troubled plane, where most of his characters evolve, reflects the paradoxes of an America that swings between successive evolutions and regressions on the representations and rights of African-Americans.

Through his roles and his stature as a public figure questioning America and its excesses, **Denzel Washington has changed the image of the black man in Hollywood and paved the way for a generation that is ostensibly following in his footsteps.**



A PARADOXICAL ICON

Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" is one of Denzel Washington's most iconic roles.

A hero to some, an extremist to others, Malcolm X's life had never been made into a movie.

The young actor makes his mark and his performance sets the stage for a unique career. He plays a complex man, by turns vulnerable, charming, spiritual or violent... Whose message is as powerful as ever.

Barely 40 years old, he forces America to face up to what it does not want to see: its deep-rooted racism. But at the same time, he refuses to become a spokesman for any community. *"I'm not a politician but an actor. If I can help I do it, but I don't get involved in activism and I prefer to concentrate on my job as an actor."*

Yet this quest for identity by the former delinquent turned preacher and figure of the black struggle resonates with Washington, who will never stop hammering his mantra: **emancipation is a personal journey.**

AGAINST THE CLICHES

Denzel Washington was born in a predominantly black suburb near New York in 1954. That same year, the Supreme Court puts an end to racial segregation in schools.

His father is a pastor and his mother runs several beauty salons. Shaken by his parents' divorce, the young Denzel almost falls into delinquency. But his parents send him to boarding school. As his former classmates turn to a life of crime, Denzel Washington learns a lesson:

before you blame the system, do your duty.



The teenager lives through the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. As he enters adulthood, the Civil Rights movement is still making waves throughout the country. After considering medicine, he tries journalism. From that experience, he kept a strong taste for investigation and research. But it was in the theatre that he found his calling.

He does not know it yet but his beauty and talent would propel him to the top. With the series “*St Elsewhere*”, success on the small screen paved his way to the silver screen. But the 1980s were a decade of mixed fortunes for African-Americans.

America was thrust into the Reagan era: “*It is time for us to realise that we are too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams.*” The motto also applies to African-Americans who achieve stardom: Michael Jackson, Prince, Michael Jordan, OJ Simpson or Carl Lewis... America dreams of being multi-racial. But the Reagan years were synonymous with unemployment, ghettos, drugs and delinquency.

On the screen, the same rift showed. The Reagan majesty embodied by invulnerable, body-built heroes (“*Commando*”, “*Rocky*”, etc.) was countered by a political cinema of the downtrodden. This is where Denzel Washington shines. **At the ripe old age of 30, the actor dons the garb of the invisible America, that of the powerless, the forgotten of History, that of the African-Americans.**

In the film “*Glory*” (1989, Edward Zwick), Trip, his character, dies under the bullets of Confederate soldiers in a suicidal raid with the rest of his battalion, entirely composed of black soldiers. In “*Philadelphia*” (1993), he plays the conformist and homophobic lawyer whose prejudices collapse when he comes into contact with a colleague suffering from AIDS. Washington will not be a man of one cause, of one community. **With this film, he broadens his audience without confining himself to black and political figures. His audience grows, the charm works...**



THE AMBIGUOUS BODY

Denzel Washington quickly established himself as a sex symbol. In 1996 he was voted the sexiest man in the world by People magazine, and in 2008 he was named one of the “coolest black men” by Ebony.

Although he often retorts that he is rarely offered romantic films or love scenes, does he refuse to let his body be an object of desire? The hypothesis seems to be borne out by the controversies that regularly surround his relationships with white partners.

His reluctance to kiss women, especially white women, is regularly pointed out.

In 1995, in Brett Leonard’s *“Virtuosity”*, the actor refused to kiss his partner Kelly Lynch, so as not to shock the white male audience *“who would react badly to an interracial kiss”*.

The same controversy occurred during the release of Alan J. Pakula’s *“The Pelican Brief”* (1993).

Although it exists in the novel, the romance between the student played by Julia Roberts and the journalist played by Denzel Washington is erased from the film.

In *“The Hurricane”* the boxer he plays (Rubin Carter) is filmed naked with his cellmates. This nudity comes with a humiliating body search scene.

His body is exposed to martyrdom, as in the whipping scene in *“Glory”*, the beatings in *“Devil in a Blue Dress”* (1995), or in *“The Book of Eli”* (2010), where the hero’s back is scarred, a carnal reminder of the history of slavery and the suffering of African-Americans. All these damaged characters are a testament to the violence that the black community has internalized over the centuries. Denzel Washington embraces the African-American experience of the tortured, violated, outraged body. **He transcends black masculinity in Hollywood.**



ASCENSION & DECONSTRUCTION

Through this bruised body, the actor recalls a fundamental part of the history of the United States and its violence towards the black community. A violence that Hollywood has long avoided, preferring clichés and caricatures.

African-Americans are responding with independent, low-budget productions that are almost invisible to the general public. Few African-American actors have achieved popular success, with the exception of Sidney Poitier in the 1960s.

Denzel Washington really admires him. Poitier was the first African-American actor to win an Oscar in 1964 (*"Lilies of the Field"*). But we often forget the burden that Poitier has to carry. **Caught between Hollywood's guilty conscience as it seeks to change its portrayal of the black man on the surface, and a country where members of his community are still considered inferior.**

Like Poitier before him, Denzel Washington refuses to be pigeonholed as a "black actor and star". His performances in *"Malcolm X"* and *"The Hurricane"* were acclaimed and some expected him to win an Oscar, but white actors stole the show.



TROUBLED ROLES, MIRRORS OF AMERICA

In 2001, “Training Day” was released.

Gone are the sacrificial heroes, the justice-loving lawyers, the virtuous cops. Washington embodies the repressed image of an America built on violence: a corrupt cop who sows terror in the working class neighbourhoods of LA, mostly black or Latino. His character, as devious and dishonest as he may be, is simply the monstrous child of America.

This time, the Oscar does not elude him. He receives it at the same time as Halle Berry, best actress, and Sidney Poitier, rewarded for his entire career. A triple win that raises questions. Is Hollywood trying to redeem itself for its supposed racism? Denzel Washington does not see any political message in it, no openness of Hollywood to minorities. *“The people of the Academy voted for the best actors, and this year it was three African-Americans”.*

There was a before and an after *“Training Day”* in his career. Freed from the need to flesh out heroes of the black cause, **he now turns to characters embroiled in the grey area. Like a reflection of his country’s own internal conflict.**

In *“American Gangster”* (2007), he plays a drug baron in all his complexities: a good Samaritan, sensitive to family values, but who sows death with his heroin trafficking. A chiaroscuro that we find again in his character as an alcoholic pilot in *“Flight”*.



DENZEL & THE INDUSTRY, AN AMERICAN EXCEPTION

In almost 40 years of feature films, the actor has established himself at the pinnacle of American cinema. America named him its favourite actor in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2012 ahead of Brad Pitt, George Clooney, Tom Cruise and Tom Hanks.

Washington is part of American popular culture. No other African-American actor has been at the top for so long: Samuel L. Jackson, Jamie Foxx and Will Smith, despite their proven successes, are not such unifying stars. His Oscar in 2001 paved the way for other black actors (Jamie Foxx in 2005, Forest Whitaker in 2007).

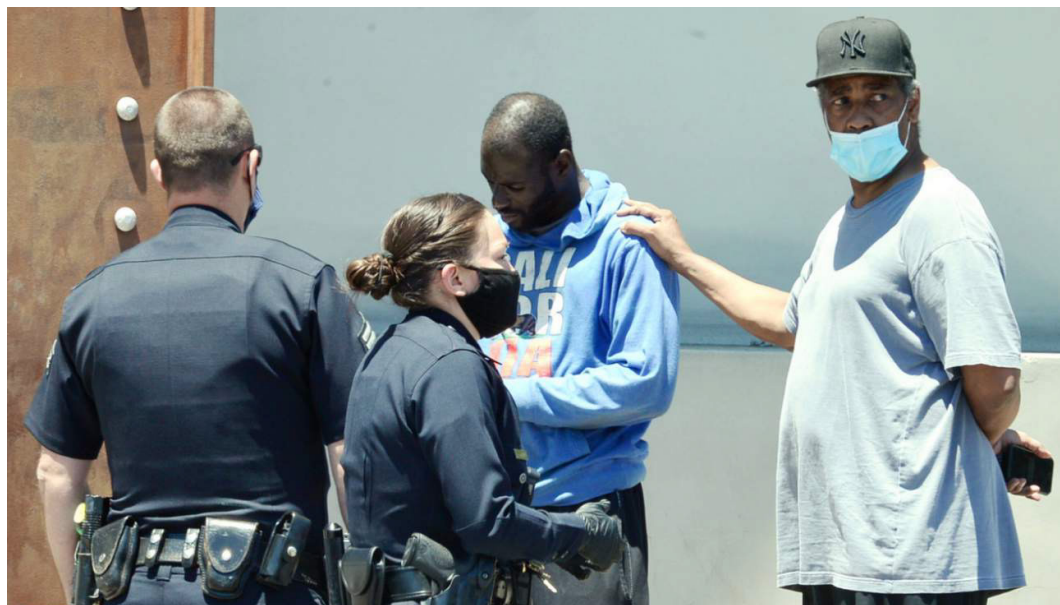
Washington is regularly compared to Clint Eastwood and is clearly following in his footsteps. He is a writer-actor whose career has spanned several decades and, like his model, he founded his own production company. **He also cultivates this taste for characters who sacrifice their bodies on the altar of a decaying America.**

Regularly compared to white actors, he contributed to changing the image of the black man in American cinema. In parallel with the emergence of hip hop, which became mainstream in the 2000s, he forged a new masculinity in Hollywood.

Moreover, through his influence and charisma, he imposed himself in roles reserved for white actors and erased the “colour line”.

This erasure of the colour line anticipates the controversial phenomenon of “blackwashing”, which has been much discussed since 2020. The term refers to the fact of having black actors and actresses play the roles of historical or fictional characters who are not black in reality or in the original work.

If the phenomenon remains controversial (as it was seen for “Bridgerton” on Netflix, or for the next James Bond film, since the next 007 could be black), Denzel Washington is bridging the gap and normalising the trend. At a time when the racial question is once again becoming a burning issue in the United States.



PUBLIC FIGURE, PERSONA DICHOTOMY

May 2020. The scene was recorded live, but it could have been taken from one of his films: Denzel interferes with the police to help a homeless man. The video goes viral and questions the actor’s ambiguous position on the issue of police violence.

While the Black Lives Matter movement is reshaping the anti-racist struggle in the United States, Denzel Washington takes everyone by surprise and insists on individual responsibility: The system is not responsible for the violence suffered by the black community; the absence of black fathers is to blame.

The violence of Denzel Washington’s roles, which are the antithesis of the image of the moderate Christian family man he portrays, appears cathartic. And when asked about the tensions in his country, the actor remains evasive: *“Americans have to stay together, but they are drifting apart”*.



THE TRANSMISSION

From the teenager who almost fell into delinquency to the “role model”, Denzel Washington is an inspiration for the younger generations. **From his pulpit, on stage or through his production company, he invites America to change its focus.**

In 2002, Washington directed “*Antwone Fisher*”, which tells the story of positive transmission. The actor plays an army shrink who digs up the traumas of a young soldier.

In his next film, “*The Great Debaters*” (2007), he again plays a mentor, a professor who teaches eloquence to young black students. **Education is the answer and acts as a social remedy.**

With his third film “*Fences*” (2016), he begins a new cycle. Although it is still about transmission, it is negative here. His character responds to the deep aspirations of Denzel Washington, who points to the universality of his film: *“This is specifically a story about middle-class African-American families and the issues they have. But the universality of it is that it could happen to anyone, any colour, any socio-economic background. This is part of the beauty of the storytelling”.*

His son John David Washington (seen in Spike Lee’s “*BlackKkKlansman*” and Christopher Nolan’s “*Tenet*”) is a rising star in American cinema.



CONCLUSION

In this idea of lineage and heritage, the final scene of “Flight” ends with a father-son confrontation:

- “Who are you?” the young man asks his father.
- “That’s a good question,” he replies. A close-up of Denzel Washington’s face, pondering the interrogation.

This scene is emblematic of the Washington mystery that remains intact. Who is he, indeed? It is difficult to get a full read on him. **This grey area in which he constantly operates, an enigma skilfully crafted, allows him to control all aspects of his career and his image**

NOTE OF INTENT

The film is not a portrait of Denzel Washington, which would detail the significant events of his life in the manner of a “biopic”. The purpose of the film is to decipher the way his career sheds light on the American racial question. The film will therefore be constructed as a back and forth between excerpts from the actor’s films and strong markers of American history and pop culture. We will use historical archives: the segregation of American society in the 50s and 60s, the assassination of Malcolm X, the beating of Rodney King, the election of Barack Obama...

We will draw from the actor’s most emblematic films (*Glory*, *Malcolm X*, *Philadelphia*, *Training Day*, *The Equalizer*, *Fences*) but through less popular scenes, in order to offer an unexpected vision, far from the clichés.

To better understand the man, we will use some archives showing the highlights of his career and public life: the Oscar ceremonies, his public speeches... The speeches of this excellent orator shed light on his personal journey, his difficult ascent, the values to which he is attached and his desire to leave a legacy to the younger generations.

We will prioritise the few interviews of the actor, which beg the question of the representation of the African-American community in cinema.

Finally, we will use animated graphics to homogenise the numerous sources and archives used.

THE DIRECTOR

Sonia DAUGER

Sonia Dauger began her career as a sports journalist and covered news and major sports events for 15 years. Since 2015, she has been directing documentaries. She is responsible for *Les Bleus, une autre histoire de France* (“*The French Football Team, Another History of France*” 100’, France2), *Sprint* (90’, CANAL+), regular collaborations with the program *Secrets d’Histoire* (“*History Secrets*” France 3) and a documentary for RMC Découverte: *Résistance, le Maquis du Limousin* (“*Resistance, the Maquis du Limousin*”).



She also collaborates since 2017 to the program *Invitation au Voyage* (“*Destinations*”) for Arte.

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a-herrmann@arteFrance.fr



AUDREY KAMGA
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a-kamga@arteFrance.fr

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ISABELLE MONTEIL
Sales Manager

i-monteil@arteFrance.fr

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SOPHIE SOGHOMONIAN
Sales Manager

s-soghomonian@arteFrance.fr

Eastern Europe, Russia, Africa
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worldwide inflight



FRANKA SCHWABE
Sales Manager

f-schwabe@arteFrance.fr

Germany, Austria, Switzerland,
Belgium, France, Netherlands
Scandinavia, Iceland