

Race, Media, History, and Relevance in Ava DuVernay's "Selma"

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Race, though a socially constructed idea, has been a major part of American history. From slavery, to the Civil Rights Movement, to the modern day Black Lives Matter movement, the African American race has been at the center of oppression, marginalization, and violence at the hands of white America. Contrary to this, however, American general education does not seem to hone in on these very injustices inflicted upon the African American community. Often times African American history is taught through a white lens in which unjust laws and violence towards African Americans are perceivably stopped through the law making of white men. This leads the educated to believe that slavery and segregation, and the violences that came along with them, are isolated incidences. Specifically, it leads the people to believe that these injustices imposed on blacks were fixed with the abolition of slavery and laws such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Rarely are young Americans taught about lynchings, hate crimes, the violent depths of the KKK, commonly held cultural beliefs towards African Americans, etc. Without this kind of education, the American people are left blind to how slavery was only the beginning of the cultural and racist attitudes towards African Americans, and how with every passing decade laws may have changed to better African American social status in this country, but those attitudes towards race persist. It is clear, then, that our educations about racial history in this country must go deeper and must allow us to draw deeper connections between the past and today. Media and popular culture are an immense part of American culture and, throughout history, have helped to shape not only our perceptions of race, but also have drawn the attention of the American people when change is so clearly needed.

Black, female film director, Ava DuVernay craft fully brings all of the previous points into fruition with her creation of the film "Selma." DuVernay brings to life historical accuracies that

many Americans are simply unaware of in an artistic and entertaining way that helps to educate its audience about race relations in America during the 1960's Civil Rights era. Her implementation of media and other forms of popular culture help to immerse the audience in the violence experienced by African Americans at this time, while also attempting to help white audiences understand the connection between the past violences and modern day violences experience by African Americans. Ava DuVernay uses her power in media to encourage her audience to confront more complex truths about racial violence in the past and pushes them to understand the reality of modern day racial violence.

Ava DuVernay's "Selma" is a film which depicts a rather brief moment in history, while also unraveling much larger aspects history that led to and surrounded that specific moment. This "moment" includes events from late in 1963 leading up to the march on Selma in 1965. A time in which Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and many other peaceful protesters faced violent resistance from the white population and state troopers in their journey to protest the barriers which hindered African American franchise. The film begins with King's acceptance speech for his Nobel Peace Prize in October of 1964 while simultaneously highlighting the devastating moment in September 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama where a church was bombed and four young girls were killed. After this moment, the audience is introduced to Annie Cooper, a black female, attempting to vote. Cooper creates the foundation for "Selma" by revealing the main reason for King to orchestrate marches throughout the film. The black female is denied her voter registration after citing the preamble to the United States and being able to address that there were 67 county judges in Alabama, but denied because she could not name them, all the while being told she was "stirring a fuss" by trying to register to vote. It is imperative to recognize that real life accounts of these "qualifying questions" were far harder to answer. A study on blacks in higher education informs that Sheriff Jim Clark asked questions like "how many drops of water in a waterfall?" to other African Americans trying to register to vote (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 107). This makes it clear that registrars were not interested in African American knowledge of the US, rather

wished to make it impossible for them to vote. This is followed by conversations King has with President Lyndon B. Johnson urging the president to pass a voting act that will allow more black citizens political influence and will be the first step in stopping violent acts such as the Birmingham Church Bombing. Johnson responds with asking King for patience, that voting rights will eventually come, but the African American community must wait.

Because of the President's response, King and the SCLC decide to go on with their peaceful demonstrations and the rallying of people for the march on Selma. The first demonstration shown was outside of the county courthouse, King claiming the large group of people there simply wanted to register to vote. This depicted the many group protests that took place at the Dallas County Courthouse from January to February in 1965. The film displays the often violent turn these demonstrations would take when Sheriff Jim Clark and other State Troopers went into the crowd intimidating and violently handling the peaceful protesters. In the film, we see elderly man Cager Lee beaten with a night stick, and Annie Cooper violently handled for attempting to protect Lee.

From here, the viewer is given Governor George Wallace's racist perspective on the handling of Cooper being published in the county newspaper. This leads to Wallace and other law enforcement deciding that it is necessary to strike one of King's marches when there are no cameras around to capture their brutal actions. The night march, originally occurring on February 17, 1965, is the next protest shown in the film. Unfortunately, State troopers shoot Cager Lee's grandson, Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was running to hide from them. Jackson dies from the gunshot wound and King uses his speech at Jackson's funeral to remind them how important it is for them to obtain equal voting rights.

Jackson's death causes King to question the march on Selma as the SCLC continues to organize it, but ultimately, he decides to follow through. From here the SCLC and other protesters attempt their first march on Selma. This becomes known as "Bloody Sunday" and occurred on Sunday, March 7, 1965. The large group of protesters are met by a line of state troopers wearing gas mask gear and

holding clubs. The protesters are asked to leave, but refuse peacefully by standing in their places, Clark tells the troopers to "advance" to which they brutally attack the protesters with their clubs while riding horses and releasing a large cloud of gas. Many of the protesters were brutally injured, and all of them ran away from the bridge for their own safety. This moment is televised, and DuVernay is sure to reveal the shock and horror on the faces of white and black viewers alike. Because of "Bloody Sunday" being televised, along with King's plea for people to come and march with them, it recruited many allies for the second march on Selma.

The second march on Selma is revealed much differently. The state troopers allow the large group of protesters passage, but King simply kneels for a few moments and then walks through the crowd of protesters and off of the bridge. His decision is met with opposition from fellow protesters when the march does not go on. The march eventually goes to court and Judge Johnson announces that the march is allowed to go forward without resistance in the case of SCLC v. the State of Alabama. Finally, on March 21st, 1965, the march began from Selma to Montgomery. DuVernay ends the film with a mesh of characters in the film marching as well as real footage of the Selma marchers in 1965. She also uses the speech of President Johnson passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which officially passed in August of that year.

The artistry used to depict moments of peaceful protesting met with violence are the moments which really stand out in the film and work to prove that the march of Selma was more than just a triumphant moment in history. Each of the following scenes display historical accuracy and detail that is often missing in the typical general education classroom, while also demonstrating a particular style that puts the viewer in each horrifyingly unjust moment. Before analyzing these scenes, it is important to mention DuVernay's dedication to truthfully display accounts of history. The film director states, "the story needs to be told and, once people know even a little bit of the truth, they will be riveted as I am...and we don't have to construct characters because the truth is jaw-dropping enough" (Martin, 70). This suggests DuVernay's dedication to accurately depict this piece of history while also displaying that the truth

is in fact shocking and a necessary part of history that will and should engross its audience to learn more. After release of the film, sources like The Washington Post confirmed that “the film sticks closely to well-established facts” (Gibson, np). This reveals the film’s credibility and DuVernay’s responsible role in styling the film as an emotional motivator for recognizing African American oppression and violence towards that community. The large majority of characters in the film were based off of real people, white and black, who aligned closely with DuVernay’s depiction of them. This includes but is in no way limited to Martin Luther King Jr., Cager Lee, Annie Cooper, and Sheriff Jim Clark. Sheriff Jim Clark’s character is especially important to consider because of his violent behavior towards African Americans in the film, therefore it is important to discover the accuracy of his depiction. When Clark died in 2006, a newspaper article was released as well as him saying before his death that he’d “do the same thing today if [he] had to do it all over again” (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 107). There was no denial of his violent behavior, rather the implication of his pride in being so violent. There are also personal accounts like from that of Sam Walker who lived in Selma in 1965. He recounts that “On February 10, Sheriff Clark forced 160 students on a three-mile march out of town, his officers harassing them with clubs and cattle prods” (Stuart, np). This real life account serves to validate DuVernay’s honesty in the retelling of events like the march of Selma and “Bloody Sunday.”

The courthouse protest was one of the first moments in the film that demonstrated DuVernay’s artistic approach to promote the audience’s awareness of white violence toward African Americans. The SCLC’s commitment to nonviolence was met with violence in this scene and DuVernay was sure to entwine that moment with style in order to reach the audience on an emotional level. A large group of African Americans protested in front of the Selma courthouse while placing their hands behind their heads and Martin Luther King Jr. communicated that the group was there to practice their right to vote. County Sheriff Jim Clark was not agreeable to these actions and sent other sheriffs out in the crowd. It led to a violent beating of Cager Lee and Annie Cooper. Annie Cooper, specifically, was aggressively handled by multiple state troopers and wrestled to the hard ground.

DuVernay craft fully put together this moment by portraying the sheriffs taking Cooper down in slow motion, followed by an abrupt thud when she hit the ground. By slowing this moment down, it gives the audience a moment to contemplate what is happening. There is much to reflect on in this moment, and DuVernay encourages that contemplation by slowing down the scene. The abruptness that follows serves as a way to force the audience to recognize after their brief moment of contemplation that this really happened. That this violence met by Annie Cooper was reality and an influential piece of American History. Embedded in this scene is both an artistic approach forcing an empathetic reaction from the audience, while also pointing out historical fact and therefore creating an uncomfortable realization of the real life treatment of African Americans. DuVernay is sure to put emphasis on the racial hatred and bigotry of Sheriff Jim Clark a major component to Selma, Alabama’s history. The fact that this man, and the ideas he stood for existed, along with the painful moment in which Cooper is battled to the ground, force the audience to face Selma as more than a singular, and triumphant, moment in history. DuVernay’s embedding of pop culture in this scene is also important as she places the song “I’ve Got the New World in My View” by Sister Gertrude Morgan (released in 2009) in the moment where they are marching to the courthouse. This highlights how American history is often perceived. That the African American community wanted something, marched for it, and obtained it, but it comes crashing down with Annie Cooper as the audience realizes there were barriers far harder to obstruct than a simple voting law.

“Bloody Sunday” is another scene depicted in the film that is often times not talked about in general U.S. history, or is at least glazed over. This was the moment in history in which African Americans attempted to march across Edmund Pettus Bridge and were faced with violence from state troopers, county police officers, and even white supremacists all gathered by Jim Clark (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 107). As shown in the film, people were beaten with clubs and canes as being chased down by state troopers on horses. Similar to the scene described previously, Bloody Sunday was created by DuVernay in slow motion while Marsha Bass’

“Walk With Me” (released in 1984) played. As the viewer is slowly forced to watch African Americans being injured by state troopers, they are forced to listen to lyrics such as “Walk with me lord. Walk with me. All along this tedious journey.” This moment continues to force viewers, whites in particular, to face the realities of the past and how violence was used to control African Americans. The slowness in the scene gives the viewers time to take this in and contemplate its realness and what that means for American history. It forces them to realize the Voting Rights Act was not obtained because America decided it was the right thing to do, but because black bodies were treated in barbaric ways in order to control them and hold them in inferior positions, and the media allowed the general public to come to this understanding. This scene also allows white viewers to empathize with the realities of the time because they watch white actors and actresses depict what it was like to watch that treatment of blacks unfold on the news. During the Civil Rights movement it was images on television of violence towards African Americans that appalled the general public and demanded the president call for change (Campbell, 190).

Perhaps one of the most powerful parts of the movie is its conclusion because after having held white audiences emotionally accountable for historical violence towards blacks, DuVernay connects that to modern day violence through the use of pop culture. DuVernay employs several different cinematic choices which foster an even stronger sense of empathy and reality. She continues to employ pop culture by embedding Fink’s “Yesterday Was Hard on All of Us” (released in 2011) while showing the march on Selma, both in the film and the real footage from the march in 1965. The slow song which articulates “Where do we go from here? Where do we go?” while showing both African American triumph in their march but also white opposition (confederate flags and middle fingers) points out the reality of history to its viewers. It also, again, exemplifies how the Voting Rights Act was not only a triumph, but that white opposition would continue, and therefore violence towards African Americans would not simply stop, but had less potential to continue in the same outwardly barbaric way without consequence.

This idea continues when during the credits of the film, rap artist, Common and R&B artist, John Legend’s song “Glory” (released as Selma’s theme song in 2014) works to connect the civil rights movement and the fight for equality to modern day America. Glory demonstrates lyrics such as “Selma is now,” and “Resistance is us. That’s why Rosa sat on the bus. That’s why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up.” This song literally states the films connections to today’s violence towards African Americans by talking about Ferguson and its span of events that started in August 2014 with the shooting and killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson, the acquittal of Wilson, the unrest by citizens in Ferguson because of those events, and the response from police during the unrest. The song also reminds its viewers, again that Selma is not an isolated piece of history but still has relevance to African American’s social standing today. It is so important that DuVernay does this because the entire film has likely just made its audience confront the horrible treatments of blacks in the past, and now, with the use of this song, the audience is forced to question whether or not modern-day America still treats the African American community violently. This violence differs in subtle ways, but not drastically. This is suggested in the current social standings of African Americans in Selma, the very place that is often tied to the symbol of African American equality. In a study within Selma on black freedom struggles, Karlyn Denae Forner found that “The vote brought political power, but it did not bring the economic justice, security or quality education that made up the other half of African Americans’ demands for freedom” (vi). We will later see that this very inequitable circumstances are what allows for the violent treatment of African Americans today. Sociological data of Selma shows that schools are still segregated, not by law, but by the affects of Selma’s attitudes towards race. A table in “Building Bridges in Selma Alabama” an article by Rebecca E. Davis relays that Selma’s schools are either majority white or black and this segregation (48), and the effects of this segregation are made clear in Forner’s article: “the publics schools...educate the city’s black children, while nearly every white child attends the private John T. Morgan Academy or Meadowview Christian. The Selma Country Club...still does not admit black members” (3). It would be ignorant to claim that the separation of the

black and white communities in Selma are in no way related to the racist attitudes attributed to blacks that are displayed both in history and in the film. It is therefore impactful and important that DuVernay has pointed out the film's connection to modern day race relations.

Modern day race relations are strongly touched upon in "Glory." While Selma displays peaceful protests in order to obtain equal voting rights, instances like Ferguson display civic unrest due to police brutality against African Americans. The death of Michael Brown at the hands of the police officer, Darren Wilson, was not an isolated incident of violence against African Americans, especially not for the town of Ferguson, MO. Much like in Selma throughout history, Ferguson has history of overtly racist behavior towards African Americans, especially by law enforcement. In fact, Ferguson has a history of both racial bias and using that racial bias as a pathway for the city's revenue. Ta-Nehisi Coates, African American writer and journalist writes that Ferguson's "emphasis on revenue has compromised the institutional character of [the] police department, contributing to a pattern of unconstitutional policing" that "both reflect[s] and exacerbate[s] existing racial bias" (Coates). It is important to take these factors into account when considering not only the death of Michael Brown, but the city of Ferguson's reaction to both his death and Wilson's acquittal. Media, a pertinent piece in the Civil Rights Movement, served as an important part in the case of Ferguson and Michael Brown's death. The major difference here is that the media did not capture the initiative violence towards African Americans in the community, and more specifically, MB. Instead, media gave America coverage of the civic unrest in Ferguson after they had been taunted with violence and death at the hands of those vowed to protect them. This arguably had the opposite affect of media coverage during Civil Rights. It allowed for the white public, generally ignorant to the treatment of African Americans in Ferguson and in other locations around the country, to see non-peaceful behavior and blame African Americans for the violence bestowed on them by police officers.

On the other hand, Twitter serves as a different type of media that helped served the same purpose as the nightly news did in the case of Selma. News media was to the Civil Rights

Movement what social media is to the Black Lives Matter movement. Twitter, along with its hashtags, allowed for the general public to call media out for its excusal of police violence towards African American communities. By this I mean that while African Americans are racially profiled by cops, an act which often results in violence, media such as television news outlets predominantly display African American men as threats, coercing viewers to understand violent behavior cops take part in and disguise as self-defense. Twitter has allowed for people to call out this injustice through hashtags such as #HandsUpDontShoot in response to Michael Brown's shooting. "Through this campaign, users sought to call attention to the arbitrary nature of racialized policing, the vulnerability of black bodies, and the problematic ways in which blackness is perceived as a constant threat" (Bonilla, 8). One man even tweeted a photo of himself in a perceivably "hood" stance with a durag on next to another photo of himself in his graduation cap and gown captioned "#IfTheyGunnedMeDown which picture would they use" (8). Images of racial stereotypes, specifically black men in baggy clothes and durags, serve today as an excuse for police violence against African Americans and is masked as a means of protection. Twitter gives voice to individuals to point out these racial biases.

While media during Selma's time was necessary for the American public to see the violent mistreatment of African Americans, it seems it functions now as a way to depict African Americans as threatening and therefore serve as an excuse for police's violent behavior towards them. That being the case, Twitter and other social media now serves as the nightly news did then in Selma. It allows the general public, especially black people experiencing the injustices, to call out the falsified perceptions broadcasted to Americans. It can be suggested, then that "mainstream media silences" allows for the continuation of "the long history of state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations" (12). The part of media that once aided African Americans in revealing the violent treatment they endure is now used to justify violent behavior towards African Americans, a more subtle injustice that condones violence toward the African American community. While this particular part of media has essentially been tampered with to muddle the violent truths it once displayed during the Civil Rights Movement,

Twitter serves as a way for African Americans to again “control the public discourse” (Carney, 196) as they once did by having their peaceful protests and the violence they were met with televised. Twitter serves not only as a piece of social media which allows for African Americans to point out the false perceptions of black male youth, but also for them to “express their experiences and viewpoints” (196), another important aspect of understanding black lives and not simply coming to conclusions that are likely racially influenced in a negative manner. DuVernay is hoping to draw out these kinds of connections when using songs like “Glory” to connect Selma and its ramifications to the present. She wants her audience to think about race in a more thoughtful manner.

DuVernay even draws on the differences in the affects of media in the 1960’s and now and mentions a disconnect between seeing the violence and feeling something in their conscience like they did in the time of Civil Rights. In an interview talking about why she made a movie about MLK She says, “When you have something like Eric Garner, his death being captured on camera and the whole world sees it and yet there’s still not an indictment, we know that Dr. King’s facts of showing the violence doesn’t work anymore. I guess we’ve been somehow desensitized to it” (DuVernay, np). Because America seems to have been “desensitized” it is important to view Selma and draw connections. Viewers in that time were clearly not desensitized to the violent treating of African Americans, and it is important to remember not only that treatment, but also the importance of reacting when injustice is occurring. Twitter serves as a conscious checker to the falsified perceptions displayed within the news. This is because of the very instances in which Twitter users call out racist views and perceptions put out by news that blurs people’s perception of truth.

Regardless of the role media played in both Selma in 1965 and Ferguson in 2014, DuVernay does a flawless job in accurately recreating depictions of “Bloody Sunday” that are frighteningly similar to moments captured in Ferguson’s moments of civic unrest. Below are two photos, the first one an actual image captured from “Bloody Sunday” which mirrors DuVernay’s portrayal of the events. It also shows unarmed black citizens being approached by armed state troopers.

Below that is a picture from a protest in Ferguson, MO in 2014 after the shooting of Michael Brown. Again, we see unarmed black citizens very closely confronted with armed police officers, and still seemingly remaining very calm and unthreatening. The immense likeliness in these photos are another reminder of the close relationship between violence against African Americans in the past and in the present.



Figure 1 Photographer Helped Expose Brutality Of Selma's 'Bloody Sunday'" via kuow.org



Ava DuVernay's goal to awaken the general public about the harsh truth of violence towards African Americans in the past, while hoping to enlighten them about the unjust violence still occurring towards blacks through the making of "Selma" may not be clear upon viewing the film one time, but it is clear that DuVernay intelligently and carefully put together scenes in order to evoke this kind of response. Her attention to detail, including the slowing of scenes and implementation of emotion evoking music, helped the audience to respond empathetically to the pain felt by African Americans at the time of Civil Rights. She was also sure to attend to historical accuracy so that viewers knew what they were seeing, and what they were feeling, was real and not simply an attempt to hit big at the box office. When looking at instances of violence in Selma in 1965 and comparing them to Ferguson in 2014, there are many parallels in the treatment of African Americans. One difference is the way in which media functions during each of these situations. As television once pointed out the violence used against African Americans, it now seems to defend it, while Twitter is able to give people, specifically African Americans, a voice to point out the false perceptions television gives much of the African American community. DuVernay took on a large task in creating such a monumental film, and successfully pointed out problems in race relations and inspired more thoughtful ways of considering attitudes toward race and negative effects that result from that.

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