The Power of Sentimental Cinema and Sentimental Politics

Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014)

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Ava DuVernay's film *Selma* (2014), about the 1960's civil rights movement's initiative in Selma, Alabama, situates Dr. Martin Luther King's activism within a domestic, personal framework. Director DuVernay repeatedly makes aesthetic choices that foreground the emotional power of her film. This particular representation of the Selma voting rights campaign has several significant results. One is to foreground the sentimental appeal of King's activism, giving visibility to the affective connections to community, shared values, and camaraderie. In taking this approach, DuVernay amplifies the sentimental political appeal that King himself pursued. In addition, DuVernay's choice to focus on emotions and sentimentality results in highlighting the roles of women civil rights activists. This paper argues that both DuVernay and King engaged in civil sentimentalism.

As Heike Paul and Ursula Prutsch have argued, civil sentimentalism draws upon "culture-specific imaginaries of order and belonging" (Paul/Prutsch). Throughout the film, DuVernay depicts King staging dramas of activism. King works to intervene in a national imaginary by representing "not belonging." The resulting mass protests of peaceful, impeccably dressed citizens enact visions of communities excluded from political society. In a tour-de-force speech in the film, King forcefully explains to both President Lyndon Johnson and the viewing audience that African American citizens in the pre-civil rights South were at the mercy of racist physical intimidation because they could not serve on juries that would censure the violence against them because they were not registered to vote, a requirement to serve on juries, and why they are protesting in the first place. As historian Lamont Yeakey notes, "Selma was a town of approximately 13,000 white people and 16,000 black people; but

less than 2 percent of the black population was registered to vote" (165).[1] Both King and DuVernay had to consider: How to make disenfranchisement visible, palpable, and affective?

The crowd excluded from the Selma courthouse reveals the issue. Early in the film, King organizes a protest of African American citizens requesting the right to register to vote outside the Selma courthouse that is rebuffed and met with violence by the local police force, helmed by the local sheriff. The assembled crowd includes local civil rights activists, activists like King who have joined them from out of town, and local citizens. The tableau that King dramatizes makes apparent the exclusion these citizens face, as well as the ruthless violence that this demonstration is subjected to. It is a sentimental effort to catalyze spectators and witnesses. Accordingly, DuVernay films this scene in a sweeping long shot that pulls back seamlessly to elevate King and situate him as one among many leaders and protestors, including many women. In addition, if the demonstration reveals inequity and disenfranchisement, it also serves as a testament to belonging; this group shares a common purpose, works together well, and proceeds according to an agreed-upon plan.

The film establishes its sentimentalism from the onset; the opening scene announces its domestic, personal focus. Jeffrey Knapp, in his article, "*Selma* and the Place of Fiction in Historical Films," suggests that the first shots also reflect the film's unstable genre, one that Lamont Yeakey notes has historically had trouble landing with audiences and awards; Knapp claims, "This opening to *Selma* announces the complexity not only of the movie itself but also of the genre to which it belongs—the historical film" (91). In this initial scene, we view King practicing his speech for the acceptance of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. The film's foregrounding of revision and repetition immediately undermines the notion of King as an inherent genius, gifted a rhetorician though King was. Instead, we witness King's dissatisfaction with his own words, which signals a behind-the-scenes vantage on this historical figure. In keeping with that perspective, Coretta Scott King is present; she aids King in tying his ascot. King frets about the optics of the event, and the juxtaposition of its opulence with

1 Yeakey goes on: "The social conditions of black people in the rural South were horrendous, and life in the black belt counties of Alabama were especially deplorable. Black people made up approximately 47 percent of Alabama's population, but they had no political power. Over 80 percent of the eligible African Americans were not registered voters" (165).

the income equality he strives to promote. His concern establishes several issues: For one, it is in keeping with the revision of his speech; he is revisiting and re-working his thoughts on the issue, and in fact throughout the film, we witness King re-thinking and re-assessing his approaches to situations, including, later in the film, "Turnaround Tuesday," his decision to reverse direction during a march on the Edmund Pettis bridge. In addition, King's invocation of what people might think of his participation at such a fancy event underscores his recognition of his own visibility and the significance of the staging of events. This strategic understanding of the pageantry of politics recurs throughout the film. Meanwhile, the film itself quietly, visually asserts the significance of an African American recipient of the Nobel Prize, given the insistently white setting of Norway, where it was received. These opening moments highlight the intimate but deeply politically aware approach the film will take.

The inclusion of Coretta Scott King in this first scene also indicates the important role that women will play in the film, an effect of DuVernay's reliance on civil sentimentalism. The politics that DuVernay emphasizes take place in kitchens, bedrooms, and living room couches, domestic settings that traditionally function as women's arenas, as opposed to boardrooms, or more professional public spaces. As a result, Coretta Scott King, Diane Nash, Amelia Boynton, and Mahalia Jackson are featured, giving visibility to the participation of women in the civil rights movement. As Danyelle Greene asserts, "DuVernay gives particular attention to the influence of the strong, intelligent, patient, and powerful black women who were essential figures in the voting rights movement" (212). This move to include the many women activists broadens the range of representation of the civil rights movement. In his article, "Seen and Heard: Negotiating the Black Female Ethos in *Selma*," David G. Holmes argues that this inclusion is in fact, "the most significant takeaway from *Selma*: Black female lives matter—in terms of physical safety certainly—but also in terms of Black women speaking up, standing up, and moving forward for social justice" (186). This is a profound claim for a film that centrally features King, one of the best-known figures in the United States. Above and beyond the film's sympathetic portrayal of King, Holmes argues that it is in fact the representation of the broader community that is its most essential feature. Similarly, academic Periel Joseph, writing for *Newsweek*, applauds the fact that, "The notable presence of black female characters [...] offers a corrective to popular depictions of the era as a male-led movement" (Joseph). The film thus advances a vision of culturally specific belonging for Black women as civil rights activists.

Given the large number of historical figures who appear in the film, the strength of its actors, assembled by long-standing Hollywood casting agent Aisha Coley, is worth noting. The range is vast and stellar, from major celebrities like media magnate Oprah Winfrey and the musician Common, to several relative newcomers at the time, who have since launched to major roles in the film industry. Civil rights activist Diane Nash, credited by some for the idea of marching from Selma to Montgomery (cf., e.g. Julian Bond, quoted in Lott 346), is played by Tessa Thompson, whose breakout role as the protagonist of *Dear White People* (2014) occurred the same year as *Selma* (2014), and who has gone on to star in independent films such as *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), as well as blockbusters franchises such as *Thor* (2017–2022), *Avengers* (2019), and *Men in Black* (2019). DuVernay includes Diane Nash in scenes throughout the film, as one of an ensemble of political thinkers and activists. Meanwhile, Selma civil rights activist Richie Jean Jackson is played by Niecy Nash (known for her role on the comedy series *Reno 911!*). Selma civil rights activist Amelia Boynton, a major figure in Selma civil rights and president of the local NAACP branch, is played by Lorraine Touissant, who at the time the film was made was enjoying a star turn in the series *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019). Lakeith Stanfield plays a local victim of police violence, Jimmy Lee Jackson, before advancing to a major career, including Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), the protagonist in Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), and an on-going role in Donald Glover's television series *Atlanta* (2016–2022). Because of the talent assembled, the formidable power of the team that King works with is manifestly apparent in the film. DuVernay has stated that she wanted to present King as working with and on behalf of a community (Shatkin). Casting so deep helps reinforce that principle; Oyelowo's star power as King is matched repeatedly by the actors around him.

In keeping with her civil sentimentalism approach, DuVernay stages a scene in a kitchen in order to give authority to civil rights activist Richie Jean Jackson, who hosts the out-of-town activists when they arrive. The setting of the kitchen gives Jackson's character pre-eminence. If the film had decided to stage the arrival of activists in Selma in an auditorium, a setting used in other scenes, it is unlikely that women characters like Jackson would have featured as centrally, and they definitely would not have been in charge of the situation. Instead, to advance the intimate, personal feel of the film, we view the famous activists enjoying Jackson's cooking, while she presides over her kitchen. Martin Luther King sits to eat, while she remains standing, both working but also enjoying visual dominance in the shot.

Coretta Scott King also plays a larger role in the film than adjusting King's ascot. As well as other moments between the married couple, DuVernay includes a scene of a meeting between Scott King and Malcolm X, which occurs while King is in jail in Selma; Scott King then reports back on his newfound openness to King's focus on voting as a strategy for liberation. This explicitly political scene with Scott King changes her role from supportive wife to activist in her own right, arguing with King about the potential value of including Malcolm X in the movement. (In the end, this potential allegiance is foreclosed upon when Malcolm X is assassinated.)

In addition, Mahalia Jackson plays a small but profound role. Her character further represents one of the film's few invocations of star power (Harry Belafonte is also invoked at the very end of the film, and then appears in the reality footage). Feeling particularly besieged, King calls Jackson late at night, waking her from her bedroom where she is asleep beside her husband, to ask her to sing to him. The interruption of Jackson's sleep and the request for a favor indicate the closeness between the two. It is an intimate moment, revealing two celebrities in private, domestic spaces, one in personal need, the other unquestioningly willing to respond. Jackson answers the phone, leaves her husband's bed, and delivers a spiritual for King to assuage the civil rights leader's frayed nerves.

As moments of care and affection like this demonstrate, the film highlights the pleasure of camaraderie that community affords. In contrast to the first scene of the film, with just King and Scott King, DuVernay largely focuses on the group effort that the civil rights movement relied upon. We witness King as one of several activists, casual, joking, uninhibited, enjoying each other. The affective pleasure of coming together plays a crucial role in the success of a political movement, the film suggests. *New York Times* reviewer A. O. Scott notes that "Dr. King worked in the service of the movement, not the other way around, and Mr. Oyelowo's quiet, attentive, reflective presence upholds this democratic principle by illuminating the contributions of those around him" (Scott). Portrayed as a member of an extensive familial community, Martin Luther King and his voting rights campaign, as represented by DuVernay, reflect the concept of civil sentimentalism. The sentimentality of this comradeship features the pleasure and significance of eating together, which DuVernay highlights in Jackson's home. King is portrayed discussing strategies with friends and colleagues, and meeting with the families of those who have joined his movement, not as an individual genius. Repeatedly, we witness King in domestic, intimate

moments: He lies on the couch; writes in bed; shaves in the bathroom; takes out the trash; tucks his children into bed.

To highlight her sentimental approach, DuVernay repeatedly makes aesthetic choices that foreground emotions. One formal choice is her use of close-ups. Historians such as David Garrow in his book *Protest at Selma* (1978) suggest that Dr. King selected Selma as a useful location to stage the voting rights struggle in part because he knew the racist Sherriff and Chief of Police would respond violently to the initiative and not be restrained by racist Governor George Wallace. As such, part of King's strategy was performative: He needed events to occur on a public stage in order to trigger an empathetic reaction from spectators, spectators produced by news coverage. Citizens were hearing about the struggles of the civil rights movement, and the violent reaction they were facing, but to visually witness these assaults provoked an emotional response in viewers.

In her film, DuVernay re-enacts not just the violence met by the protesters in Selma, but also the campaign to orchestrate these interactions. Once again, in doing so, she is able to amplify the sentimental appeal that King was searching for. She can bring the camera in closer to film specific, individual moments. King was reliant upon news coverage, which generally featured a classic long shot, removed from the interactions, seeking to "objectively" represent reality; this camera distance works both to orient the viewer, as well as to deliberately refrain from an emotional response. At the end of her fictional account, DuVernay includes reality footage from the actual Selma campaign, which for the most part employs the standard visual technique of the long shot. DuVernay also stages similar long shots of the police response to protest on the Edmund Pettis bridge. But she further presents images in a much closer range. So, for instance, when a police officer beats an unarmed woman attempting to register to vote, the impact is much stronger and more horrific (especially when that woman is played by Oprah). DuVernay focuses on close-up images of individual citizens, and also tells the story of a particular historical figure, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young man who died in the violence. In doing so, DuVernay personalizes the otherwise potentially faceless losses suffered by the Black community during the civil rights struggle.

In terms of visuals, an aesthetic commonality between the reality footage and DuVernay's film that probably carries more emotional weight in the 21st century occurs in the realm of costume, in that the protestors in their 1960s garb look much more formal than average citizens of 2014 (or 2024). As a result, the image of 1960s citizens in clothing suitable for a nice occasion being

met with brutal violence possibly resonates more powerfully for a 21st-century spectator.

More profoundly, the affective horror generated by staging the camera closer to the violence is reinforced by sound effects. The original reporting on the civil rights march in Selma and its violent attempted suppression featured a voice-over account from a white male reporter explaining the events, a voice-of-god narration common to documentary filmmaking of the time period. By contrast, DuVernay is able to employ the techniques of musical accompaniment, including synchronized sound effects that correspond to the violence, as well as music that underscores the pathos of the moment. Again, this approach allows DuVernay to powerfully amplify the sentimental project that King originally undertook.

To heighten the melodramatic appeal of her film, DuVernay drew upon famous musicians, John Legend and Common, who also played a small role in the film. Their song "Glory" plays over the film's credits and won the Academy Award for Best Original Song. Its sweeping, stirring appeal helps provide a soundtrack for an emotional request for civil liberties like voting and participation on the justice system, including the ability to serve on juries. These are potentially dry liberties, but accompanied by music, their affective force is powerful.

The centrality of music in the film helps situate it in the realm of melodrama, which draws upon music (melos) to make its appeal. The invocation of melodrama, like sentimentalism, is not meant to disparage the quality of this film; in fact, quite the opposite. Film scholar Linda Williams has suggested that almost every Hollywood film could rightfully be labeled a melodrama (42), given their tendency to rely heavily on film scores to orchestrate audience responses. Film melodrama represents a long tradition that has dramatized the struggles of the disenfranchised, like those engaged in the civil rights movement, and makes those struggles legible and sympathetic to those in power. Some critics, like James Baldwin and Lauren Berlant, have bemoaned the sadism of requiring suffering in order to engender compassion, and argued that the rights of citizenship should not be reliant on sympathy (Baldwin; Berlant). Nonetheless, melodrama, in many ways an auditory accompaniment of a sentimental account, has repeatedly been called upon, particularly in the U.S., to serve as a useful avenue to represent quests for legitimacy.

Another formal decision that DuVernay makes to generate emotion is to reorganize the historical timeline. DuVernay substantially revised the original screenplay written by her (white male) screenwriter to create combinations of

historical moments that she preferred. DuVernay took up the film after Lee Daniels decided to direct *The Butler* (2013) instead of *Selma*. At that point, the screenplay was complete. However, significantly, in the time since the screenplay had originally been written and DuVernay taking on the project, access to King's words had shifted; DuVernay and the film were no longer able to use them, because DreamWorks and Warner Brothers had purchased the copyright in anticipation of the possibility of director Steven Spielberg making a film about the civil rights movement (Hornaday). As a result, DuVernay had to write speeches for King that sounded like his speech and cadences, but were not in fact his exact words. And because the original screenwriter had already been credited for the screenplay, DuVernay was not allowed professional acknowledgement by the Academy of Motion Pictures for substantially revising the screenplay.

Despite the lack of recognition, overhauling the screenplay allowed DuVernay to shape the film according to her own vision, including creating a sentimental approach to the material. One of her approaches was to disrupt a linear chronological account. For example, in the opening scenes, as King delivers his speech in 1964 accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, the film visually cross-cuts between him and four girls at a Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, who died as a result of a bombing of their church in 1963. Film critic Delphine LeTort, in an article on *Selma*, notes that while King's acceptance speech was more upbeat, DuVernay, writing in his voice, includes a rumination about the lives lost, which anticipates the lethal violence that the Alabama police force will unleash, as well as reflecting the horrible violence on the screen from events that occurred over a year earlier (198). Rather than focusing on the civil rights movements as a "creative battle," in King's original words, DuVernay has King mourning "our lost ones, whose deaths pave our path" (198). In fact, these are the first lines of the film, delivered in a voice-over against a dark screen, setting the tone for the film that follows. LeTort notes that by juxtaposing King's Nobel Prize acceptance speech with the Birmingham bombing, and "[d]isregarding the constraints of chronology [. . .] DuVernay explicitly chooses [. . .] drama over historical accuracy, allowing feelings of injustice to interfere with the narrative of *Selma*" (199). DuVernay creates this "interference" to deploy feelings that reinforce and advance the argument that King was making in 1964 about access to voting.

It's worth noting that the issue of voting rights was again very much under siege in 2013, the year the film was being made, as a result of a Supreme Court decision (Shelby County v. Holder), which undermined the tenets of the 1965

Voting Rights Act. (And again in 2021 with Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee.) While many were probably outraged by jeopardizing voting access to predominantly voters of color, DuVernay mobilizes emotion in order to demonstrate the injustice, and the resulting pain and suffering, created by this disenfranchisement.

In one of the first scenes of the film, in slow motion, we see the four girls, dressed in Sunday best, descending the stairs, a clearly profoundly sentimental image of piety, innocence, and childhood, posed in a sacred space. Their careful, beautiful costumes reflect the care of the community that seeks to nurture and protect them. After the bomb detonates, the film cuts to an alienating overhead shot of the destruction and we see fragments of this image destroyed, reflecting the lethality of the hostility against the African American community. The rest of the film is viewed through the lens of these "lost ones, whose deaths pave our path," creating a sentimental, affective poignancy to the campaign, as well as a pervasive layer of fear. DuVernay repeats the phrase "our lost ones" when King speaks at the funeral of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who dies at the hands of police during the Selma campaign.

Narrative reenactments of historical events might be considered always already sentimental recreations, in that most fictional narratives will include a protagonist with whom the audience is meant to identify if not sympathize. But as a result, fictional accounts of events may have more political impact than non-fiction. In the case of *Selma*, the film may further serve the purpose of educating a new generation about the U.S. civil rights movement; in his review of the film, Chicago critic Richard Roeper argued that "Once school is back in session, every junior high school class in America should take a field trip to see this movie" (Roeper).

Over the course of her career as a director, DuVernay has decided when to use a reality-based approach to material and when to fictionalize it; she has created both documentary and fictional films. Her first feature film was a documentary about Los Angeles rap music, and her documentary *13th* (2016), about the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans in the U.S., received extensive visibility for a non-fiction film. Thus, in back-to-back projects, DuVernay used cinema to address major avenues of discrimination facing the African American community: a fictional depiction of historical voting disenfranchisement in *Selma*, and just two years later, a documentary account of the prison industrial complex in *13th*.

DuVernay is strategic about when to use which approach as a director, and her decision to fictionalize real events has had political consequences in the

lived world. For instance, three years after directing *13th*, she wrote and directed the mini-series *When They See Us* (2019), about the case of the Central Park Five, five young men of color wrongfully accused and prosecuted for the rape of a white woman in Central Park in 1989. In 2012, well after the men were released and exonerated, a documentary covered the case, *The Central Park Five*. However, it was not until DuVernay's fictional mini-series seven years later that there were ramifications for the lawyer involved in the case: Linda Fairstein, the prosecuting attorney, lost her publisher, as well as her position on several boards (Storey). Neither the case being overturned in 2002 nor the 2012 documentary had this effect. As Oprah Winfrey commented in an interview about the film *Selma*, "Laws do not legislate people's hearts" (Neumaier). In this instance, hearts lagged more than 15 years behind the law; it took a fictionalized, sentimentalized representation of the case to move public opinion and create this effect in the public sphere. Spectators needed to see the young men of color, spend time with them in close-up, and thereby identify with their plight in order to move against those who had perpetuated injustice.

The civil sentimentalism that DuVernay engages in with *Selma* occurs in terms of both the form and content of the film, as well as some of the activity associated with the film, or "extra-diegetic" material. The actors associated with the film clearly considered it a political undertaking. Created 50 years after the events being depicted, both the violence and the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the film was also made during 2014 protests in Ferguson, MO, in response to police shooting and killing unarmed teenager Michael Brown, as *New York Times* reviewer A. O. Scott noted. *Selma* was released in late December 2014, around the time that a grand jury decided not to indict the New York police officer who murdered unarmed African American Eric Garner, also in the summer of 2014. Many people associated with the film, including director DuVernay, star David Oyelowo, and actor Tessa Thompson, staged a protest at the film's New York premiere to call attention to the miscarriage of justice, wearing black T-shirts that read "I can't breathe," Garner's last words while being choked to death. His phrase became a rallying cry against police brutality, horribly echoed by the murder by asphyxiation of George Floyd six years later in the summer of 2020.

As a result of her explicitly political approach to the film, DuVernay intersects with an activist academic movement identified by film scholar Mark Reid as "Black Lives Consciousness." Reid describes this movement as one that "speaks to the value of black bodies that might be traumatized, and those bodies that are coming into being-ness through intersectional theoretical analysis

and every-day activism" (8). Reid's movement thus draws upon both academic work as well as social justice movements. DuVernay similarly foregrounds the potential for trauma to the black body, again and again bearing witness to the violence meted against it historically. It stands to reason that the film would also be available to reflect the continued violence against the black body in the contemporary moment, a connection explicitly created by the filmmaker and actors in their demonstration. It is worth noting that black careers were also made vulnerable, by being put on the line in this protest. While their bodies were not damaged, their careers may have been.

New York Times writer Cara Buckley suggested at the time that this public protest may have accounted for the Academy of Motion Picture's disregard of the film. *Selma* received little recognition from the Academy of Motion Pictures—just two nominations—part of a trend of dismissal of Black cinema made more acute in the 21st century by the renaissance of Black cinematic productivity. Buckley asserted that "The movie's campaign tactics might have hurt its chances. [...] The filmmakers and cast inserted themselves into present-day events by wearing T-shirts that read 'I Can't Breathe' [...] This perhaps conveyed the sense, distasteful to some, that they were capitalizing on the politicization of the film" (Buckley). Several claims are notable in this passage, including the characterization of the protest staged in response to a Black citizen's state-sponsored murder as "campaign tactics" for the film itself. Film campaign tactics typically involve studios putting up posters and taking out For Your Consideration ads, as Buckley well knows, not organic protests taken up by actors, which would likely, as any activist would surely recognize, be met by disapproval. It also is notable to suggest that the filmmaker and cast were "capitalizing" on the violence that they were protesting against, rather than drawing a clear continuum from the race-based violence depicted in the film to contemporary violence. The film itself is political, making its "politicization" moot. In keeping with Mark Reid's Black Lives Consciousness, one might argue that to make a film about police violence against unarmed protesters in the civil rights era and NOT weigh in on contemporary violence against unarmed Black citizens would undermine the political validity of the film. Rather than preserving a fantasy of cinema as removed from politics, DuVernay and her cast use civil sentimentalism to situate their film in an on-going public outcry against police brutality. In doing so, DuVernay, probably knowingly, undermined her own career.

Because by contrast, in an interview with DuVernay just weeks before the film was released, *New York Times* reviewer Manohla Dargis noted that "Os-

car talk was building" about the film and stated that DuVernay had a shot to become the second woman to win an Academy Award for Best Director (Dargis). In fact, DuVernay did not even receive a nomination. Instead, that year's Academy Awards granted two nominations to this major film about a famous U.S. figure: Best Original Song, which it won; and Best Picture. No Best Actor, no Best Director, which no Black Director has ever won (only three had been nominated at the time; by 2024, six had been nominated). No Best Supporting Actor, no Best Supporting Actress, no Best Cinematographer, which no African American Cinematographer has ever won (and only one has ever been nominated for—the same cinematographer for *Selma*, Bradford Young, the following year, for *Arrival* [2016]). The film received no acknowledgment in any of these ways. Instead, all the nominees for all of those categories were exclusively white. This exclusion resulted in the first use of the online protest using the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, which gained more energy the following year (2016), when the Academy once again put forward almost exclusively white nominees. The film that did win Best Picture in 2015 was part of the Academy's blurring of the lines of Best Foreign Film and Best Picture, Alejandro Iñáritu's *Birdman*. While considering *Selma*'s relationship to the Oscars, it should be noted that it is a big film: a costume drama about a major historical U.S. figure, a nationally valorized martyr (at least after his assassination), that included a large cast and featured a number of celebrities. These are the kinds of films that the Academy has historically rewarded. But not in this instance.

Historian Lamont Yeakey has noted the difficulty that fictional films based on historical reality have traditionally had to navigate.

> [N]ondocumentary cinematic films devoted to actual historical civil rights events have not had a strong 'track record' either among film critics, Academy judges, or the box office in comparison to fictional, nonspecific historical subjects that may either tangentially or directly deal with personal or collective civil rights issues no matter how weak or powerful in the telling these contrived stories may be. (Yeakey 161)

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd provides an example of that prejudice against non-documentary films (and more!) in her response to *Selma*, criticizing the film, as many did, for its depiction of President Johnson as being opposed to the civil rights movement. Dowd complained about DuVernay's response to that criticism when DuVernay noted that she was making a fictional film, not a documentary. "Filmmakers love to talk about their artistic license to

distort the truth, even as they bank on the authenticity of their films to boost them at awards season," Dowd claimed (Dowd). In response to the claim that the film downplayed the role of President Johnson in the Voting Rights Act, David Holmes responds that,

> The obsessive attention afforded Johnson's role in the Selma campaign may indict this society with the material critique that white masculinity, ethos, and voice appear to matter more than Black femininity, character, and perspective, even when African American women are central subjects within the narrative. (Holmes 186)

As Holmes notes, it is revealing that DuVernay's depiction of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement led so many critics to rush to protect the legacy of the White president.

In addition, Dowd seems to be charging DuVernay with banking on authenticity (which DuVernay had explicitly dismissed) in an effort to garner just two Academy Awards nominations, since Dowd's column appeared shortly after the 2015 nominations were announced. Apparently even that limited recognition was too much for Dowd.

By contrast, David Carr, also writing for the *New York Times*, who covered the Academy Awards for many years, believes that the Academy's oversight was significant and unfortunate. Carr, invoking the principles of Black Lives Consciousness, notes that "The news continues to be full of all manner of pathology and victimization involving black Americans, and when a moment comes to celebrate both a historical giant and a pure creative achievement, it merits significant and broad recognition" (Carr). Carr also notes, "By contrast, *American Sniper*, a portrait of American greatness directed by Clint Eastwood that drew mixed reviews, received six" Academy Award nominations (Carr). Carr ends his lamentation about the Oscars oversight, however, with a note of triumph, by heralding DuVernay's success: "While the snubs may sting and point toward a broader blindness, it's still more important in the long run that a young female black director received the backing of a Hollywood studio and made an important film" (Carr).

DuVernay's most recent endeavors have been directing a big-budget adaptation of a best-selling children's book, *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) and helming the series *Queen Sugar* (2016–2022)—less explicitly political fare, although both feature African American female leads. Ultimately, with *Selma*, DuVernay has demonstrated how to amplify the civil rights movement's sentimental ac-

tivism through sentimental and melodramatic filmmaking. Historian Yeakey argues that "King's tactic was to stress love and employ nonviolent direct action, which he believed were powerfully effective instruments in building a sympathetic following throughout the nation among white and black people" (167), and in her film-making practices, DuVernay has similarly taken up these instruments. Her resulting film and achievement stand as an example to all politically-minded directors.

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