

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
January 2015

Selma (dir. Ava DuVernay, 2014)

On Camera – even more than usual, a noticeably partial list

Martin Luther King, Jr: David Oyelowo: British! *The Last King of Scotland* (06), *The Butler* (13)
Coretta Scott King: Carmen Ejogo: British! Played Coretta earlier in HBO's *Boycott* (01)
Pr. Lyndon B. Johnson: Tom Wilkinson: British! *The Full Monty* (97), *Michael Clayton* (07)
John Lewis (SNCC): Stephan James: Starring as Jesse Owens in *Race*, scheduled for 2016
Diane Nash (SNCC): Tessa Thompson: *For Colored Girls* (10), *Dear White People* (14)
James Forman (SNCC): Trai Byers: *All My Children* (11), rebooted *90210* (12), *Empire* (15)
Andrew Young (SCLC): André Holland: *Sugar* (08), *42* (13), *Black or White* (14), *The Knick* (14)
Ralph Abernathy (SCLC): Colman Domingo: *Lincoln* (12), *42* (13), *The Butler* (13); Tony nominee
Bayard Rustin (SCLC): Ruben Santiago-Hudson: *Lackawanna Blues* (05), which he also wrote
Hosea Williams (SCLC): Wendell Pierce: *Waiting to Exhale* (95), *The Wire* (02-08), *Ray* (04)
Jimmie Lee Jackson: Keith Stanfield: *Short Term 12* (13), *Straight Outta Compton* (15)
Richie Jean Jackson: Niecy Nash: Known for comedy: *Reno 911* (03-09), *Getting On* (13-14)
Cager Lee (grandfather): Henry G. Sanders: *Killer of Sheep* (77), a landmark of Af-Am cinema
Annie Lee Cooper: Oprah Winfrey: *The Color Purple* (85), *Beloved* (98), *The Butler* (13)
Amelia Boynton: Lorraine Toussaint: *Any Day Now* (98-02), *Orange Is the New Black* (14)
Gov. George Wallace: Tim Roth: British! *Reservoir Dogs* (92), *Pulp Fiction* (94), *Rob Roy* (95)
Lee White (LBJ's asst.): Giovanni Ribisi: *Saving Private Ryan* (98), *Lost in Translation* (03)
John Doar (LBJ's agent): Alessandro Nivola: British! *Junebug* (05), *American Hustle* (13)

Off Camera

Screenplay* Paul Webb: No prior credits; *his LBJ-centered script was largely revised
Cinematography Bradford Young: *Pariah* (11), *Mother of George* (13), *A Most Violent Year* (14)
Editing Spencer Averick: All of DuVernay's three features; several stand-up films
Costumes: Ruth Carter: *Malcolm X* (92), *Amistad* (97), *Sparkle* (12), *The Butler* (13)
Musical Score: Jason Moran: Special jazz consultant to the Kennedy Center, and a performer

Previous features from director Ava DuVernay

I Will Follow (2010) – Drama about a grieving woman and the folks who help her move on

Middle of Nowhere (2012) – Drama about the devoted wife of a convict, resisting a new suitor
— DuVernay won Best Director at Sundance; movie didn't debut on DVD till last week!

If you enjoyed *Selma*...

King (1978) – Six-hour, post-*Roots* NBC miniseries; Paul Winfield, Cicely Tyson in the leads
Malcolm X (1992) – Still the biggest-budget civil rights drama in Hollywood studio history
4 Little Girls (1997) – Spike Lee’s Oscar-nominated documentary about the church bombing
Boycott (2001, HBO) – Historical drama about Montgomery bus boycott; Jeffrey Wright as King
The Rosa Parks Story (2002, CBS) – TV biopic starring Angela Bassett; directed by Julie Dash
Milk (2008) – Combines fiction and documentary influences; *Selma*-ish stress on collective effort
The Witness: From the Balcony of Room 306 (2008, 32 min) – Oscar-nominated documentary about Rev. Billy Kyles, the only witness to Dr. King’s assassination; on Amazon, YouTube
How to Survive a Plague (2012) – Re-tells the early years of AIDS as grassroots-organizing tale
Lincoln (2012) – Re-tells passage of 13th amendment as collective project, delicate compromise
Betty and Coretta (2013, Lifetime) – Angela Bassett as Coretta, Mary J. Blige as Betty Shabazz
Cesar Chavez (2014) – Embarrassed I haven’t seen this yet, about the Mexican labor organizer

Facts about *Selma* you may appreciate...

Selma’s script isn’t the only aspect that kept evolving. Many directors and casts were attached to various versions over the years. Most recently, the film was all set to go with Lee Daniels (*Precious*, *The Butler*) at the helm. David Oyelowo is the only cast member in that *Selma* who was also cast in this version. Oyelowo fought for DuVernay to be hired as director.

DuVernay made her name as a publicist for a long time before turning to directing. Given her expertise but also, perhaps, Hollywood’s unimaginative way of thinking about things, she was repeatedly hired to coordinate publicity for movies with significant black characters or African-American cultural reference points, from *Lumumba* to *Scary Movie* (both 2000), *The Rosa Parks Story* (2002) to *White Chicks* (2004), *Collateral* (2004) to *Dreamgirls* (2006) to *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (2008). Her last gig as publicist for hire was *The Help* (2011), which debuted a year after DuVernay’s first, self-distributed feature, *I Will Follow* (2010).

Notice how many movies show up multiple times once you explore the past credits of *Selma*’s cast: *The Butler*, *42*, *Lackawanna Blues*... These overlaps suggest just how few films invite large ensembles of black actors but also give us a way to read the film: as a kind of allegory for a major, collective push and a moment in the spotlight among longtime allies and friends.

The reported budget for *Selma* is about \$20 million—almost identical to that of *12 Years a Slave*, which shared some producers, notably Dede Gardner and Brad Pitt. DuVernay’s previous feature, *Middle of Nowhere*, had a budget of \$200,000. By many accounts, alongside her prize-winning talent and her African American Studies degree, what helped her land the job was her fleet of practical ideas for mounting an epic story with relatively slim resources.

Selma premiered at the AFI Fest in November, where fellow late-December awards contenders *American Sniper* and *A Most Violent Year* also debuted. But those films had been finished for weeks. *Selma* was still being edited; the original plan was to screen only an excerpt. Oprah Winfrey convinced DuVernay to screen the whole print, which got the buzz started.

Broad conversation topics...

Individuals and Groups: *Selma* does not profile King's early life, does not extend all the way to his murder, and frequently pivots on events he did not attend. As in *Lincoln*, the protagonist presides over the film without encompassing all its scenes and themes; indeed, both films are about collective and sometimes contentious effort. That said, the broad canvas means we sometimes spend little time in *Selma* with individual activists, even quite famous ones. How did you respond to the film's narrative and visual balance of solo heroes and allied groups?

Historical Accuracy: *Selma* begins with an inexact approximation of dialogue from King's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech ("I accept this honor for our lost ones, whose deaths pave our paths..."); the rights to the original speech had already been sold to others. King even interrupts himself to say, "This isn't right." He means his badly tied ascot, but surely also signals the movie's necessary embellishments and dramatizations of precise facts. The Birmingham church bombing—commemorated in the film's second sequence as a symbol of how much work desperately needed doing—actually took place more than a year before King claimed his Nobel. Fact-checkers and character witnesses have been all over *Selma*'s case, arguably more so than with every biopic that opens every year. What are your investments in or expectations of "historical accuracy"? How did the film gratify or disappoint them?

Teachable Moments: If I could "fix" anything in *Selma*, it might be the series of blunt lines of dialogue where characters spout basic, textbook-level information about the Civil Rights movement to close allies who cannot possibly need such reminding. For example:

Hosea Williams: "The students are in town."

Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The local students?"

HW: "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee."

MLK: "Ah, our good friends at SNCC!"

At one level, this feels like regrettable scripting. On another level, the PG13-rated *Selma* seems to predict a life for itself as a teaching tool, even for young viewers who won't know the basics. And at still another level, *Selma* may be justified in assuming that popular audiences don't know anything more about the Voting Rights Act or SCLC than we knew about, say, Iranian history before *Argo* covered that ground in a very on-the-nose preamble. What premiums do you put on aesthetic finesse vs. the passing of valuable knowledge?

Gender: Coretta aside, few to none of the speaking roles for women in *Selma*'s script existed in the draft that DuVernay inherited. Almost all of them reflect her revisions to the screenplay.

Politics of Photography: *Selma*'s cinematography may not seem as conspicuously gorgeous or inventive as the Oscar nominees in that category (*Birdman*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Ida*, *Mr. Turner*, *Unbroken*) but consider the challenges. Black actors in Hollywood repeatedly withstand lighting schemes that are keyed for white complexions, which tend to obscure their expressions and flatten darker complexions. You almost never see the full range of skin tones that *Selma* captures, for example, in the scene where the SCLC crowd shows up to the Jacksons' house for dinner—or see black actors inhabit such pitch-dark environments as the jail cell where King and Abernathy consult, without losing details in their faces entirely.

Specific touches worth discussing...

Framing: The first shot of the film, as King practices his speech, is a tight, symmetrical close-up where his head fills the exact center of the screen. His “this isn’t right” interruption corrects the camera as well as his own script: this monumental visual treatment gives way to a series of more democratic, decentered two-shots of Martin and Coretta. Typically in the film that follows, *Selma* avoids the urge to make King the privileged or monolithic center of images.

Acting: A running joke but also an important character point in *Lincoln* was that the President could never stop speechifying even in private life. *Selma* suggests nothing like this: King rarely employs his dulcet oratory away from the podium, either to entertain or manipulate, unless you count his brilliant handling of Johnson in the White House scenes. If anything, his sermonic delivery plays as a register he *only* can hit at public moments, with no direct connection to how he usually sounds or talks. Oyelowo must have regulated this with care.

Lighting: One last claim about the prologue: the lighting in the hotel room seems rather stagy, with strong, specific light-sources and a kind of lensing that flattens the Kings a bit and detaches them from their blurry background. We are at direct, theatrical right-angles to them many times, rather than assuming more casual perspectives. Why might this be: because they are preparing for a public ceremony? Because there’s a sense in which they are acting roles for each other? Because, as Coretta later complains, even their privacy carries public responsibilities—their home, their kids, their expenditures must “look good” to others?

Focus: In the tight shot on Annie Lee Cooper’s voter-registration application, the clearest focus is on the space for specifying “Sex” on the form. That quick, subtle detail drove home to me how Cooper isn’t just up against racist histories of voter suppression but sexist ones, too.

Camera Angle/Mise-en-Scène: The shot of Annie Lee waiting to apply is from a high angle (camera looking down on its subject), which already reinforces her lack of power. It’s also taken from a landing on a staircase, which is included in the shot—visually linking her plight to those of the four little girls walking down the steps to catastrophe in the previous scene.

Editing: *Selma* holds on Annie Lee for two beats after the bigoted Registrar asks her to recite the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution. She isn’t pausing because she doesn’t know it; her pause means something else (what?), before launching ahead. That tactic repeats when he asks for the number of county-level judges in Alabama. She knows, but won’t dazzle him with her instantaneous recall. Her war is patiently fought, refusing to take bait or parade her smarts.

Sound Bridge: Over the last shot of Annie Lee Cooper leaving the Voter Registration office, we hear a voice fulminating, “Are we not done? Are we not done with this?” We will soon learn this is President Johnson, impatient at having to address black suffrage and civil rights yet again. But this technique often lifts lines of dialogue beyond their specific scenes and allows them to resonate out of context: Annie Lee’s specific plight, and *our* predicament in 2015.

Mise-en-Scène: Were Washington and Jackson really the two Presidents whose portraits hung in Johnson’s Oval Office? Either way, seeing him squat between them situates LBJ between a long-game tactician and a notorious hothead. Both, of course, were Southern slave-holders.

Costumes: Ruth Carter, one of many African Americans that *Selma* employs in key creative positions, refuses to use clothes to “oppose” Johnson and King. Both men wear gray suits, the President’s only slightly darker. Visually speaking, we are not in “good cop”/“bad cop” territory. Neither costume gives much away, either; both imply they are in the same game. (Even when we later meet the SCLC crowd, only Young’s houndstooth suit shows any flair.)

Politics: Johnson is unhappy to be dragooned back into a voting-rights struggle at this moment, but he isn’t lobbying softball distractions. His attempt to enlist King’s aid in a general War on Poverty is not just historically accurate to both men’s agendas—and an ongoing African-American concern—but many feel that King’s anti-poverty activism hastened his murder.

Script: Filmmakers often discourage using on-screen captions to clarify chronology or setting; “real artists,” one hears, should transmit information organically via image, music, dialogue, etc. *Selma* seems to blatantly spell things out for us, accompanied on the sound-track by a clacking typewriter—until the simple word “LOGGED” brilliantly transforms these captions from narrative crutches (given only to us) into a close surveillance record (key to the story).

Acting: Given the choice in a crowded frame, my eye will always go to Lorraine Toussaint, and I noticed she doesn’t even flinch in the scene where King is punched in the face in the Selma hotel lobby. Imagine how much that says about her character’s strength, but also about her familiarity with scenes as cruel as this. Note the contrast of the Bloody Sunday bridge scene.

Costumes: When Martin and Coretta talk in their kitchen, he wears a short-sleeved period sweater, in a fabric so thin you can see the sleeveless T-shirt underneath it. “Biopics” often render their protagonists as untouchable icons; by contrast, King wears underwear and takes out the trash. If this sweater suggests to you his pure “transparency,” however, think again.

Lighting: I love the smoky haze of the lighting in this same scene, as though something is boiling down or already burning on a nearby stove. Not a bad analogy for what’s going on.

Script/Direction: *Selma* is well aware that King’s marital infidelities still loom large (would I say too large?) in contemporary views of his character. The movie corroborates those facts while also framing such moral adjudication as a cynical tactic of the opposition. Script and direction even play with our expectations here. As Martin watches Coretta exit the kitchen and furtively dials a phone number, modern sensibilities may predict that he is calling a mistress. A woman indeed answers: it’s Mahalia Jackson. He wants to hear a spiritual.

Mise-en-Scène: When King delivers the speech that kickstarts the activist push in Selma, he does so before a backdrop of enormous church-organ pipes. That’s both a practical reality of the set and an indication of how sermonic oratory *became* political rhetoric in the way he exercised them—and he of course was not alone, and not the first. The trajectory from pulpit to politics unfolds across later, similar shots: of LBJ before a flag, of King before the Capitol.

Costumes: When we first meet John Lewis, the more receptive of the SNCC representatives, he wears a beige/brown/orange sweater that recalls in color palette and material the one King wore back in his kitchen. This is costumer’s shorthand for two men cut from the same cloth.

Sound: As the activists in Selma take their first march to the courthouse, precipitating the first standoff with Sheriff Jim Clark, you can imagine the temptation to mix the sounds of their footsteps loudly and majestically: *this is history!* But the sounds of the footsteps are muted and “realistic,” in keeping with the film’s overall balance of commemoration and modesty.

Zoom: Imagine, too, the temptation to zoom *closer* to King as he eloquently states the marchers’ position, but instead the camera zooms *away* from him to include more and more of the now-seated protesters. *He* is not the point. He is a mouthpiece for the group. They are the point.

Laughter: Say what you will: I cannot imagine the white director who would cue King and Abernathy to laugh after the line, “This cell is probably bugged.” To document oppression while trying to take the edge off it is both a talent and a forced task of minorities in the U.S.

Characterization: Malcolm X’s jabs at Martin make his blood boil like nothing else in the film. Even the close-ups of Martin tilt wildly away from the center of the frame as he rages; he loses temperamental *and* visual composure, as does Coretta, who we gather is not used to such displays. In a Hooverian moment, he links political disagreement to sexual treachery.

Mise-en-Scène: Jimmie Lee Jackson dies against a restaurant wall festooned with evidence of African-American accomplishment, from hit records to photos of Olympic athletes. (That didn’t look like Jesse Owens to me but could have been.) This tableau suggests how Jimmie Lee himself will become a commemorated figure in African-American history while also, of course, indexing the violent suppression of a people even amid its implacable achievements.

Script: King’s furious eulogy for Jimmie Lee includes an allusion to “something I often say when one of our leaders is struck down.” Put yourself in the shoes of a person or group who loses so many leaders so quickly that they have things they *often say* on such occasions.

Music: Just a few twangs in the score at the outset of the first planned march to Montgomery—not enough to alter the mood, but enough to invite association—recall the instrumentation and textures of Sergio Leone’s spaghetti-western scores. We’re about to see a showdown.

Lighting: I mentioned the cinematographer’s rare gift of shooting dark complexions in dark backgrounds without losing detail or tone. Look how the Bloody Sunday scene requires the opposite: filming barely-glimpsed bodies amid pluming, white-on-white clouds of smoke while still allowing us to discern important actions and familiar faces. Still, the earlier gift will soon come in handy. Most cinematographers show no details on black faces at all. With Young, you see exactly where the victims have applied concealer makeup, and how much.

Mise-en-Scène: The iron letters atop the Edmund Pettus Bridge, exposed to rain, leak realistic rivulets of rust on the white frame of the bridge. But didn’t that look like blood to you?

Songwriting: Note how, in the Oscar-nominated song “Glory,” that single word serves as a chorus by itself, repeated often, accompanied by a surging chord that re-commences often but never resolves. “Glory” is both an exalted exclamation and a perpetually frustrated push.