

Selma, a 2014 film written by Paul Webb and directed by Ava DuVernay, opens with a black screen. The words of Martin Luther King, Jr. sound, slow and deliberate. This opening scene conveys the foundational truths which guide all the cinematic choices DuVernay makes in her film: One, that this film has chosen, for the first time on any screen, to tell the story of the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of its leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Two, this black screen which hosts the intimate sound of the prophetic words of Dr. King, tell us that for the next 2 hours, words matter as much or more than action, and we should pay attention. King's words will soon be crafted into his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, and they make clear the frame DuVernay has chosen for her film set in the year following the historic passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. As he practices his speech in the privacy of his own thoughts, King says that he came to Stockholm as a representative of the "20 million negroes motivated by dignity and a disdain for hopelessness." Motivated by dignity, and a disdain for hopelessness. As the audial and visual narrative of *Selma* unfolds, it is clear that DuVernay has chosen to craft a film that waivers on this thin edge between the assurance of dignity and the encroachment of hopelessness. Throughout the film, King himself poignantly displays

moments of doubt, not only concerning the possibility of victory, but even about the manner in which equality is achieved. DuVernay, as a filmmaker, echoes the words of King with her cinematic choices. Indeed, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and even Malcolm X and President Johnson are given thoughtful screentime as they wrestle with the best path forward. Moreover, DuVernay and Webb craft several scenes in which King privately questions the validity of their struggle while he is in jail to a close friend, or when he finds the space alone in which to beg Mahalia Jackson to sing the words of God to him, and others in which his advisory team frankly wrestles with what should be the SCLC's first legislative priority—from vouchers to poll taxes—in outlawing voter intimidation and resistance. In short, this film refuses to deliver easy answers, or to unfold as inevitable the march for equality.

This is important for several reasons. Any honest attempt to portray King's life or key moments in the Civil Rights Movement must grapple with the fact that King is an icon in America, and in many places around the world. How does one appropriate this story without participating in hero worship or telling a story as predictable as this quite familiar history? To avoid these pitfalls, DuVernay chooses to

focus on small moments and quiet but courageous people, interspersed with historical moments or players that we think we know well. The unfolding of her narrative, although told from King's perspective, artfully connects the viewer with much smaller tragedies. We sense the grave injustice of Annie Cooper as she tries to register to vote; we feel rage and grief at the death of Jimmy Lee Jackson; we are shocked and terrified as the little girls are killed in Birmingham; we feel disillusioned and scared with Coretta; we feel lost and later inspired with Martin. The ways in which these moments are filmed and presented allow us not to connect only with the huge events of struggle that we think we know, but surprise us by giving equal weight to the stories of individuals who lost life and tragic hours in order to usher actionable equality into this country.

DuVernay achieves this impressively fresh storytelling about the actual March from Selma to Montgomery cinematically through 2 primary devices: First, she uses an intimate voiceover technique to juxtapose the two ideas with which the movie opens: dignity and the despair of hopelessness. Second, she uses slow motion techniques to communicate the intimacy of bravery and violence, while also

demonstrating the role spectacle played in achieving lasting civil rights for all people in the United States.

The words of King which begin the film clearly frame the cinematic choice DuVernay makes around the juxtaposition of hope and despair. This juxtaposition is made evident through the first several scenes, which bring hopeful words to bear on hopeless situations. Precious little girls, dressed in their Sunday best and sharing their admiration for Coretta Scott King as they playfully dance down the stairs of their Birmingham church, are suddenly made the victims of a destructive bomb. This scene is all the more terrible because viewers know what is coming; the bomb in Birmingham is a part of this decade we all mourn. DuVernay's mark on this collective memory is made because she plays the hopeful words of King immediately over the images of the vital, and now devastated bodies of these young girls. This juxtaposition of the hope for peace of equality and the irrationality of terrible violence creates the tension present for those who, as King earlier argued, are "motivated by dignity and a disdain for hopelessness." DuVernay, by shocking the viewer's senses and by forcing us to bring King's words to bear on the images before us, makes

us victims of sorts as we decide if we can access the actionable “disdain for hopelessness” that King and his people stubbornly prized.

DuVernay emphasizes the point by following this scene with another juxtapositional moment which gives the reader the impossible task of squaring hopeful words with an unjust visual scene. Annie Cooper, played by Oprah Winfrey, is asked to perform absurd feats of memory in order to obtain her voter registration card. The most poignant moment occurs when she is asked to recite the preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America. As the viewer hears these words of confident and hopeful equality, we watch the despair of irrational, bigoted denial of rights. DuVernay’s cinematic choices both emphasize the power of words in this struggle and the presence of constant despair in the hope for equality.

Films are visual in nature, and DuVernay masterfully comments on the importance of created spectacle not just by engaging in this process herself in the making of the film, but in demonstrating the power of such scenes to call a reluctant country to action. She achieves this in several ways. First, she allows King to explicitly explain that this movement will only succeed if the SCLC continues to create situations in which white people lose their tempers and mistreat them on a public

stage. His movement needs the spectacle not just of unified, peaceful protesters, but of enraged, violent responders. In his view, the spectacle itself will call the country to act.

DuVernay emphasizes this feeling of spectacle by filming each pivotal moment of violence with slow motion, and, crucially, by narrating these moments most often by the words of King. This choice both reminds us of the incredible power and hope of King's words, but it also places the viewer as a spectator. This cinematic move recreates the feeling of millions of Americans watching these scenes unfold on their television sets across the country. DuVernay places us in the film, asking us to come to Selma, to stand with these good people. Indeed, at crucial moments on the bridge, she removes us from the action so that we hear it on the radio in Boston, see it on a small tv in Virginia, or watch it unfold in a Diner in Missouri. These choices, in the cinematic context of visual slow motion and aural narrative overlay, demonstrate the power of spectacle not just in *Selma* the movie, but in the events which unfolded in Selma 50 years ago. In her capable hands, spectacle is not created so that the viewer can place their powerful gaze upon the Other; rather, this is an inclusive spectacle, calling people to participatory action. The bombing in Birmingham, Annie Cooper falling

down in front of the courthouse, Jimmy Lee Jackson being shot in a back alley restaurant, the violence of the 1st March, the tense prayer of the second march, and the priest from Boston being beaten to death....all of these scenes, captured in slow motion, and narrated by King or a reporter, remind us that none of these things happened in a vacuum. They unfolded intentionally as part of King's master narrative, and reporters leapt at the chance to juxtapose the injustice they witnessed with the determined, hopeful resolve of King. Indeed, the interspersed presence of reporter's words and the FBI's observations solidify the awareness that these events all occurred under the gaze of the country. DuVernay, like King before her, masterfully creates layers of spectacle, allowing the viewer to grapple with the knowledge that it is morally reprehensible to be a spectator of this injustice without taking action to stop it.

In an age of live tweeting and omni-available scenes captured on YouTube, this film reminds us of the power of words, particularly when combined with spectacle, to expose injustice and to call strangers to action. The impact of *Selma* is that it refuses to sanctify the holy words of Dr. King without placing them in the context of despair in which they were uttered. Further, the cinematic choices DuVernay makes in the

film demonstrate the power, then and now, of spectacles of injustice.

Given the current climate of racial tension and the clearly exposed systematic injustice of many government agencies, the call to action issued at Selma and reiterated in this film must not fall on deaf ears.

Will we hear and ignore prophetic words of hope? Will we passively gaze upon the spectacle of injustice? How will we respond to the call to stand with those who have a “disdain for hopelessness?”

