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Film Review: *Selma* (2015)

Critics and audiences view biographical films with an assumption of historical accuracy and authority. When biographical films fail to factually portray the events and people that we have come to know during our formative years, either through History Channel specials, and reading numerous books and textbooks, those films are harshly criticized. There are many films based on seminal events and people that have both failed and succeeded in bringing to life familiar narratives in American society's collective historical memory. Many audiences fail to recognize that a historical film is not a source of authority. The medium of film is a collective of different artistic expressions; it blends the art of writing, acting, cinematography, and direction. The art of the biographical film is to combine all these artistic elements and to animate the collective historical memory in a way that does justice to facts and the people portrayed. Some of the most successful biographical films, or biopics, that come to mind are *Gandhi*, *Malcolm X*, and *Schindler's List*, but even those artistic endeavors are not free of flaws. We tend to hold the aforementioned biopics in high regard because the acting, the writing, and the direction are elevated to the realm of true artistic expression; the stories, rooted in factual events and people, are stripped of their mythical elements and portrayed as universal struggles carried on the shoulders of flawed human beings.

Over the past couple of years, the genre of the biographical film has experienced major artistic and commercial revival. Nevertheless, films like *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* and *Cesar Chavez* were ambitious endeavors that collapsed under the immense weight of their subject's historical significance. The foremost critique is that these films failed to blend all the diverse artistic elements of film, and because of this failure, the stories of these amazing leaders in film does not capture the impact that they had in history.

Selma successfully portrays an emblematic snapshot of the civil rights movement. It does not detail the life of Dr. Martin Luther King from beginning to end, but demonstrates the personal within the political. The personal was political, not just for Dr. King, but for many of the activists involved in the movement. *Selma* conveys the civil rights movement as a struggle of collaboration. It was a struggle of diverse opinions, personalities, and ideologies within the movement itself. It was a struggle of bringing all these components into one unified and coherent idea. It was a struggle for the right to vote without the arbitrary restrictions imposed on the black population. The film captures these elements in a compassionate and eloquent way.

The Edmund Pettus Bridge unites the diversity of personalities in *Selma*. The bridge, in the context of the film, is representative of a conflicting narrative, and how a community challenged the evolution and shape of that narrative. The violent clash that came to be known as “Bloody Sunday” on March 7, 1965 on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was broadcast on national television. Through this platform, the force and violence used against the peaceful protesters became a call for social justice for many. The bridge, named after a KKK leader, became a contested space where the past, represented by the authorities, tried to desperately cling on to their dominant status by any means necessary. In the film, the bridge is represented as a Rubicon, or the point of no return,¹ in the civil rights movement. Symbolically, crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge is to triumph over an entire sector of oppressors. It’s these subtle elements within the film that elevate it to artistic quality.

The performances by David Oyelowo who played Dr. King, and Stephan James, who played John Lewis, deserve special accolades. Their relationship transitions from Lewis’s perception of Dr. King as a heroic figure, to Lewis’s disappointment and frustration over Dr. King’s plans. The portrayal of the interactions between these two characters is very human and relatable. The film

¹ The crossing of the Rubicon River by Julius Caesar.

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portrays Dr. King as a flawed individual, and brings his mythical narrative down to real human qualities. This is most explicitly portrayed in Dr. King's relationship with Coretta Scott King, played by actress Carmen Ejogo. Jealousy, infidelity, and stress abound in the King family. The film handled these elements in a sensitive way and both actors were convincing in their roles. In the larger context, these elements within the King family were not portrayed to expose their unfortunate reality, but as the realities that social and political leaders often face.

One of the primary criticisms that *Selma* has received is the portrayal of President Lyndon B. Johnson's resistance to the Civil Rights Movement. Tom Wilkinson plays the part of the hesitant and sometimes difficult President Lyndon B. Johnson. Joseph Califano, former White House Aide under President Lyndon B. Johnson, has raised several questions over director Ava DuVernay's portrayal of the former president. Califano paints a very different picture of the historical events, reporting that President Johnson was not only the man behind the *Selma* protests, but that he was more integral to the movement than Dr. King himself. In this instance, it is the critique itself that is flawed. One of *Selma*'s greatest accomplishments is its introspective look into the humanness of its characters. President Johnson was a very complicated man. He turned against many of his Southern allies and passed the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. He also forced the Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover to dismantle the Ku Klux Klan. He was not a terrible person, but he was not always a great one either. The film does a phenomenal job of presenting President Johnson as a human being and not just as a historical figure.

President Johnson's role in the film has been greatly misinterpreted. President Johnson's support for Dr. King's plan to mobilize in *Selma* was initially limited. At the beginning of the Selma marches, President Johnson was determined to pass the War on Poverty bill. This interfered with his support for the Voter's Rights Act. The film also showed the impact that the Selma protest had on President Johnson. His character changes throughout the

film. He is portrayed in the beginning as a politician who is out of touch with the needs of the people. It takes Dr. King to push President Johnson to address the injustice within voting rights. He was a strong enough leader to realize when to correct wrongdoings and to reform.

Another wrongly criticized facet of President Johnson's portrayal in *Selma* is that of his relationship with Dr. King. Akin to the criticisms that President Johnson was grossly misrepresented, the film has received backlash over the strained relationship the men have in the film. Dr. King and President Johnson were two very different men with very different responsibilities and agendas. President Johnson was president of a country that was deeply marred by social instability, a war in Vietnam, and the overwhelming threat of communism. For President Johnson, Dr. King was a political activist who was rocking an already teetering boat and Dr. King, an impassioned civil rights leader, was frustrated and fed up with the racial inequality of the 1960's and the government's slow reaction to this injustice. President Johnson did not understand the importance and the necessity to take quick action. The idea that the two men would have been compatible with each other all of the time is unrealistic. Again, the tension between President Johnson and Dr. King displayed in the film reflects the humanity of both men.

The timing of the release of *Selma* was strategic in that it would honor the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma marches. Without a doubt the film incorporates 2015's Black Lives Matter Movement, but *Selma* also has the overarching theme of promoting human rights and justice. This is arguably done most explicitly through the song "Glory," written and performed by musical artists John Legend and Common. After winning Best Original Song at the 2015 Grammy Award ceremony, Common stated in his acceptance speech: "The spirit of this bridge connects the kid from the South Side of Chicago, dreaming of a better life, to those in France standing up for their freedom of expression, to those in Hong Kong, protesting for democracy... This bridge was built on

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hope, welded with compassion and elevated with love for all human beings.”

This message is reiterated throughout the film, beginning with the opening scene of the innocent murder of four black female children during the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963. The Selma marches are portrayed as coinciding with the church bombing when in truth these events took place almost two years apart.

Another scene that portrays the disparity of the value of human life follows the murder of James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister who joined the Selma marches following King’s call to American clergy members. The murder of Reeb by white supremacists prompted an outcry against the brutality of white supremacist organizations and the trial and conviction of four men accused to Reeb’s murder. The director of *Selma* juxtaposes this scene to the scene in which King advocated for President Lyndon B. Johnson to advocate for justice to be brought to the state trooper who murdered Jimmy Lee Johnson, a young black Baptist deacon who had participated in the Selma marches. At no point in time does Dr. King minimize the tragedy of the murder of Reeb, instead King pleads for Johnson’s murder to be taken just as seriously.

Selma attempts to encapsulate the complexities of the Civil Rights Movement through the fight for black voters’ rights through the marches in Selma, Alabama of 1965. This biographical film offers an artistic interpretation of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. DuVernay uses drama to engage audiences to tell the story of the men and women who advocated for equality and justice and to wrestle with the complex relationship Americans still have with this country’s bitter racial history.

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