

# Selma

(2014, Ava DuVernay, USA)

## Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area: Spectatorship (AL) Ideology (AL)

#### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Martin Luther King's speech about the right to vote 24:26 - 27:10
- First attempt to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge 1:07 - 1:14

#### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

##### Cinematography

- Composition and framing – Martin Luther King is central, catching spectators' attention and highlight his importance; wide-shot to capture his followers who are seated either side of him on the podium.
- Back-shots in MCU (medium close-up) of the audience, indicating their support and attention.
- Zoom in when Martin Luther King is picking up momentum with his speech, draws in spectators' interest and centres on the importance of what he is saying; he is a powerful speaker and the focus is now on him alone.
- Zoom out with a side shot capturing the entire audience - indicates the strong following he enjoyed- the hall is full to capacity.
- Zoom out and wide shot reveal the hall

has two levels of seating, and these are all packed- reinforcing Martin Luther King's strong support from Afro-American community and also from white Americans.

- Low-key lighting is effective in suggesting the seriousness of the occasion, establishing an intimacy between Martin Luther King and the audience and enhancing the level of tension.
- Low angle focusing on feet- raises interest and enigma at the start of the marching sequence.
- Long shot captures those on the march filing in single file, suggesting their common goal and purpose.
- Determination of protesters/ demonstrators highlighted as they are framed walking towards the camera.
- Wide-angles frame full shots of demonstrators, reinforcing how they walk with a common goal in mind; wide-angles capture the bridge and river they will attempt to cross, showing the danger they may face as well as the length of the bridge they want to cross.
- Close-ups zoom in on reaction of journalist and white spectators/ the locals.
- MCU frames the troopers, whose stillness contrasts with the marching movement of the protestors; stillness suggests hostility as they line up and form a barrier.
- Camera panning captures wide-shots of a white supremacy sign, the clubs held by the troopers and a bill board saying ironically 'The Selma City Council welcomes you to Selma'.

##### Mise-en-Scène

- Framing captures his followers as he is on the podium- he speaks with authority, standing up, whilst other men are seated.
- The podium has a large cross on the front to enhance the connection between Martin Luther King's politics and his religion/ philosophy of peaceful protest and demonstration.
- During marching sequence the troopers' masks suggest violence and confrontation, whilst the zoom in to the sheriff's badge

indicates that the symbol of authority in *Selma* is against the march.

- Troops on horses indicate the preparations to confront the protestors with force.

### Editing

- Long-takes enable the spectator to be absorbed in Martin Luther King's speech.
- Slow pace complements Martin Luther King's calm and rational delivery of his speech.
- The pace picks up when Martin Luther King becomes passionate and the audience is clapping; the momentum in the room is enhanced through the faster pace of editing.
- Cutaways from Martin Luther King to the audience enable the spectator to gauge the impact of his speech on his audience.
- During the march, the pace of events builds up from a steady pace of the protestors filing up and beginning their journey on the bridge, to a faster pace when the troopers attack the demonstrators, creating chaos, fear and panic.
- Slow build-up creates anticipation and tension whilst the stillness of the troopers at the outset contrasts with the demonstrators walking towards them on the bridge, reinforcing the idea of confrontation and conflict.
- Cutaways from the scene of the march to Martin Luther King viewing events on the television creates tension whilst it shows that the riots were on live national television for all Americans to see, as well as the President.

### Sound

- Diegetic sound of Martin Luther King's speech dominates sequence.
- Sound of the audience clapping and speaking in response to Martin Luther King's contributes to the effectiveness of the sequence, reinforcing the strong support he has.
- Non-diegetic music introduced effectively at the end of this sequence to sustain impact and mood.
- During the march, diegetic sounds of the clubs beating those marching are powerful together with diegetic sounds of those being hurt, creating strong sense of danger, force and violence.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- Martin Luther King's speech represents his approach when leading Afro -

Americans against civil rights injustices; demonstrates his intelligence and vision.

- Representations of the Afro-Caribbean community showing Martin Luther King full support and seeking guidance in protesting for their civil rights and also representations of white Americans in the audience, indicating that Martin Luther King and his civil rights movement enjoyed support from white Americans too.
- Peaceful protestors wanting their rights as American citizens, in this case to vote; people of all ages came out to protest.
- Hostility and confrontational attitude of troopers is strong, representing inflexible and violent approach of the authorities in *Selma*; representation of their unwillingness to enter into any communication and willingness to use force and tear gas on unarmed individuals.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- *Selma* sustains a sense of realism by closely following the events of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and re-creating them. Names, places and events are represented, together with transcripts from Martin Luther King's speeches, to validate the seriousness of the events in history and to narrate them as closely as possible.
- Use of archive footage as seen in the sequence where the demonstrators first attempt to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The violence and brutality on the bridge are represented through the archive footage, indicating that they are real, and also on the television screen (CBS) when Martin Luther King is watching at home.
- The film's recreation of real events is consistent with the director's strong interest in the history of civil rights for Afro-Americans, themes of human rights and the American constitution and legal injustices for Afro-Americans. For example Ava DuVernay's documentary film *13th* (2016) about the high number of Afro-American in USA prisons.
- DuVernay advocates social purpose to films, rejects stereotypes of Afro-Americans in media and advocates their empowerment and representation- *Selma* consistent with this.
- DuVernay founded African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement (AFFRM) to have distribution of films representing African-American experiences.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

### Historical

- *Selma* represents key developments in US history regarding the Black civil rights movement, focusing specifically on the right to vote at local, state and federal level in the early 1960s. This right was granted in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, protecting voting rights for all minorities.
- Within the narrative, there are references to other events in the civil rights struggle which took place during the 1950s, such as segregation in restaurants and schools, with the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama by Rosa Parks. These are mentioned in Martin Luther King's speech in an early sequence.
- The film's release in 2014 is set against the wider historical context of racial tensions and unrest which prevail in the US, in spite of the achievements won by the civil rights movement during the period 1955-1968.
- Racial tension between the police and the Afro-American community and the civil rights of this community within contemporary US society have been represented in other American films, for example: *Mississippi's Burning* (Alan Parker, 1988), *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989) and *Straight Outta Compton* (F. Gary Gray, 2015) with films such as *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) and *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) going back to the period of slavery, the civil war and the movement to abolish slavery.

### Political

- *Selma* represents the challenges facing the political administrations in the 1960s in the face of the civil rights movement- the film centres on Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency and Martin Luther King's attempts to gain support and have legislation passed; President Lyndon B. Johnson is reluctant to devote time to the movement, whilst his predecessor, John F Kennedy was openly supportive.
- Martin Luther King's methods of peaceful protest and demonstration were seen as more favourable by President Lyndon B. Johnson in comparison to the violent means adopted by Malcolm X and his followers (the film mentions that Malcolm X has been assassinated).
- Supporters of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement pointed out that President

Lyndon B. Johnson's administration was sending troops to Vietnam, but it was not supporting its own struggles for rights at home.

- FBI spies on Martin Luther King and his followers, taping their phones and recording their activities, with the president's knowledge- suggesting how the movement's growing support was a perceived threat; President Lyndon B. Johnson in conflict over civil rights with authorities in southern states where historically slavery was begrudgingly abolished, and where racism was stronger than in the north (the theme of *Mississippi's Burning*).
- Campaigns for civil rights continue today through organisations such as Black Lives Matter.

## SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Spectatorship and Ideology

### Starting points

- DuVernay's film offers a reconstruction of historical events around the Civil Rights Movement, representing the ideologies - attitudes, views and behaviours of individuals and groups opposing the movement's goals; these racist and white supremacists included authority figures such as the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Edgar Hoover.
- *Selma* shows individuals and groups opposing these racist ideologies, the clergy from various religious denominations, white liberals, journalists and the media.
- Martin Luther King's ideology was to protest peacefully, a philosophy which was adopted by the Indian independence leader, Mahatma Gandhi - he advocated non-violent means of demonstration and protest as a means of achieving rights.
- Martin Luther King's ideology was also influenced by his Christian outlook, he was a doctor of religion, and this approach contrasted distinctly with Malcolm X and his followers who advocated 'by any means necessary', in other words a belief in using violence for the purpose of their protest for civil rights.
- Martin Luther King's and Malcolm X's ideologies offer differing views of the place of Afro-Americans in US society and become a source of tension and conflict.
- Framing and shot composition contribute to ways in which spectators may align themselves

with civil rights protestors, for example as they march peacefully and unarmed; we sympathise with their predicament in the face of the hostility and violence carried out against them by armed troopers with masks and tear gas - they are vulnerable and defenceless.

- Close-ups and camera angles during Edmund Pettus Bridge sequence - draws spectators in and engages their reactions and emotions, inevitably situating them on the side of the civil rights marchers as they are brutally attacked (diegetic sound enhances our point of view and again aligns us with the protestors).
- We align ourselves with Martin Luther King's point of view, for example when he decides not to cross the bridge and endanger his followers, whilst during his negotiations with Lyndon B. Johnson as President, we can put ourselves in the latter's shoes/ see events from his perspective.
- Consider how active we are as spectators- do we challenge the representation of events or are we passive, accepting the director's point of view? How easy/ difficult is it to resist?
- To what extent can a film like *Selma* encourage diverse responses to the complex and emotional issues at play, such as the deaths of innocent protestors, the murder of young girls, the injustices experienced by all those who attempted to sign their name on the voting register?