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## ‘Don’t wait for permission’: Ava DuVernay as a Black female intellectual and political artist

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### ABSTRACT



Black intellectualism, particularly in the public sphere, tends to be associated with male figures from the academy. This trend risks excluding a broader range of viewpoints and traditions – particularly the contributions of Black women, artists and community organisers whose intellectual praxis has been wrought from experiences outside the academic paradigm. This article argues that filmmaker and activist Ava DuVernay should be recognised as a Black female public intellectual. It demonstrates how DuVernay uses her work to grapple with the racial histories, philosophies and ideologies which have permeated American history and society. An artist-intellectual-activist, DuVernay sits in a historical lineage of Black artists employing visual cultures to interrogate and resist the operation of racism in the United States. Her work centres and explores Black lives, particularly women, rendering Black characters as complex and multifarious – an act of intellectual rebellion against a hegemonic narrative that centres whiteness, a narrative which has long dominated mainstream film. Through intellectual labour adjacent to her filmmaking, DuVernay also works to promote the perspectives of women and people of colour as interventions in the national imaginary. Ava DuVernay’s work and approach demonstrate that a multiplicity of intellectual identities exist beyond the academy.

### KEYWORDS

Ava DuVernay; Black filmmaking; racism; film; visual cultures; art as resistance; Black female intellectual; *Selma*; *When They See Us*; 13<sup>th</sup>

## Introduction

Soon after President Barack Obama left office in January 2017, African American filmmaker Ava DuVernay addressed a crowd of fellow filmmakers at Utah’s Sundance Film Festival. She wanted to share with them words spoken by the Black American author and public intellectual Toni Morrison, which she had transcribed from an old, rediscovered recording (Reelblack 2017). ‘Racism was never the issue’, Morrison had reasoned, ‘power and money always was’. Racism was always a ‘monumental fraud’, designed above all to distract its victims from a focus on their own lives. ‘It may very well be left to artists to grapple with this fact’, said Morrison, ‘for art focuses on . . . the names of people enslaved on ships, and not only the number’ (as quoted by DuVernay, Reelblack). It is significant that DuVernay chose to share

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Morrison's powerful anatomisation of racism the day after Donald Trump was inaugurated as 45th president of the United States – a man known for divisive and race-baiting rhetoric, who was publicly supported by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke (see Domonoske 2016). It is particularly significant that DuVernay chose a festival of cinema, a meeting of fellow filmmakers, to reiterate Morrison's belief that the artist is uniquely placed to confront and expose the political and social purpose of racial bigotry, together with its devastating effects on the lives of human beings – to 'focus on the names . . . not only the number'. DuVernay chose these extracts from Morrison purposefully, adding her own exhortation: 'Maybe it'll inspire you like it inspires me'. Coming just after Trump's inauguration, it was a call to cinematic arms.

In this article I argue that Ava DuVernay embodies the Black artist-intellectual which Morrison alluded to. Furthermore, DuVernay's career demonstrates how a multiplicity of Black intellectual identities and spaces exist beyond the academy. As a filmmaker and activist, DuVernay uses her work to grapple with the racial histories, philosophies and ideologies which have permeated American history and society – but also to expose how these persist, in a granular way, in the present-day lives of Black Americans. Her work, ranging from historical drama (such as *Selma*, 2014) to feature documentary (*13th*, 2016), to mini-series (*When They See Us*, 2019; *Colin in Black & White*, 2021), multi-season drama television series (*Queen Sugar*, 2016 - 2022), and much more besides, seeks to actively bear witness to lived Black experiences. DuVernay's stated aim is to promote the voices of women and people of colour, acting as counterpoint to a film and television industry which has often been quick to erase or misrepresent them. Importantly, her work often explores the complexities of those lives lived at the intersections of competing American narratives of gender, class, politics and economics. DuVernay works in a mainstream arena, in the commercial medium of film – a choice in itself that challenges and resists traditional ideas about the value of low versus high art. Further, overturning conventional notions of intellectual hierarchies, DuVernay's engagement is not restricted to the anointed halls of academia, but is readily accessible to the wider population. Her work can be viewed with a subscription to an online streaming platform, a multiplex cinema ticket, a screen talk before a film showing, or from a glance at Twitter – where she is a highly engaged political activist. An artist who challenges racial, patriarchal and class norms, she thus also challenges notions about who gets to be an authoritative intellectual voice – as well as where and by whom that voice can be accessed.

Scholar Patricia Hill Collins has observed that Black intellectuals have often come to sit in gendered spheres of influence; with the exception of Toni Morrison, the limited space allotted to Black intellectual thought in the mass media is mostly occupied by Black men (Collins 2005, 26). DuVernay turns that notion on its head, claiming the public intellectual space for herself as both a woman and an artist – through her filmmaking art, and her activist entrepreneurship. A mantra of 'don't wait for permission', an approach she has frequently discussed publicly (see @Ava, 19 January 2017), speaks to a radical attitude in the face of a film industry reluctant to support women and people of colour.<sup>1</sup> Early in her filmmaking career, DuVernay responded to such barriers by setting up her own film distribution network, the African American Forward Releasing Movement – the name, in effect, a statement of intent. As she explained to film scholar Michael Martin, through an existing career as a successful film publicist, she already knew 'what

doors not to knock [on]’ in Hollywood, and where she would be met with ‘preconceived notions of Black people, or women, or what [a] film . . . should be’. Instead she decided to ‘carve out another place’ (Martin 2014, 62).

It is a radical attitude which permeates several strands of DuVernay’s identity as a Black female intellectual. She has created a modern, democratised, highly accessible version of the public intellectual – one in line with earlier Black female figures, whose status as intellectuals has often been overlooked. She further weaves into her work the very tropes and mechanisms of resistance which have acted as a bedrock for Black intellectual thought in America – such as ‘bearing witness’, the use of historical and cultural memory, and the mechanism of storytelling. That she should do this through the medium of commercial film, speaks to her commitment to fully engage with the public, at the same time as upending traditional parameters of what constitutes intellectual space.

### ***“Public intellectual” – an evolving definition?***

The term intellectual is usually, as scholar Ula Taylor has observed, associated with thinkers located in the academy (Taylor 2006). As noted above, Collins has further observed that in the area of Black intellectualism, male rather than female voices have tended to dominate the category of public intellectual. Writing in the mid-2000s, Collins noted that such figures as Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates Jr. had even become ‘academic superstars’ (Collins 2005, 26). While the term public intellectual is occasionally applied to those outside the academic pool, to figures such as James Baldwin, and more recently journalists like Ta-Nehisi Coates, a persistent tendency to privilege male voices as intellectuals is problematic, particularly in the public arena. As Rebecca Fraser and Martyn Griffin have highlighted, the idea of Black intellectualism itself has come to be conceived of in an androcentric, or male-centred, frame (Fraser and Griffin 2020, 1006). By comparison, far less attention is paid to Black female thinkers in public discourse, historically and contemporaneously. While some women, for example Toni Morrison, and to a degree Maya Angelou, joined the ranks of prominent Black intellectual figures, others – such as Frances Harper, Amy Jacques Garvey, and Merze Tate, for example – are far less well known in the public sphere. Such androcentric and often academy-centred tendencies risk excluding other intellectual viewpoints, and missing those who draw from a wider range of traditions and experiences. Those marginalised or missing voices include Black women, artists, and community organisers, whose intellectual praxis – their analysis of the politics, history and power structures which shape Black lives – has been wrought from their experiences outside the academic paradigm.

Despite the limited view of what constitutes an intellectual, visual and other artists in the Black community have long used a multitude of artforms to express and interrogate the meaning, history and everyday experience of Black Americans (see Painter 2006). The artists of the Harlem Renaissance and broader New Negro Movement, for instance, were making a conscious public-political intervention when they celebrated Black identity in their literary, visual and musical works – combatting a contemporary cultural and political assault at the hands of a White America eager to denigrate and diminish Blackness (see Du Bois 1926; Lewis 1997; Carroll 2007). Contemporary or historical failure to recognise artists’ contributions as intellectual work risks excluding those who use alternative tools to academic form and language to explore intellectual ideas. It also

ignores the capacity of these voices to provoke debate, and communicate with a wider public who seek engagement with intellectual ideas outside the more privileged channels. As a woman, and an artist working in visual cultures for a mass audience, engaging with politics, history, and African American representation in the popular film form, DuVernay is an example of such ‘non-academic’ theorists – and should be taken seriously as a public intellectual outside the traditional paradigm.

Scholar Ula Taylor also expresses disquiet about the dangers of artificially constructed hierarchies by questioning why ‘street scholars’ – community-based activists who offer theories based on personal experience and observation – are often dismissed by academics. Yet such individuals are frequently at ‘the forefront of giving voice to the complicated issues of their day . . . [and have] a sophisticated level of political consciousness’ (Taylor 2006, 154). She identifies them as ‘organic intellectuals’ in the Gramscian tradition – those arising outside the professions usually accredited as society’s thinkers, who react to ‘the political energies, pressures, and contradictions of marginalized or oppressed groups’ (Strine 1991, 195). Taylor makes a compelling case for why the street scholar-intellectual praxis should not be overlooked, noting ‘their ideas and expressions . . . not only move us, but move us to act’ (Taylor 2006, 154). The same argument works perfectly to describe the work of filmmaker and activist Ava DuVernay.

### **Activist-intellectual-filmmaker**

Ava DuVernay’s artistic praxis is to ‘move us to act’ in Taylor’s terms. Her artistic output joins in a mobius strip with her activist praxis, such that her films, her ‘moving pictures’, are at the same time *moving* pictures for an audience. Her choice of Toni Morrison’s words at Sundance, and her appeal to fellow filmmakers to be inspired by them, point to her own intentions as a filmmaker within the same intellectual tradition as Morrison – echoing the venerated intellectual’s stated approach: ‘I do not make a distinction between politics and art’ (Morrison et al. 1975). Morrison emphasised the importance of art not as a theoretical abstraction, but an expression inherently connected to lived experiences, and accessible by those outside elite hierarchies – stating plainly: ‘I’m not interested in art that is not in the world’ (Nance 2008).

Ava DuVernay has described her approach in very much the same terms. In a *New York Times* interview discussing cultural hierarchies within the film industry, with cinema [theatrical] release deemed the pinnacle, DuVernay elaborates on her embrace of online streaming distribution: ‘I’m telling these stories to reach a mass audience’, she said, ‘nothing else matters’ (Buchanan 2019). Her response illustrates a methodology which challenges accepted hierarchies, and eschews traditional precepts of behaviour – taking a more radical and intellectual approach, one rooted in socio-political awareness:

As filmmakers, what is our goal with film? For me, it’s telling a story meant to be seen by many people, not just the ones who have a movie theater near them and can afford to go . . . You couldn’t watch *Straight Outta Compton* in Compton, because there’s no movie theater there.

I'm trying to urge people to realize that their privilege-preferred presentation of cinema is outdated . . . The more that you talk about how to uphold these old systems and methods of presentation that were already excluding so many different types of people . . . the more you will lose when it all slips away. (Ibid.)

DuVernay also mirrors Morrison's activist approach in promoting stories directly from marginalised communities. As a publisher in the late 1960s, Morrison set out to publish and promote Black writers and stories about African American experiences. She championed such writers as Toni Cade Bambara, and persuaded Angela Davis to write an autobiography. Morrison became a literary artist in her own right, writing for and about Black lives, as well as a respected public intellectual. DuVernay also champions the voices of marginalised communities – filmmakers of colour and women – those who struggle to get their work seen by the public due to Hollywood's dominance in film financing and the distribution system. Prompted by her own difficulties in getting her first feature film (*I Will Follow*, 2010) made and shown, as noted earlier DuVernay set up an independent distribution collective (AAFRM) to promote filmmaking from women and people of colour. Through this initiative she promotes art which represents the experiences, history, and struggles – but nevertheless the agency – of underrepresented communities.

AAFRM has now grown into a much larger network and collective (now named ARRAY) and DuVernay has added several sister organisations, as well as creating a dedicated site in Los Angeles (ARRAY Creative Campus), including a cinema. All of this began with the stated aim of developing and promoting the work of these same, underrepresented constituencies of filmmaker (see Faughnder 2019). Another addition is the non-profit organisation ARRAY Alliance, which sets out to support filmmakers amidst an overall purpose to 'positively impact[. . .] racial and social justice around the globe'. Its mission statement also reflects a desire to foster a recalibration of the white, patriarchal domination of the film industry, as it details the organisation's aims to encourage a sense of community, and 'provid[e] women of all kinds and people of color with the resources needed to ensure their diverse perspectives have a platform for change' (ARRAY n.d.).

In this practical and strategic response to the barriers facing marginalised constituencies in Hollywood, DuVernay is engaging in what Minkah Makalani identifies as 'organizational work as a strain of intellectual labor' (Makalani 2019, 145). Makalani refers to Black women in the Harlem Renaissance, creating and organising the social spaces which enabled intellectual debate and activism to thrive. DuVernay's ARRAY and associated entities are also intellectual labour which enables spaces for those voices frequently overlooked by the established mainstream film industry; or whose stories – when they are told – are often imagined by, or from the perspective of, those outside of their own communities. ARRAY's promotion of such voices challenges a cultural distortion or erasure of marginalised communities, often propagated through more traditional Hollywood film product. In this way her initiatives with ARRAY and its sister organisations show her to be a thinker whose intellectual labour provides what Joy James calls ' "models and strategies for resistance" by improvising "integrative analyses of race, gender . . . and class" ' (as cited in Makalani 2019, 145). DuVernay's work and public commentary further suggest that she sees the cultural creations of film as nourishment for marginalised communities. It is an echo of scholar Barbara Christian's argument about the vital importance of literary works to those accustomed to having to express their opinion in 'muted tones' (Christian 1987, 53). Christian further argued that

People of color have always theorized . . . And I am inclined to say that our theorizing . . . is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (Ibid. 52)

DuVernay's work points directly to the same argument about the film form. The ARRAY concept promotes the potential for film as a meaning-making and interpretative medium, as intellectual resource alongside a host of other art forms, revealing a strategy designed to both empower and promote a reflexive response within communities, through the film medium:

ARRAY Alliance envisions a world where the rich cultures, diverse viewpoints, and unique perspectives of the communities in which we live are fully represented through film . . . We also cultivate audience among communities starved of inclusive images on screen. All people deserve to see their experiences reflected in cinema with authenticity, and we cultivate and rally audiences by crafting dynamic theatrical experiences based on high-impactful community building models.

(ARRAY 'Our Vision' n.d.).

DuVernay's praxis here is reflective of many Black female intellectuals throughout history, women who were both artists and activists. Some were writers – creating stories, novels, poems which exposed the experiences of slavery from the perspectives of the enslaved; or reflecting the interior and exterior effects of experiencing anti-Black racism. But they were also activists, stepping up to public-speaking roles, organising, travelling the country to lecture and write abolitionist or later activist material. The nineteenth-century figure Frances Harper, for instance, was a successful writer, but also suffragist and abolitionist, who helped found the National Association of Coloured Women (see Boyd 1994). The celebrated writer and performer Maya Angelou was deeply engaged with the Civil Rights Movement, raising money to support campaigning and also becoming a regional director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (see Bloom 2009). DuVernay sits in a lineage with these and many other Black women, names lost to history, who have employed multiple approaches to expose and resist racism in the United States (see Fraser and Griffin 2020). Her modern-day public lectern is the social media network Twitter, where she is active in highlighting social and racial injustice in America, as well as encouraging the celebration of African American cultural and historical identity. In response to the murder of unarmed African American man George Floyd, by white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020, DuVernay also set up the non-profit organisation LEAP – Law Enforcement Accountability Project – to help activists draw attention to police crimes against Black people, and highlight the officers involved (see *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* 2020, T.C: 5:01–6:55; LEAP n.d.). Illustrative of her positioning at the intersection of artist-intellectual-activist, LEAP funds artist-activists to make short films and a host of other creative arts forms, a mechanism which literalises the concept of art as resistance. And it has a farther-reaching, activist-intellectual aim, to alter wider society's dynamic with relation to law enforcement: to 'disrupt the code of silence that exists around police aggression and misconduct' (LEAP, n.d.).



### ***The political use and abuse of visual cultures***

It is in DuVernay's artistry as a filmmaker, however, where she explores the relationship between history, identity, politics, racism, and social relations, that her intellectual approach is most clearly on show. Her work as a filmmaker is located squarely in a long established tradition of the visual arts as resistance, as well as a mechanism for evoking Black historical and cultural memory. Film is joined by painting, sculpture, quilting, murals, graphic novels and photographic images as art forms bearing witness to African American experiences; as well as providing meditations on the meanings of those experiences for Black history, and the present-day realities of life for people of colour in America (see Painter 2006). For a community whose ancestral past was erased, visual cultures serve to excavate that past, and more radically, insist on its examination and its relevance to the present.

At the same time, Black visual arts often contest narratives of inferiority imposed on Black Americans from outside. To understand the importance of DuVernay's and other Black filmmakers' attention to representation, it is vital to consider the history and legacy of how Black identity has been fashioned in American culture through a white gaze. In the context of often violent white supremacy, and a political and social system riddled with racial inequality, the stakes of visual representation are extremely high. Black Americans continue to live in a dominant culture where racial constructions are based principally on visual phenotypes, and where an overarching ideology of superior whiteness has led to malignant misrepresentations of Blackness permeating American culture. Visual cultures have been at the forefront of that project.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the pervasive use of degrading and stereotyped images of African Americans incorporated into cultural artefacts, everything from ashtrays, to toys, to sports equipment (Morris 2011). Images were similarly widespread in advertising and other visual media. Susan Booker Morris details how Black people were often depicted in subservient roles – porters, butlers or 'mammy' figures, for example; and often with exaggerated features, sometimes grotesquely. Such images promulgated racial constructions of Black identity which were either docile or brutish, depending on the white supremacist anxiety of the day (Ibid.). So familiar across everyday life, such imagery worked as 'props that helped reinforce . . . racist ideology' (Goings 1994, cited in Morris 2011, 78).

Photography's potential as a political tool and instrument of white supremacist ideology was clear from its earliest days (see Fox-Amato 2019). The celebrated nineteenth-century scientist Louis Agassiz, for example, used daguerreotypes of enslaved people to support pseudoscientific theories of the day, arguing that Black people were a separate and inferior species to whites (Wallis 1996, 102). The commissioned images (known as the Zealy daguerreotypes) showed a number of men and women, composed as if they were scientific specimens; as scholar Sarah Elizabeth Lewis describes, they are "bare-chested and bare-breasted, half stripped, insistently revealed . . . an early example of the transformation of pictures into data weaponised to support the societal boundaries in American life' (Aggarwal-Schifellite 2020). Alongside other images made by ethnologists, these proved influential in wider society, employed as purported scientific evidence for maintaining the slavery system; and more generally diminishing the humanity and rights of Black Americans (Wallis 1996; Barbash, Rogers, and Willis 2020).



The film medium, one of the most popular cultural products of the first half of the twentieth century, turbo-charged the propagation of derogatory images – and their socio-political purpose – such that they became what cultural critic Stuart Hall calls ‘a form of ritualized degradation’, reinforcing a host of negative and damaging characterisations of Blackness which persist in American culture (cited in Morris 2011, 78; see Hall 1997). D W Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* illustrates Hall’s observation about the dangers of such media representation. The infamously racist film, seen by millions across the United States, spun a revisionist tale of the Civil War and Reconstruction. It heroised Southern whites and, in the service of the ‘Lost Cause’ narrative, depicted Black Americans either as contented slaves or villainous and cunning (see Stokes 2007). Characterised as a menace to the national (white) body politic in the film, it also promoted the common racist trope of Black men as a threat to white womanhood. *Birth* romanticised and glorified the Ku Klux Klan, and the film is thought to have played a key part in the Klan’s resurgence in popularity and membership in the early 1920s (Ibid. 231–235). As Manthia Diawara points out, the film was also hugely influential for the growing [white] film industry, establishing the ‘grammar book of Hollywood’s representation of Black manhood and womanhood’. Whites are firmly at the centre, visually and organisationally; with Black characters as marginal props, often in denigrating characterisations (Diawara 1993, 3).

African Americans were acutely attuned to the dangers - and possibilities - of photographic and moving images, and their potential for mobilising the public, from the inception of the technology (see Wallace et al 2012). In 1854, in response to Agassiz’ and other ethnologists racial imagery, the leading abolitionist Frederick Douglass publicly lectured on the political and imperialist ideology underpinning some contemporary scientists’ use of images of Black people (Douglass 1854; Wallis 1996). Douglass was himself a huge enthusiast for photography and its potential, and he used the dissemination of his own photographic image, visually arranged to emphasise respectability and dignity, to counter Northern racism (Fox-Amato 2019; Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier 2015). Abolitionists also used other photographic images, showing the marks of extreme violence visible on the bodies of escaped slaves, in campaigns to refute Southern claims that slavery was a benign practice (Fox-Amato 2019). In the mid-1800s, campaigner on race and women’s rights Sojourner Truth used the popular photographic calling card, ‘carte de visite’, to amplify her public image as a campaigner. Susan Ware describes how Truth sold such images widely to support her activism, and ‘seized the possibilities of this new medium to position herself as one of the most widely recognized African American icons of her time’ (Ware 2019, 30). Ware also notes that the visual language of her image was ordered to emphasise strength and a middle-class respectability, at a time when suffragists were lampooned in the press. Notably Truth wrested control of the intellectual property of her image from the photographers, becoming the only person to copyright her own image on the hugely popular cartes de visite medium, and thus control their distribution (Ibid. 32). In essence, Sojourner Truth’s embrace of visual culture of the photographic image was an ancestral echo of DuVernay’s both practical and artistic approach to wresting control of the Black moving image, in modern day film production.

DuVernay’s forerunners in the film industry, some of the early Black filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux, were equally attuned to the new medium’s potential for reframing tropes of Black identity. Several Black directors created production companies in the

early twentieth century, producing films for Black audiences, mostly in Black-only spaces. Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (Micheaux 1920) provided the most scathing retort to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, undercutting its white supremacist propaganda by, for example, depicting craven violence from whites – communities eager to lynch African Americans, even children (see Gaines 2016). Countering the central, maniacal claim about Black sexuality presented in Griffith's *Birth*, Micheaux's film instead highlights the vulnerability of Black women to sexual violence in a white supremacist society, as he features the opportunistic attempted rape of a Black woman by a white man (see Robinson 2007).

### ***Ava DuVernay – visual cultures of resistance as intellectual praxis***

Ava DuVernay's work taps into these processes of resistance both through her intellectual labour within the industry, and the discourse of her films. Reflecting her organisational work, her film art is a rebuttal to an industry and wider cultural and political hegemony which often distorts, marginalises or erases the contributions of women and people of colour. At the same time, her work often sets up a dialogue between the past and present-day America, exposing the historical continuum of racism in the US, and encouraging a wider meditation on the concerns of today's audiences.

This is best illustrated by some brief spotlights on key intellectual analyses she makes across her work. *Selma* for example deals directly with the legal apartheid of the Jim Crow system, the demand for civil rights, and the violence underpinning racial injustice. It was released in 2014, just as a resurgent civil rights movement Black Lives Matter was mushrooming, protesting the multiple deaths of unarmed Black citizens at the hands of the authorities (see Taylor 2016). *Selma* specifically focuses on the campaign for African American enfranchisement, resulting in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The protections of this very Act were being eroded in 2013 by the Supreme Court, just as DuVernay was working on the *Selma* script (Suskind 2014). Her documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* examines the iniquities of the criminal justice system, weaved into a historical primer on how the system became the behemoth 'prison-industrial complex' of today, disproportionately incarcerating people of colour. DuVernay also provides compelling intellectual commentary on how Blackness itself came to be associated with criminality.

Her mini-series which followed, *When They See Us*, is ostensibly a miscarriage of justice drama. But it builds on the factual underpinning of *13<sup>th</sup>* to argue that systemic racial prejudice – in society as well as exercised through the levers of the state – operates to demonise African Americans, particularly young Black men. Importantly, it also highlights the devastating effects on families and communities outside the prison walls.

DuVernay is taking her place in a lineage of Black artists using visual cultures of resistance to provide intellectual commentary on the nature of being Black in America. Through drama, documentary, and even short-form commercial work, she invites the viewer into an alternative space to the academy where lived Black experiences are not only represented but prioritised, and where existing hegemonic narratives are interrogated.

DuVernay's full body of work is too large to examine in this article. But to illustrate her artist-intellectual praxis in detail, the remainder of this piece will take a deep delve into selected scenes from DuVernay's Oscar-nominated film *Selma*. This will also serve to

highlight connections with some of her other works which speak to wider intellectual discussions within Black activism, and historical activist-intellectual practice in the African American community.

*Selma*'s centrepiece is the historic civil rights march by a silent, dignified crowd of Black protesters attempting to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Alabama, on their way to the state capital Montgomery. On crossing, they are viciously repelled by state troopers in an orchestrated attack – what soon became known as Bloody Sunday. The film depicts the terrifying violence inflicted on them by these agents of the state – as well as the media coverage of the event, which broadcast the images across the United States. Earlier the audience witnessed other instances of violence towards Black Americans protesting their rights. We also saw a reporter question the film's central character, Dr Martin Luther King, on the marching strategy. 'We are here using our very bodies in protest', Dr King replies, 'to say to those who would deny us, that we will no longer let them use their billy clubs in dark corners and halls of power. We make them do it in the glaring light of day' (*Selma*, T.C: 28:20 – 28:46).

DuVernay draws attention here to the use of Black bodies by African Americans as sites – and sights – of resistance. In this moment she taps into a long thread of African American historical memory; back to enslaved ancestors who, robbed of weaponry to defend themselves, committed suicide (*took* their own lives), rather than submit to violence and catastrophic loss of their autonomy. The Black body in *Selma* is at once a historical site of resistance – for example, the body of murdered activist Jimmie Lee Jackson, the collective of peaceful protestors marching in defiance of the threat of violence. But DuVernay also emphasises them as 'sights' of resistance. In the film President Lyndon Johnson complains that 'pictures' of protestors being beaten 'are going round the world' (1:21:03 – 1:22:05); Dr King explains to the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that the only way to focus the President on their cause is 'by being on the front page of the national press every morning, and by being on the TV news every night' (30:57 – 31:13). It is noticeable that DuVernay also includes several sequences of TV sets beaming footage of *Selma*'s Bloody Sunday march into venues across the nation – into both private and public spaces, *moving pictures* which prompt viewers to travel to Selma and join the protests.

DuVernay repeatedly emphasises the importance of photographic and video images, and their media dissemination, as part of the armoury of Black activism. She returns to the theme in, for example, *13<sup>th</sup>*, where she also meditates on contemporary questions over the use of such images. As she draws the documentary towards conclusion, she features a long sequence on how visual and media technologies are effective and historic tools for civil rights activism (*13<sup>th</sup>* T.C: 1:28:34 – 1:32:55). The sequence becomes a meditation on the use of imagery in Black civil rights activism throughout history. As a trope, it also directly speaks to the work of earlier Black activists throughout the long civil rights movement, using such images to bear witness to vicious white oppression of African Americans, and provoke political action to correct it.

The shocking killing of Emmett Till is one prominent example that she touches on in this sequence. When the 14 year-old boy was tortured and murdered in a racist attack in 1955, his mother Mamie Till-Mobley insisted he be waked in an open casket, and further allowed the African American press to photograph him (see Gorn 2018). She wanted to direct the world's gaze onto her son, so that it would bear collective witness to his

brutalised body. The murder had provoked Mamie Till-Mobley into becoming an activist, who acutely understood that Emmett's murder was also a proxy attack on the state of Blackness, reinforcing the vulnerability of African Americans at all times to racist assault, underwritten by a white supremacist, terrorist ideology (see Buchanan 2015). Her instinct to focus the public gaze on her son's broken body, juxtaposed with earlier photographs of a smiling Emmett placed on the casket lid, makes Till-Mobley's grief-stricken activism one of the most profound examples of visual cultures of resistance in African American history. It reclaimed, for Emmett, the agency of his own body, affording him in death the power to protest the violence and iniquities of a white supremacist system, which led white men in Mississippi to feel it was their right to murder a Black child for a fleeting alleged interaction with a white woman.

Ava DuVernay's 2019 miniseries *When They See Us* concerns a group of young Black teenagers in New York, wrongly convicted over the brutal attack on a jogger in Central Park, Trisha Meili, in 1989. The title taps directly in to Till-Mobley's activist intentions with the visual tableau of her son's open casket and photos of the young Emmett. Specifically, the title provides a figurative arrow, pointing to the importance and effects of visual cultures for and on African Americans. Through her acts of filmmaking DuVernay is herself using moving image to expose racism and systemic injustice. The subjects of her miniseries were dubbed the 'Central Park Five' in 1989, and widely known as such ever since. However DuVernay resisted that name for her series' title, describing how she wanted to 'get . . . underneath this moniker that'd been given to them by the police, by the prosecutors, by the press . . . To humanise these boys, ask you to see THEM – and not just the label they'd been given' (CBS This Morning 2019). Titling the work *When They See Us* thus draws attention both to visual depictions of people of colour, and more generally to the white gaze – it's an exhortation to the audience to interrogate the racial assumptions of white hegemony which assigns a criminality to Blackness, assumptions activated by the mere visual cue of Black people. *When They See Us* is thus an intellectual meditation, arguing that the case depicted demonstrates the figurative framing of Blackness in America – examining how the contemporary reportage, and circling combination of language and visual images, together depict the boys as guilty in the minds of the public. The series asks us to examine how easily the boys could slot into a narrative as the perpetrators in this case, and at the same time how they could be contained/circumscribed as dangerous racialised archetypes within the parameters drawn by larger white society.

The film and cultural studies scholar Mia Mask notes that 'cinema [is] a powerful political tool and artistic site of cultural production shaping the national imaginary' (Mask 2012, 5). The effect of the frequent denigration or erasure of Black identity throughout film history, has thus had profound implications for African Americans in society – supplementing efforts by wider hegemonic forces to maintain a hierarchy of power relations which privileges whiteness. DuVernay recognises the importance of film art as a tool to resist such an imposed structure. For artists who are women and/or people of colour, 'our art [is] our weapon', she explains (Essence 2017). To that end she draws Black characterisations that reflect the complexity of Black lives, emancipating African American representation from its imprisonment in what Ed Guerrero calls 'an ideological web of myths, stereotypes, and caricatures' (Guerrero 1993, 9). As she alters the normative Hollywood dynamic by positioning Black lives centrally in the narrative, it is

an intellectual act of rebellion which challenges the pervasive lingua franca of mainstream film – and by extension the much larger, established political and social paradigm in America, which is often reinforced by the dominant film industry output.

DuVernay's films further interrogate American politics, society and history from an African American perspective. Her account of *Selma*'s evolution offers a useful example. DuVernay describes overhauling the existing filmscript (inherited when she accepted the project), and shifting the focus away from it being a struggle between two men – Dr King and President Lyndon Johnson – with the Selma campaign as more of a backdrop. Instead, she wanted to centre the narrative on King and the collegiate nature of the Civil Rights Movement, along with celebrating and historicising the Selma campaign.<sup>2</sup> Johnson remains an important, but ultimately secondary, figure. The Black civil rights struggle, Black history and experience, claim the centre, and the narrative circles outwards from there. *Selma* also tackles the misappropriation of African American history by a white political hegemony. DuVernay focuses less on King's famous ideology of non-violence, than on his searing indictment of racial injustice and the entire system which supports it. She thereby reclaims King as a radical figure, wrenching his memory from the co-option by conservative and right-wing political forces (Jackson 2013; Younge 2018).

In one scene Dr King, played by David Oyelowo, presides over the funeral of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a civil rights activist we earlier witnessed being killed by a state trooper. As *Selma* was not granted the rights to use King's speeches, these were written or rewritten, for the film (Fleming 2015). The scene emphasises a scathing political and radical side to King and his activism, something today's audiences are unaccustomed to connect with a figure who has been popularised worldwide for his harmonious vision of equality (Cone 1994, 27). DuVernay shows King using the eulogy to interpret the activist's death in terms of the overarching social and political narrative of the struggle for Black civil rights. He aligns Jackson's death in a triumvirate with Malcolm X and President Kennedy, both recently assassinated. From a pastor, the symbolic use of a trio here connects the killings to the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity, and to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, as King emphasises the martyrdom and righteousness of these men who, King implies, have been killed – sacrificed – for the righteousness of the civil rights cause. Aligning leaders and activists of varying public statures also emphasises a non-hierarchical reverence for the sacrifices these men have made – and implies the same goes for all civil rights activists. The speech further suggests the work of activism is everyone's responsibility – ordinary citizens alongside figureheads. Further, just as we can all participate in activism, those who terrorise Black people are underpinned by all those who prop up a racist system – as well as those who stand by, too cowardly or indifferent to stop it. King's oratory at the funeral makes this clear [Oyelowo's EMPHASIS]:

Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?

EVERY white lawman who abuses the law to terrorize.

EVERY white politician who feeds on prejudice and hatred.

EVERY white preacher, who preaches the Bible and stays silent before his white congregation.

Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?

EVERY negro man and woman who stands by without joining this fight, as their brothers and sisters are humiliated, brutalized, and ripped from this earth.

*Selma*, T.C: 53:07 - 53:56

This is a fearlessly radical King. The church scene reminds the audience of a law court, with King a prosecutor giving an opening speech. Aided by Oyelowo's mesmerising performance, the speech compels today's viewer to join the scene's congregation in confronting their role in perpetuating or dismantling racism, a system identified by this religious setting as a moral abomination. DuVernay also highlights King's condemnation of the moral bankruptcy and hypocrisy of politicians committing to wars abroad to defend principles of freedom, without first addressing the violent oppression of people of colour in the "Land of the Free". Oyelowo's emphasis here stresses an unwavering, demanding King:

We will NOT let your sacrifice pass in vain, dear brother.

WE WILL NOT LET IT GO.

We will FINISH what you were after.

We will GET what you were denied.

We WILL VOTE.

We will PUT these men out of office. We will TAKE their power.

...

We're gonna DEMAND to see the president and I'm gonna tell him – that Jimmie was MURDERED BY AN ADMINISTRATION, that spends MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, every day, to sacrifice life in the name of liberty in VIETNAM. Yet lacks the moral will and the moral COURAGE, to defend the lives of its own people – here, in America.

...

We will not let it go - and if he does not act, WE will act. We WILL ACT.

*Selma*, T.C: 54:48 - 55:47

These sequences illustrate DuVernay's process in weaving an intellectual argument into the audio-visual text of the film. She shows King calling out the deeply embedded structures in America which prevent racial progress, as well as pointing to the dangers of national myth-making which promote American exceptionalism. The scene is shot so that King is often speaking directly to us, the audience – an extension of the congregation, who watch him at work, often with the camera positioned looking upward towards the civil rights leader, almost as if we were right in front of him. These are political and social exhortations about the moral responsibility of society, the intertwining of the personal and the collective – specifically the duty to examine one's conscience, and take action for the public good. The scene also emphasises the audience's responsibility – on screen and off – to interrogate received national identity narratives, and question how political frameworks underwrite violence against African Americans. DuVernay's decision to include King referring to wider global politics (such as the Vietnam War), also

points to the international brotherhood of Black resistance to white, Western and colonialist oppression across the globe – something that has also been an important part of the African American resistance movement (see Grant 2017).

This radical King is established in *Selma* from the start, as is the radical nature of non-violence as practised by the civil rights activists. In the first sermon DuVernay shows King give, he makes clear that their movement is aggressive and unrelenting, while Oyelowo's electrifying delivery is infectiously inspirational for the audience. Evoking the spirits of the children killed in the notorious 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, 18 months earlier, the shocking event DuVernay dramatises towards the start of the film, King declares that their spirits urge all people to take action:

They say to us, that the local white leadership USE their power, to keep us AWAY from the ballot box – and keep us VOICELESS.

As long as I am unable to exercise my constitutional right to vote, I do not have command of my own life . . .

...

THOSE that have gone before us say – NO MORE!

*[Audience replies]:* NO MORE !

...

That means PROTEST, that means MARCH, that means Disturb the PEACE, that means JAIL, that means RISK – and that is HARD!

We will not wait any longer – GIVE US THE VOTE!

*[Audience replies]:* GIVE US THE VOTE!

We're not asking, we're demanding – GIVE US THE VOTE!

*Selma*, T.C: 27:10 – 28:19

As we switch to a long shot from the back of the church while the buoyed congregation claps, as if to mirror the viewpoint of someone observing the scene DuVernay superimposes a surveillance report of the event over the centre of the screen, reading: 'King and the SCLC incite local Negroes in Selma. Approximately 700 present. 06:22 p.m. LOGGED'. This is a civil rights leader, the surveillance suggests, who deeply alarmed the state (see Theoharis 1993). Indeed the state was deeply alarmed by the spectacle of Black people demanding their civil rights – something which resonates with present-day audiences watching the film. Given the FBI's attention on the civil rights leader and wider movement, the visual device also emphasises that the common 'bad apples' narrative about racism in America, and the suggestion that hysterical racism was confined to backward Southern States, is also a myth.

For decades the conservative establishment in the US has appropriated King's voice, selectively quoting him to suggest that racism, and the response to racism, is a problem of individuals, rather than a systemic issue and responsibility (see Jackson 2013). These commentaries have focused on the non-violence of the campaign King headed, using it as a convenient soundbite, and passing over the radical civil disobedience and far-reaching



condemnation of American society's tolerance of racism and inequality, which were an integral part of King's activism. Whether it be King's reference to his dream of people being judged on the content of their character rather than their skin colour, used by President Ronald Reagan to resist affirmative action initiatives in 1985; or commentators in 2014, evoking King's name to rebuke demonstrators in Ferguson protesting the death of Michael Brown, King has been reinvented and sanitised as the non-threatening, acceptable face of Black revolt (Blake 2013; Lind 2014; Younge 2018).

*Selma* is thus in conversation directly with its present-day audience. Its premiere in 2014 came at the same time that the Black Lives Matter protest movement was gathering pace across the country, demanding political action in response to the killing of unarmed African Americans by law enforcement, as well as an end to the racial inequalities of the criminal justice system, and systemic racism more widely. The film emphasises the powerful nature of non-violent protest, as well as the courage and determination of previous generations of African American protestors. Yet it also illustrates that activism can be a fractured endeavour, which needs to weather disagreements over strategy, as well as generational and other conflicts. In DuVernay's film, when King and his companions arrive in Selma, they are met with wariness by the local branch of the SNCC, the youth-orientated campaign organisation, who are sceptical about King's strategy of marching, and 'drama' in front of the media. Drama here refers to the violent response of the police and other state agencies towards peaceful African American protestors, which King and the movement's other leaders hope will be recorded by news outlets, and disseminated across the nation. DuVernay shows this was a key lever for King and the non-violent movement he led, and King persuasively argues that it is a potent and effective strategy. 'What we do is NEGOTIATE, DEMONSTRATE, RESIST', he tells the SNCC, and goes on to argue that African Americans marching in the public arena is a purposeful exercise of agency, with effects way beyond the local arena where a demonstration is held. This strategic tussle between activist groups, featured several times in the film, is highly resonant with generational arguments that have also occurred between constituencies of activists under the Black Lives Matter banner, particularly emanating from the 2014 protests in Ferguson (Taylor 2016). DuVernay's film outlines the messy realpolitik of the struggle for justice and equal rights. However, while their different viewpoints remain somewhat unresolved, the students join the march. The message is clear: *Selma* demonstrates that activists coming together makes them a far more effective force united, than divided.

## Conclusion

At a screen talk promoting her mini-series *When They See Us*, Ava DuVernay was asked how she had decided on the dramatic structure for such a wealth of historical material, spanning 25 years. She noted there was more than one way to tell the story – it could have been shot as a 'whodunnit' true crime drama, for example. But she found her framework when she 'centred the story and everything I did around the boys' voices: giving voice to their experience, their family, their emotions, their dreams – their youth ripped from them'. From there, she said, she blended in what she'd learned from making her documentary *13<sup>th</sup>*, structuring the story into four parts to elucidate different aspects of the criminal justice system – including how its effects radiate outwards, temporally,

emotionally, and geographically to affect whole communities. DuVernay also wanted audiences to be confronted with the fact that while their lives may sit outside the criminal justice system, they are still implicated in it – explaining her intention to show that: ‘we’re all ensnared within’ the overall system, ‘because our taxpayer dollars go toward making all this happen’. Further, while many of her works make compelling arguments for how racism skews the operation of justice in America, at a more micro level DuVernay is also keen for the audience to understand “police interaction, police aggression – how it feels to be a black or brown person and be approached by the police’ (Film at Lincoln Center 2019, T.C: 2:01 – 4:45).

With these comments, DuVernay illustrates how her work exactly fulfils Toni Morrison’s suggestion, outlined at the beginning of this article, that artists are the ones best placed to elucidate how racism serves the bidding of overarching structures of power and money in America. DuVernay’s focus on ‘the names . . . not only the number’ in *When They See Us* and elsewhere blends her intellectual approach with her skills as a filmmaker. Through the stories she tells about the boys’ and their families’ experiences, she maps how, once an individual is brought into the criminal justice system, narratives of race, class and gender can intersect to keep them there. The audience is invited to interrogate the hegemonic forces which profit from maintaining people within a racialised status quo; while at the same time, to *see* – feel, understand, appreciate – how individuals at the mercy of these political machinations are affected, for their entire lives.

DuVernay takes the same blended approach throughout her body of work. History is weaved into current affairs, and into a profound meditation over African American identity within a racialised national structure – all interrogated along with the systems which control society, and the powerful forces that underpin them. Ava DuVernay is a public intellectual, as well as political artist, for our time.

## Notes

1. Several scholars have examined inequalities in the Hollywood film industry (see Quinn 2012; Yuen 2017; Erigha 2019). UCLA’S annual *Hollywood Diversity Report*, analysing the representation of women and people of colour – both in front of, and behind the camera – for the top-grossing films, illustrates the issue. For 2011, for example, the year after DuVernay made her debut feature film *I Will Follow* (2010), the report shows that in film director roles, ‘minorities. . . were underrepresented by a factor of about 3 to 1’, directing just 12.2% of the 172 top grossing films. ‘Women faced even tougher odds at directing a top film’, said the report – underrepresented by a factor of over 12 to 1, women directed just 4.1% of films examined (Hunt, Ramón, and Price 2014, 7).

Subsequent years’ analysis shows some meaningful improvements in representation. However, the last pre-Covid pandemic figures (2018 and 2019) reveal that both women and people of colour still ‘remain underrepresented on every industry employment front’. Just 15.1% of the top 200 films were directed by people of colour, compared to a population share of 40%. Women, who account for just over half the population, also directed just 15.1% of the top films (Hunt and Ramon 2020, 3).

2. DuVernay’s rewriting of the *Selma* script has been widely reported, and she has discussed it several times. One *Vulture* article, for example, reports that DuVernay made her rewrite a condition of taking the job (Yuan 2014). The white British screenwriter Paul Webb, who wrote the original script in 2007 and retained his writing credit on the film, contests

DuVernay's claim. Yet in an article for the BBC, he also makes reference to some key differences between his script and the film (Dowd 2015). In any case, director DuVernay has overall authorial control; for example choosing which scenes to shoot, how to shoot them, and which scenes to edit, or cut completely.

(See Fallon 2017; Yuan 2014; Dowd 2015.)

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## Notes on contributor

*Teresa Hagan* is a final-year PhD candidate in the School of Art, Media and American Studies, University of East Anglia. Teresa's project is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Her research examines an apparent renaissance in mainstream American filmmaking by Black directors during, and arising from, the Obama years; and looks ahead to Black directors' responses to the Trump administration. Situating these films within a historical lineage of visual cultures by Black artists, she examines the role of filmmaking as an art form of resistance for African Americans. Her research also examines the intersections of the filmmaking renaissance with social and political forces at play during the Obama years, and against the wider backdrop of American history. In particular, the project considers how these films react to economic injustice, the weakening of voting rights, the inequalities of the criminal justice system, violence against African Americans, and the rejuvenation of Black protest movements. Teresa is also a journalist and documentary-maker.

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