

"Selma" and the Politics of Invisibility

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Expressions of Black anger in recent times at the unvanquished racism in America may have moved Ava Du Vernay to make the movie "Selma" to ensure that the American public appreciate the life-and-death character of the civil rights struggle and the raw courage of its activists. For that reason it was imperative that "Selma," which portrays the dramatic Selma-to-Montgomery March emblematic of that struggle, be indisputably accurate. This means that no aspect of it should be falsified.

And no aspect of the civil rights movement is falsified in the film - except for the egregious omission of the significant Jewish involvement in it. Jews passionately participated in the struggle in great numbers and several were martyred. No mention was made of this involvement in "Selma."

Especially reprehensible was Du Vernay's excision of Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel, who worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, from the first line of the march during which, he said, "my legs were praying." A refugee from Nazi Europe, Dr. Heschel was a noted scholar who shaped a new theology drawing on traditional Jewish sources to address modern issues. Coretta Scott King called him "one of the great men of our time."

Du Vernay responded to criticism of the gouging out of the Jewish presence in the civil rights movement from her film with a twisted version of the artistic license rationalization: she is, she said, "not a historian. I'm a storyteller."

But artistic license is not an unlimited privilege of *laissez faire*. Without honoring the principles of responsibility and authenticity artistic license embodies, it can easily set in motion a work's degeneration into malignant narcissism or intentionally deceptive political propaganda. Furthermore, artistic license has boundaries constituting a *cordon sanitaire* to keep out falsification, including that which derives from the omission of realities integral to the narrative.

Some critical realities may be inconvenient truths, but eliminating them from a work drawing on history cannot be justified as artistic license when it falls into falsification.

Why did Du Vernay excise Jews from her film? The central question to be asked here is: Did she deliberately amputate the Jewish participation from her portrayal of the civil rights struggle to "prove" that this participation should not be considered important? Did she downgrade the Jewish role into oblivion in order to elevate the Black role?

But why should this seesaw strategy be considered necessary at all? Why does a portrait of the struggle carried out by African Americans with deep commitment and persistence need to omit its allies? And this distortion, parenthetically, also applies to the film's misrepresentation of President Johnson's authentic dedication to passing civil rights legislation.

The film's underlying mean-spirited and destructive delusion that mentioning the Jews' contribution detracts from the Blacks' activism lingers like the shingles virus from destructive exclusionist policy begun at the onset of the Black Power movement in 1967. Most of its leaders believed it was incontrovertibly necessary to expel Jews (along with other whites) from organizations working for civil rights.

That policy and Du Vernay's incarnation of it drew strength from the millennia-old anti-Semitic myth that Jews always want to dominate. Therefore, catting attention even in a token way to the Jews

contribution to the civil rights movement could trigger the belief that they colonized and controlled it. Believing this would downgrade the role of African Americans.

Another wannabe justification by Du Vernay for the omission of the Jews is that she does not see herself as "a custodian of anyone's legacy." Who is the "anyone" she refers to? Isn't she herself behaving as a "custodian" - a conserver and protector - of the legacy of the civil rights movement?

Is this legacy only the legacy of African Americans? Is the Jewish participation not considered an integral part of the civil rights struggle because its legacy must be depicted as a 100% Black monopoly? Is the Jewish role only to be treated as a separate and unequal Jewish story?

It is hardly a new experience for Jews to endure this exclusionist treatment of Jewish history. It is an old pattern of ghettoizing Jewish experiences to make them invisible to ensure that Jews will not be seen or treated as part of human history.

Rabbi Max Arzt, who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary, once wrote that the Romans' burning alive of the Ten Rabbis for teaching Torah during the religious persecution by the Emperor Hadrian was a martyrdom of the resisting upholders of freedom of thought and expression on the level of Socrates' forced suicide. Why doesn't this resistance to tyranny get equal time? Why isn't it taught, let alone become the subject of a film?

Why do Jews disappear from history books after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) until it's time for them to be murdered during the Holocaust? Why aren't most non-Jews familiar with the story of the two heroic rebellions against the Roman Empire? Or with the high Jewish culture that flourished alongside its Moslem and Christian counterparts in medieval Islamic Spain for the several hundred years of *convivencia* ("living together") of adherents of the three Abrahamic religions at a time when Christian Europe was mired in violence, illiteracy, 99% abject poverty, and religious persecution?

Why, when President Obama was condemning acts of violence committed by Christians, such as the Crusades, did he fail to mention even in passing that the waves of Crusaders massacred entire communities of Jews enroute to Moslem-ruled Jerusalem? Their openly voiced "justification" for this carnage was, "We're going to fight the infidels there, shouldn't we start with the infidels here?" But that genocide is presumably only part of the "Jewish legacy." It's not considered part of human history.

It is high time that Jewish history and experience were liberated from the ghetto to which it is restricted and mainstreamed into human history. Ava Du Vernay had a valuable opportunity to pioneer in this mainstreaming by including Jews in her "Selma" movie about the civil rights movement, but failed to take advantage of it.

The human race cannot afford to falsify history by omitting any of its peoples or cultures. People who omit Jews from human history are not part of the solution, they are part of the problem.