Viewing Life through Black Women:

Ava DuVernay’s Middle of Nowhere

In Ava DuVernay’s Middle of Nowhere, the director carves out a story about black life. A story, that incorporates everything there is to being black: love, depression, stillness, willingness, failure, despair, community, and mobility–through mostly women characters. It is a testament to courageous black cinema, as well as an emerging crop of black directors, (Ryan Coogler, Justin Simien, Amma Asante) talented, bold, and who strive to present a resolute view of black people that aims to challenge normative ways of viewing black life, as well re- hashing black stories. Middle of Nowhere is special for many reasons, but especially because it is stylistically and formally ambitious,while privileging black women stories and maintaining cultural elements that keep it from being just another indie movie.

Interview magazine, when talking to DuVernay along side lead actress Emayatzy Corinealdi, about Middle of Nowhere, asked her if the film was personal. She replied, “This film isn’t as personal, in terms of, I don’t have a husband in prison. [laughs] But definitely more in terms of the scope of where I come from, the inner city, incarceration being very disproportionate in black, brown communities—[it] is really prevalent. Mother, daughters, sisters, and wives—it’s certainly something I’ve observed, a secret society of all these women waiting and we never see or hear their stories. I was always kind of interested in that. At one point I thought I might just do a documentary but then I started coming up with the story of Ruby and Derek and really playing with this idea of how they’re separated and why. [It’s] not personal directly, but definitely important to me and the part of the community that I want to project.”

Black women issues are on display in way that is similar but very different than her contemporary Tyler Perry, who deals with the same issues, or, deals with how he feels about black women. DuVernay can present black issues in a way that can speak to issues of black women and black people on a humanistic level, maintaining cultural aesthetics, while she’s working in art cinema/independent cinema. In a scene where the film has jumped four years forward, after the opening sequence where Ruby (Emayatzy Corinealdi) visits her husband (played by Omari Hardwick) in prison, and after an encounter with her pushy mother (played by Lorain Toussaint) and another mundane day at work, Ruby returns home to a bouquet of flowers (probably from her husband Derek) and enters her home and sets herself in a waiting position and envelopes herself in darkness.

She settles in likes she ready for bed. While the sun still shines over Los Angeles and through her drawn curtains nearly over every window, Ruby, sits on her bed, framed in a wide, medium close up wrapping her hair, and falls back onto the bed; back into her depressive state. It’s dark but we can still see her: beady eyed and smooth, looking and waiting for something, amalgamating with the darkness. There is a picture of her and Derek on the wall on the side and we get the feeling that she is detached; that she’s almost missing a part.

It is a scene that recalls the more intense and particular look at identity and disassociation in Ingmar Bergman’s Persona, where in a few scenes Bibi Andersen and Liv Ullmann move into a dissolvent into each other. Here, DuVernay shows that love, in the way that Ruby and Derek have chosen to love, can essentially make them the same people. Ruby then turns on her side, nearly encapsulated in the dark, and fantasizes that Derrick is next to her… (he turns and spoons her). Ruby practically fuses in with the darkness–with this dream– and at which point seems to be almost unidentifiable.

DuVernay, working in the art cinema tradition where characters’ goals are mostly not defined, allows her characters space to go through experiences so we are able to contemplate what love and growth mean: being in the middle of nowhere. DuVernay presents black people during struggle,not “the struggle”. What makes Nowhere vital and DuVernay fairly distinct, is the use of lighting, DuVernay’s utilization and exertion of the art cinema, and her brilliant eye for what cinema can accomplish.

In scenes where DuVernay must convey Ruby’s feelings without dialogue or even interaction with another: a gloomy and saddening cab ride home from the prison, or when Ruby, deep in her predicament manages sadness with hope, and desire, like only a woman can do, in a scene where she’s contemplating and at the same desiring Brian (David Oyelowo) who saunters over to her under florescent light in the back of his bus, DuVernay, carefully and near masterfully renders her characters human–and distinctly black. This is also present in a scene where Ruby, her sister Rosie (Edwina Findley Dickerson) and Ruth (Lorraine Toussaint) have an argument at the dinner table. In this dreary, low lit scene, we see how the past, poverty, and lost hope, effects these women, the point where communicating becomes a chore, which bears the potential for straining their already fractured familial unit, or, possibly creating space to re connect them. DuVernay’s acknowledgement and re-presentation of black issues–of black culture–from Ruby’s mother fear of uselessness, Ruby’s new lover Brian’s need for love, to Derrick’s need to appear in control while in prison, to Ruby’s sister, a single mother trying to make ends meet’s, need for nothing but her families happiness, makes this an artwork that defies dismissive and easy categorization. DuVernay’s characters have the ability to slip into despair; into an ocean of bleakness; into oblivion. At any point, you can feel like you have nothing to live for. And at any point, being black and poor, your life may not matter— even to you.

Nowhere and with the release of Selma, has brought DuVernay to the forefront of American directors, black or non-black. She is a progressive filmmaker and we can only watch her spread more goodness on the movie scene, and hopefully continue to subvert and provide new ways for black filmmakers to make movies about themselves, for themselves. Middle of Nowhere, is a film much like its predecessors like Killer of Sheep, Daughters of the Dust, Bush Mama, Baby Boy, Antwone Fisher, and its contemporaries like, 12 years a Slave, Fruitvale Station, and Dear White People, that seek to elevate cinema.