How *Selma* helped me appreciate organ pipes

By Edward J. Blum
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Sitting beside my best friend, we tensed as policemen clubbed civil rights protesters. We teared up as Martin Luther King Jr. marched alongside James Bevel, as Coretta Scott King talked with Malcolm X, and as the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee strained to relate to their elders. *Selma* was an experience: visceral, soulful, inspiring, and shocking.

A visual image that struck me was based in sound: microphone before King, organ pipes behind him. Time and again as King preached into a microphone at the pulpit, organ pipes framed his background. The "voice" of the civil rights movement broadcasted literally through electronic amplification and symbolically through wind propelled through the organ's metal. The visual and sonic displays offer a new prospective on older ways of thinking about preaching and power.

A great deal has been written about *Selma*. Several authors have challenged the film's treatment of Lyndon Johnson. Others have complained about the representation of Coretta Scott King, who is oddly marked as having "never married again" in the closing lines. Identifying historical "inaccuracies" seems to be an important feature of engaging the film.

But few of these treatments have dealt or dwelt with the feel of the film. Aesthetic symbolisms have histories too, and in this regard, the use of the organ pipes was a fascinating and innovative move. On one hand, it marked an important distinction between King and Lyndon Johnson. When Johnson addressed the full United States Congress on March 15, 1965, with what became known as the "We Shall Overcome" speech, a large American flag stood behind him. Television audiences viewed the stars and stripes in black and white. In *Selma*, we witness them in bold red, white, and blue. The flag of the nation-state, the emblem of national power, frames the president. Throughout the film, this vital difference—the one between the politician and the preacher, the president and the prophet—is not just spoken and legislated. It is mapped onto the visual architecture.

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, artists of many stripes have searched for the best metaphor to render African American religious leadership. W. E. B. Du Bois discussed “The Preacher” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as “the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.” Du Bois called him (and in Du Bois’s frame, black preaching was premised upon masculinity) a “leader, an orator, a ‘boss,’ an intriguer, an idealist.” This abundance of metaphor signaled the many roles and morphing of religious leadership.

Twenty-five years later, James Weldon Johnson, Aaron Douglas, and C. B. Falls teamed to produce *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927). A beautiful book visually and textually, *God’s Trombones* was enormously popular. With five editions published in its first three years, the book begs to be heard and viewed. Johnson called the “old-time Negro preacher” a “vital factor. It was through him that the people of diverse languages and customs who were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity.” Johnson called the black preacher “the first shepherd of this bewildered flock.”

Framing the preacher-poems are striking illustrations from Aaron Douglas. Sagas of spirituality radiate from the sweeping lines, the merging of horizontal and vertical axes, and misty layerings that leave me feeling depth in the seemingly flat surface. One art exhibit maintains that these illustrations offer a “style reminiscent of African sculpture.”

King is no trombone. Instead, he’s sandwiched between a microphone and organ pipes. The pipes place him in a past, just as Johnson and Douglas situated black preachers in an African past. For many contemporary churches, organs are problematic objects. Church growth experts decry them as symbols of tradition. Organs, moreover, are costly to maintain. Tuning and cleaning them are budgetary choices that funnel funds from other programs and people.

Selma presents a new set of symbols. One of them is an appreciation for organ pipes. When now I see them, hear them, imagine them, I’ll behold King and his colleagues. I’ll think of the beautiful and wondrous searching for ways to approach difficult problems collectively and to endure pains faithfully. Flags are beautiful, no doubt. They wave and flap. Organs don’t appear to move, but the air and sonic movements that seem motionless create music. These are tones and images that shake me now with new and exciting vibrations.

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