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Time Travel and Bodily Epistemology in Ava DuVernay's Selma (FR/UK/US 2014) and Haile Gerima's Sankofa (BF 1993)

Abstract

This article explores the seminal films of two black filmmakers of different generations: Haile Gerima's Sankofa (BF 1993) and Ava DuVernay's Selma (FR/UK/US 2014). It suggests that in creating Selma, DuVernay uses time travel and "bodily epistemology" (Lisa Woolfork) as first deployed by Haile Gerima in his 1993 film to offer 21st century viewers glimpses of the African American slave past. DuVernay's regressions in time are particularly bound up with those of Gerima in her film's most talked about scene: "Bloody Sunday". Several critics denounced the grotesque violence of "Bloody Sunday", failing to recognize that DuVernay crafts the episode to evoke the past in a new way. Her innovative way of transcending the art of the time-travel narrative is influenced by several of her predecessors, including Gerima.

Keywords

Ava DuVernay, Haile Gerima, Sankofa, Selma, Bloody Sunday, Time Travel, Civil Rights Movement, Slavery, Black Film

Biography

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> Haile Gerima is a legend among us, a giant among filmmakers [...] His work is so foundational, so formative, so nourishing to me and so many other filmmakers who regard him as a master, which he is.
>
> — *Ava DuVernay*

> The only contemporary movie I've seen is Selma. Outside that, I do not care. I'm not compelled to get in my car and go see a movie [...] I think she's [Ava DuVernay] an amazing strategist.
>
> — *Haile Gerima*[1]

The time is a Sunday afternoon in March 1965; the place is Selma, Alabama. Several police units, dozens of Alabama state troopers, and eight mounted patrolmen have charged into a throng of Civil Rights marchers on Edmund Pettus Bridge and are bludgeoning and kicking them. The scene falls into slow motion. A mounted policeman gallops across the melee, cutting through a billow of teargas that has begun to engulf the bridge. In pursuit of a lone marcher who has fled for safety, he extends his bullwhip in the air like a lasso. As the fog of teargas continues to thicken, the horseman comes down on the frightened runaway with such intensity that the marcher collapses to the ground. The teargas now obscures the backdrop of the scene, leaving only the horseman and his prostrated victim in view. The whole sequence suddenly feels like something from a plantation in 1800s America rather than a Civil Rights march in 20th-century America. So unfolds one of the most talked about scenes of the film Selma (Ava DuVernay, FR/UK/US 2014).

Selma covers a three-month period of the Civil Rights Movement in the spring of 1965 during which Martin Luther King Jr. (hereafter referred to as MLK) and a number of political activists – clergymen, students, and other rank-and-file Americans – gather in Selma, Alabama, to protest the literacy tests and similarly illegal tactics that are being used to bar black Southerners from voting. Bloody Sunday is the most intense of such protests. When Selma debuted in 2014, viewers were riveted by Ava DuVernay's rendition of it. One reviewer, Alan A. Stone, said, "Bloody Sunday is recreated in the film with clouds of tear gas, biting police dogs, armed cavalry, and unprovoked

1 Epigraphs DuVernay and Gerima: #Childof Testimonials: Ava DuVernay Director of "SELMA", 2015, https://t1p.de/4b937, 00:00:08–00:00:28; Reelblack One, 2015, https://t1p.de/6hc83, 00:01:31–00:01:44 and 00:04:15–00:04:18.

and unreasonable violence against a peaceful African American demonstration. It is one of the movie's most unforgettable scenes."[1] Another reviewer, Chris Nashawaty, called the Bloody Sunday scene a "hauntingly staged fracas" that is "sickening to watch".[2] Scott Foundas remarked that "the events [of Bloody Sunday] are at their ugliest."[3]

Other reviews were less concerned with the violence than with the anachronisms. Reviewer Herb Boyd remarked that "people are watching the violence of 'Bloody Sunday' on television in real time, when the nation actually was shown that footage much later".[4] Amy Taubin pointed out that as Bloody Sunday unfolds, "what [President] Johnson is viewing on his black-and-white TV is not the march as it is reenacted in DuVernay's Selma, but actual news coverage from 1965".[5]

In all of the discourse surrounding DuVernay's recreation of the historical Civil Rights march on Edmund Pettus Bridge to date, a key factor has been overlooked: DuVernay's directorial choices for Bloody Sunday are strongly evocative of the time-travel genre. That genre has been strategically implemented by many Black American filmmakers and writers before her to dislodge their characters from the present and plunge them into the harrowing worlds of their enslaved ancestors. This article reads DuVernay's Bloody Sunday scene alongside a classic Black American time-travel film, Sankofa (Haile Gerima, BF 1993), to demonstrate how the violence and temporal adjustments of Blood Sunday are deployed by DuVernay to merge her characters with the slave past. It also engages the work of scholar and author Lisa Woolfork to demonstrate that with Bloody Sunday, DuVernay inaugurates a novel style of time travel that builds on the brand of time travel Gerima deploys in Sankofa.

Ava DuVernay is an Oscar-nominated filmmaker known for her craft in illuminating the "interior lives of black people".[6] Her first feature film, I Will Follow (US 2010), centered on an African American visual artist, Maye, who moves out of her aunt's home to start her life over only to experience flashbacks of her ailing aunt, who had died. DuVernay's next feature film, Middle

1 Stone 2015, 79.
2 Nashawaty 2015, 93.
3 Foundas 2015, 14.
4 Boyd 2015, 58.
5 Taubin 2015, 27.
6 Martin 2014, 66.

of Nowhere (US 2012), was about an African American nurse, Ruby, who finds herself in limbo between her former life, which she shared with her currently incarcerated husband, and her future life, which she contemplates sharing with a new love interest. Her documentary 13th (US 2016) amplified today's ongoing mass incarceration of Black Americans, exposing the phenomenon as an extension of indentured servitude, notwithstanding the 1865 Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Each of these films by DuVernay interrogates the past of Black people to flesh out its possible implications for their present and, consequently, their future. Selma, given its potent suggestions of slavery, is no exception.

At the 2015 Tribeca Film Festival, DuVernay admitted that she deliberately staged several scenes in Selma to evoke spaces of slavery. The jailhouse scene between MLK and Ralph Abernathy served as her case in point: "There's a whole scene where there's two dark men, David Oyelowo and Colman Domingo, sitting in a dark jail cell and there's just this little peak of light [...] our reference was making it feel like the hull of a slave ship."[7] From the beginning of Selma to its end, such subtle evocations of the slave past abound. Bloody Sunday is the scene in which DuVernay's slavery recreations are particularly suggestive of time travel.

Time Travel and the Neo-Slave Narrative

Time travel is commonly associated with films and television series such as The Terminator (James Cameron, US 1984), Doctor Who (BBC, UK 1963–1989) and Star Trek (NBC, US 1966–2011). It often involves a protagonist who travels – usually by means of a machine – into the past or future. However, many scholars have offered a more expansive interpretation of time travel, suggesting that any act of remembering or psychologically imagining a moment of history preceding or following one's own time constitutes a mode of time traveling. For instance, Andrew Gordon suggests that a life-history review upon a brush with death could constitute time travel:

7 Barone 2015, https://t1p.de/vd6m7, 00:16:24–00:17:49. Bradford Young, the film's cinematographer, states in an interview with Patricia Thomson of *American Cinematographer*, "In the jail, the idea was to remind the audience what it might be like to be in the bow of a slave ship, with that single source of light through the cracks. You get these little subversive conversations between enslaved Africans who are not satisfied with captivity", Thomson 2015, 48–49.

"[T]ime travel can be passed off as a possible hallucination caused by a near death experience, as in the film Peggy Sue Got Married [Francis Ford Coppola, US 1986]."[8] According to Gordon, other films, such as Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis, US 1993), which engage such mental time traveling, feature regressions into the past that are simply "left unexplained" or are otherwise attributed to a "higher power".[9] Susan Stratton suggests another type of nonphysical time travel – the psychic time travel: in Olaf Stapledon's 1930 novel *Last and First Men*, the experience of the past is a "product of [the narrator's] own imagination from information transmitted telepathically across time and space".[10] Kristine Larsen identifies another "mind-only (consciousness shifting) time travel" in the television show Lost (ABC, US 2004–2010), in which the characters repeatedly experience flashbacks and flashforwards.[11]

In the past few decades, Black American films and written narratives about the slave past have increasingly featured this "consciousness shifting" brand of time travel. Scholar and author Lisa Woolfork explains that this developing trend is a direct upshot of the wider society's angst surrounding the topic of slavery. In a society that shies away from discussing the horrors of Colonial America, many Black Americans have become compelled to proactively construct the past in ways that open possibilities to heal this historical trauma. Such stories of the past, termed "neo-slave narratives", are particularly curative by virtue of their shock factor. Woolfork explains that in such stories,

> the protagonist suffers from a form of amnesia about the slave past (they do not know their ancestors, they know little and care less about slavery, they are unaware of the meaning of their contemporary "freedom"). The protagonist then finds her- or himself unwittingly transported to the slave past where she or he is confronted with a living, traumatic history that becomes a personal priority. In this way, characters are forced physically to "go" to the slave past to better "know" it. And when they "get there" they discover that (counter to their previous attitude about slavery) there *is* a "there there", a slave past

8 Gordon 2002, 140.
9 Gordon 2002, 140–141.
10 Stratton 2002, 78.
11 Larsen 2015, 214.

> that is […] "waiting there" to be recognized, remembered, or even re-experienced.[12]

According to Woolfork, Octavia Butler's seminal novel *Kindred* (1979) is one of such time-travel neo-slave narratives. It features a 26-year-old Black American California native, Dana, who one day mysteriously finds herself in early 1800s Maryland, where she experiences several bouts of whippings on a slave plantation. These sufferings uncannily remind her of her contemporary struggles at home in California. Woolfork also underscores another well-known neo-slave narrative, *Stigmata* (1998), by Phyllis Alesia Perry. The novel centers around a Black American woman, Lizzie, who finds a mysterious quilt is inscribed with stories of her deceased great-grandmother, an enslaved African in early America. By virtue of this quilt, Lizzie experiences vivid visions of the past and contemplates them through her contemporary sufferings.

Butler's and Perry's narratives blur the lines between the hardships Black Americans face in the present and what their ancestors experienced during the times of slavery. This blurring of the lines between the trauma of the past and that of the present is a central feature of Gerima's Sankofa and DuVernay's Bloody Sunday in Selma. Gerima and DuVernay use time travel to lead their protagonists into an experience that heals their trauma of slavery.

Gerima's Sankofa and DuVernay's "Bloody Sunday"

Haile Gerima is an internationally renowned filmmaker who has produced groundbreaking films for over 40 years. Gerima's approach to filmmaking is inspired by his will for restoration through remembrance of the past: "Memory gets into a very, very different context when you look at Africans in general because there's a normal relationship human beings have with memory and then there's what displacement, colonialism, and imperialism bring upon a person. That form of displacement becomes an inorganic and in some cases an antagonistic relationship with memory."[13] This importance of recollecting memory is the leitmotif of Sankofa, which Gerima celebrates.

12 Woolfork 2008, 2.

13 Thomas 2013, 85–86.

Sankofa is of the Akan peoples of Ghana and is a philosophical concept symbolized by a bird who simultaneously faces backwards and forwards. Sankofa means "We must go back and reclaim our past in order to create a better future."[14] This mantra constitutes the leitmotif of several of Gerima's films, Ashes and Embers (US 1982), Adwa (ET/IT/US 1999), and Teza (ET/DE/FR 2009), to name a few, in which his main characters integrate their past with the present. Gerima believes that such revisiting of the past, which the Sankofa bird represents, powerfully activates a psychological rejuvenation.[15] In Sankofa, people "return to the past using collective memory" and find "collective memory of past generations within themselves".[16] In Gerima's film Sankofa, this psychological confrontation with one's past is made possible via time travel.

Sankofa is about the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. The main character of the film, Mona, is a Black American model who bears witness to the sufferings of her ancestors who were once captured by slave traders in Ghana. Mona time-travels into the past, garners vital lessons from her enslaved ancestors, and returns to the present. By the end of the film, Mona's Sankofa pilgrimage has transformed her into a "rebel" who is "no more [...] scared".[17] Viewed alongside Selma's Bloody Sunday, similarities between Mona's oscillation between past and present and that of the Civil Rights marchers emerge. Yet, DuVernay moves beyond Gerima's brand of time travel by developing supplementary techniques that make the time travel occur for the marchers (and potentially for the viewers of the film who observe them) on a visceral rather than psychological level.

In the opening scenes of Gerima's film, Mona is in Ghana, on the grounds of Cape Coast Castle, where sounds of drums reverberate through the premises. Wielding a wooden staff adorned with the Sankofa bird, a local priest named Sankofa begins to eulogise his ancestors who were hauled across the Atlantic Ocean. Under the orders of the priest, Mona descends into the castle's dungeons, where she finds scores of enslaved Africans of centuries ago; they appear to her from the darkness. The enslaved Africans pursue Mona through the dungeon's tunnels until she encounters slave dealers, who then apprehend her. Despite her protests, the dealers drag Mona back

14 Prendergast 2011, 121.
15 Woolford 1994, 103.
16 Woolford 1994, 101.
17 Sankofa (Haile Gerima, BF 1993), 01:12:28.

Fig. 1: Slaveholders drag Mona back into the dungeons. Film still, SANKOFA (Haile Gerima, BF 1993), 00:14:01.

Fig. 2: Slaveholders sear Mona's back. Film still, SANKOFA (Haile Gerima, BF 1993), 00:14:17.

into the heart of the dungeon, into the midst of the enslaved Africans (fig. 1). They position Mona before a bonfire and sear her back with a molten iron staff (fig. 2).

Mona's branding is deliberate. Gerima explains that this violence accelerates her time travel: "The branding [that Mona experiences] allows an exploration of the past. It unleashes the collective memory of people who had

certain identities and characters and beliefs."[18] Such hallmark wounding – typically dealt to enslaved Africans – plummets Mona into her "memory bin", or her unconscious mind, so that she catches a glimpse of her ancestors.[19] In turn, the viewers of the film, who watch Mona's branding, engage in this regression vicariously through her: "It's [as if it's] the mind that is branded when Mona is branded."[20] Through that violence, viewers of the film descend, along with Mona, into their own past.

Back to the Past and Bodily Epistemology in Sankofa and Selma

African American literature and culture scholar Lisa Woolfork's conceptualization of "bodily epistemology" explicates the dynamics of such branding that is said to induce ancestral memory in Mona and in the viewers of the film. In her work *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* (2008), Woolfork defines bodily epistemology as "a representational strategy that uses the body of a present-day protagonist to register the traumatic slave past".[21] Octavia Butler's novel displays such a technique: in *Kindred*, the physical wounds incurred by Dana from her beatings on the plantation remain on her body after she has returned to the present, thereby demolishing all semblances of a separation between past and present in the mind of the reader. In Phyllis Alesia Perry's work *Stigmata*, Lizzie, like her counterpart Dana, incurs physical wounds in the shape of the manacles which once restrained her grandmother's limbs. "The body […] is used to mediate multiple forms of knowing the past", writes Woolfork. Such works "use the bodily metaphor to suggest that bodies of blacks in the present share a degree of corporeal resonance with […] those enslaved in the past".[22] This phenomenon highlighted by Woolfork is what Gerima engages in Sankofa to merge Mona with her past. Her wounds, just as Woolfork asserts, issue from the conviction that "knowledge about the slave past can be better acquired and understood when the learner participates bodily in a version of that past".[23]

18 Woolford 1994, 100.
19 Woolford 1994, 100.
20 Woolford 1994, 100.
21 Woolfork 2008, 2.
22 Woolfork 2008, 4.
23 Woolfork 2008, 11.

The psychological return to the past through violence that Mona experiences and that Woolfork terms bodily epistemology repeatedly occurs throughout Selma, but it is during the harrowing events of Bloody Sunday that the Civil Rights marchers' incurred physical assault most closely mirrors that of Gerima's Mona. In the scene, the marchers do not enter into a dungeon tunnel but instead venture onto a bridge. Just as Mona is forced to experience the branding of her ancestors, the marchers are forced to experience beatings, and even whippings, not unlike those endured by theirs. The lash of the whip on the back of the lone marcher running for dear life from the mounted patrolman particularly recalls the whippings of enslaved Africans on American plantations, just as the iron staff branding that Mona suffers on her back at the hands of the slave traders recalls her captured ancestors' ordeals. When the Bloody Sunday scene falls into slow motion during this turn of events on the bridge and focuses on the horseman and the runaway marcher, it renders the horrors on the bridge more personal to the viewer: this camera shot of the mounted patrolman and the marcher amplifies the violence of the collective assault on the marchers by the policemen.

In line with Woolfork's theory of bodily epistemology, DuVernay explains that she shot such scenes to "force you to really deconstruct these moments of violence, so that it's not just physical, that it's emotional; you allow it to get into your bloodstream and you just further sink into the story".[24] Through those gory images of Bloody Sunday, the viewer of the film is transported to that fateful day in 1965 on Edmund Pettus Bridge. DuVernay also explains that the creation of such a moment that is "really living and breathing" and that "gets into your DNA a little bit" makes viewers recognize that this violence "is not new; this is a continuum; this is a continuation of what was done before, just as 1965, Selma was a continuation of what was done before".[25] By prompting her audience to identify their present-day traumas in those of their Civil Rights forbearers (and the enslaved Africans before them), DuVernay, like Gerima, uses bodily epistemology to invite viewers into an exploration of the past.

DuVernay's technique of staging this bodily epistemology is more subtle than Gerima's. Whereas Gerima sets up Mona's time travel through the enslaved Africans in Cape Coast Castle whose appearance marks Mona's

24 Selma Movie Interview: Ava DuVernay & David Oyelowo with Cinema Siren, 2014, https://t1p.de/ok8lz, 00:08:20–00:08:32.

25 Harris-Perry, 2015, https://t1p.de/xyuax, 00:16:41–00:16:49 and 00:24:17–00:24:28.

Fig. 3: The mounted policeman chases after the lone marcher. Film still, Selma (Ava DuVernay, FR/UK/US 2014), 01:17:02.

Fig. 4: The marchers run away from the police. Film still, Selma (Ava DuVernay, FR/UK/US 2014), 01:16:16.

imminent regression into the past, DuVernay uses the cloud of teargas on the bridge to adjust the viewers' perception of the scene and the characters in it. When the cloud of teargas fully envelops Edmund Pettus Bridge and obscures the backdrop, viewers are left with the silhouette of the horseman and his victim (fig. 3), along with mostly sounds and faint movements by which to judge what is unfolding in the rest of the scene. As the fracas – replete with the lashing of whips, neighing of horses, and blasts of shotguns – evokes a skirmish on a plantation, viewers are prompted to viscerally perceive just that, and thus the marchers in the scene become suggestive of enslaved Africans on a field (fig. 4). It is this subtle change in the scene – the slight shift in mise en scène – and the way in which the characters move in the melee that achieves this time-travel effect.

Forward to the Present and Psychological Healing in Sankofa and Selma

After Mona enters the past, she reunites with her ancestors on a plantation in the Americas, where she eventually launches a slave rebellion which empowers her and then returns to the present. In Ghana, Mona sits on the steps of Cape Coast Castle and gazes at the Atlantic Ocean before her. Surprisingly, she finds her friend Nunu, an enslaved African from the American plantation, seated to her right. Mona simultaneously gazes into the past, represented by her gaze towards the Americas across the ocean where her ancestors were once enslaved, while affirming her newfound rejuvenation, represented by Nunu, seated to her right.

In this ending scene in Sankofa, there are many other descendants of Africans sitting with Mona and Nunu on the grounds of Cape Coast Castle – these individuals are representative of Black Americans as a collective. Their assembly reflects Gerima's conviction that this psychological healing of the trauma of slavery has been long overdue since the abolition of American slavery: "After slavery [Black Americans] should have been working about healing, but they went straight to work from the mines to the train tracks, to the pullman porters."[26] According to Gerima, such a brusque transition into "freedom" as Black Americans underwent following slavery does not constitute authentic liberation. To liberate oneself, one must take to "knowing thyself", including becoming familiar with the history of one's ancestors, before moving forward.[27] This is what Mona and her counterparts demonstrate as they sit and gaze across the ocean. They communicate to the viewer of the film the urgency of remembering the history of one's ancestors to become liberated in the present.

In Selma, the marchers' merging of past and present takes place following the commotion on the bridge, particularly when the marcher who is whipped by the mounted patrolman falls to the ground. After this occurs, the camera cuts to a room where MLK is watching the scene on Edmund Pettus Bridge on a television set. Like Mona and her African American counterparts on the steps of the castle who deferentially gaze over the Atlantic Ocean towards the horrors of the American plantations, MLK and his comrades gaze with humility at the carnage on the bridge. As in the

26 Woolford 1994, 102.

27 Gerima 2010, https://t1p.de/58ipi, 00:04:27–00:04:32.

anachronism at the end of Sankofa with Nunu and Mona there is something peculiar about this scene: John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Amelia Boynton, and Frederick Reese are surprisingly in the same room as MLK, observing with him the atrocity that they are simultaneously experiencing on the bridge. In this defining moment, the past and present are fused, as in the scene in Gerima's Sankofa between Nunu and Mona.[28]

Just as the ending of Sankofa stresses to the viewer the urgency of looking into the past for psychological rejuvenation, the ending of DuVernay's Bloody Sunday is aimed at inspiring present-day African Americans to reconcile their current realities with the history of their ancestors. MLK and his colleagues observing the atrocity on the television screen are not merely activists of the Civil Rights Movement looking into the face of state terrorism of their times (and into the face of their ancestors' beatings during the days of slavery) but are also representative of African Americans of today as they observe similar acts of brutality on their own television sets: "Selma is not a film that takes place in the context of history. You watch those images and you understand how it feels to be someone in 1965 being shocked about what they see on TV, because it just happened to you in August [2014]."[29] By identifying themselves in MLK and the marchers, viewers of Selma are made to realize that the past and the present are one and that the past must thus be explored as they face the struggles and affairs of the present.

DuVernay illustrates this healing power of remembering the past at the conclusion of Bloody Sunday. As soon as the skirmish on the bridge comes to an end, MLK turns towards his comrades and exclaims, "We're goin' back to the bridge!" Surprisingly, the group is willing to take up his challenge. Even Amelia Boynton, whose face is bloodied and whose arm is visibly broken, nods in agreement with MLK. Evidently, the regeneration of the group is now consummated. The group has retreated into the past, they have developed a stronger spirit of togetherness (by enduring the same beatings experienced by their ancestors), and they are now willing to repeat the gesture as an act of affirming their newfound stamina to push forward in their nonviolent movement.

28 This last Sankofa feature of "Bloody Sunday," where past and present are fused at the end to drive home the healing power of Sankofa, was added to Bloody Sunday during the editing process. Selma film editor Spencer Averick states, "We knew there was an emotion in the scene that hadn't quite come across in the edit. We tried many different ideas to put this right but rounded on the idea of juxtaposing the violence on the bridge with the reaction of audiences watching on TV at home." Pennington 2015, 67.

29 Tsai, 2015, https://t1p.de/zu1ww, 00:02:35–00:02:52.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that the inspiration which DuVernay gleans from Gerima is very manifest in Selma. Like Gerima in Sankofa, DuVernay fuses the past with the present through bodily epistemology. I have also demonstrated that DuVernay makes this psychological fusion of past and present her own. Deviating from Gerima, who alters his protagonist's environment from one time period to another, DuVernay makes subtle adjustments in Bloody Sunday that are only discernible viscerally. The subtlety of DuVernay's technique showcases the Edmund Pettus Bridge and American plantation simultaneously, ultimately creating a mise-en-abyme effect:[30] the viewer of the film is able to simultaneously observe both the marchers and their enslaved African ancestors. It is in this manner that DuVernay inaugurates a new variety of time travel, a visceral kind of time travel.

On 31 December 2016, Julie Dash, director of the seminal film Daughters of the Dust (US 1991), took to her Twitter account to celebrate DuVernay's talent, stating, "Fearlessly, you reach forward and backward simultaneously."[31] Dash recognized that this reaching backward and forward which is the theme of Sankofa is also at the core of DuVernay's filmmaking craft. In the same spirit as Gerima's film – and as crafted by Butler in *Kindred* and by many writers and filmmakers before her – DuVernay deploys the time-travel genre to encourage her viewers to "go back and reclaim our past in order to create a better future".[32]

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30 The plantation is perceived by the viewer instinctively, and the Edmund Pettus Bridge is perceived consciously.

31 Julie Dash (@JulieDash), 10:01am, 31 December 2016, https://is.gd/0z4YiQ.

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