

Poster Politics: A Reimagination of Ava DuVernay's *Middle of Nowhere*

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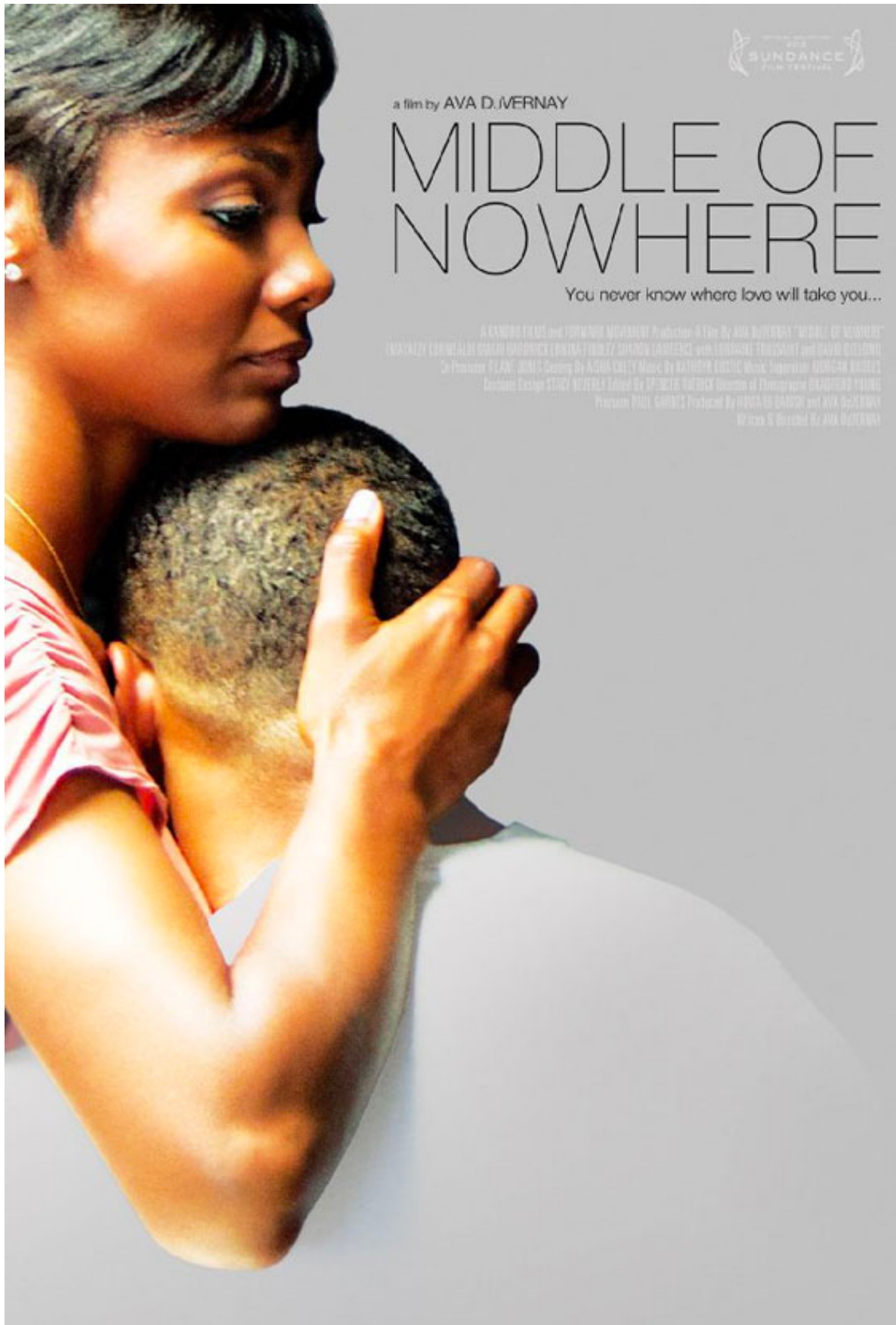
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## **Introduction**

One of the most important elements in film marketing, the movie poster acts as an introduction to the plot and message of a motion picture and can make or break the success that a film faces, as it is often the first visual material that audiences interact with. However, designers face a problem in that viewers typically only “glance at a movie poster for a few seconds, but in that time it has to tell us what kind of movie it is, what makes it special and why we have to see it” (“Six Secrets of Movie Posters”).

Ava DuVernay’s 2012 film *Middle of Nowhere* tells the story of Ruby, a lower-middle class black woman working to support herself, all the while making efforts to keep her marriage with Derek, her imprisoned husband, afloat. At its core, the story is one of time; audiences watch as Ruby struggles with the passing of years away from her husband and attempts to change her relationship with time. In addition, central to the plot of *Middle of Nowhere* are the celebration of black skin and the politics of the face. While there are certainly components to applaud in the film’s poster, which will be described in greater detail, these particular elements, while critical to the development of the narrative, are not particularly present in the film’s poster, pictured below. As previously mentioned, posters should capture a number of elements presented in their respective films, while still successfully promoting curiosity by keeping plot details hidden. Thus, in order to portray the importance of these themes in the film, I have redesigned the poster for Ava DuVernay’s 2012 film, paying special attention to elements that emphasize the centrality of time, skin, and the face. Below, I will justify the decisions made in the process of creating a new poster for this film, calling on a number of texts as well as specific moments from the film in order to do so.

Original Artwork



a film by AVA D. VERNAY

# MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

You never know where love will take you...

A KANING FOLKS and FORWARD MOVEMENT Production. A Film By AVA D. VERNAY. "MIDDLE OF NOWHERE" WRITTEN BY CORINNE ALBY, DANIEL HADRONICK & ANASTASIOULY. STARRING SHARON CASPERENCE with LOUISIANA THOUSANT and DAVID STELLANO. Co-Producer FELAN. JONES. Casting By AGORA SMELY. Music By KATHRYN COOPER. Music Supervisor MORGAN BRIDGES. Costume Design STACY NEWBLE. Edited By SPENCER TAYLOR. Director of Photography BRADY YOUNG. Producer PAUL GARNICK. Produced By HANNAH D. GARDNER and AVA D. VERNAY. Written & Directed By AVA D. VERNAY.

New Artwork

A FILM BY AVA DUVERNAY  
MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

THE FUTURE

DOESN'T EXIST

UNTIL WE

GET THERE

DAVID  
OYELOWO

EMAYATZY  
CORINEALDI

OMARI  
HARDWICK

## I. Time

In his article “Panopticism,” Michel Foucault considers the implications of early prison systems, particularly the Panopticon, an architectural innovation that allows all prisoners to be observed from a central tower while also denying the ability for said prisoners to know whether they are being watched at any given moment. This structure, as it always leaves subjects in fear of observation, regardless of whether or not it is being exercised, virtually “assures the automatic functioning of power” over its prisoners (Foucault 6). And while this term originates from a physical space, panoptic power can extend into other scenarios in which an individual, or group of individuals, are being surveilled by some force without being able to see it. Though what Foucault would consider panoptic power typically involves surveillance by a human, it can be argued that panopticism is exhibited in *Middle of Nowhere* through the relationship between time and Ruby. Time dictates nearly all of Ruby’s decisions for the majority of the film; we see it taking control over her in her choice to not attend medical school, as doing so would get in the way of her time spent in visitations with Derek. We also see it in her hesitation to open up to her new love interest and bus driver Brian, as it is only a matter of time before Derek is out of prison and with Ruby again. Throughout the narrative of the film, however, Ruby is never able to predict how time may act next and is repeatedly made prisoner to its fluctuations. This is exhibited near the opening of the film when she receives a note that Derek is set to be released earlier than expected, and again later on in the plot when Ruby learns that Derek must stay in prison longer due to his inability to behave properly and decision to engage in violent conduct.

This relationship between Ruby and time, among many other elements, is one characteristic worthy of attention in the film’s original poster; the fading away of Derek into the background is representative of the time that she is losing with him, and her embrace shows the

difficulty she has when it comes to trying to grasp this time as it slips through her fingers because of its uncertain nature. While the representation of time is particularly impressive in the original poster, however, I wanted to expand on its commentary, so as to emphasize how daunting time can be in Ruby's life. As demonstrated above, time is one of the only things keeping Ruby from the relationships that she deserves. As such, I have represented this dynamic by positioning a large clock between Ruby and the faces of her two love interests, implying that in order to reach a decision as to who she will end up with, she must first redefine her relationship with this panoptic force and free herself of its constraints. The road ahead of Ruby, while partially representative of the physical distance between herself and the prison, is also indicative of the idea that Ruby will prevail on her long journey and ultimately "pass" the clock, thus effectively removing any obstacles getting in the way of her decisions. Fortunately this is the case, as audiences come to find out, and Ruby is able to reverse the control that time has on her decisions, learning to take advantage of it, instead of the opposite.

As the film comes to a close, Ruby makes what is assumed to be her last visitation to Derek in the prison. This meeting, however, differs from the rest in that instead of passively accepting the lack of effort on Derek's part to free himself, Ruby transfers all of the legal papers over to Derek, symbolizing the end of their relationship and her ultimate decision to be with Brian. After the two discuss, Ruby stands up from her seat, walks over to the other side of the table, and passionately kisses Derek. Immediately, the audience is reminded of an earlier scene, in which Ruby's friend reveals to her that she had been temporarily banned from visiting the prison because of "making out." Thus, it can be assumed that Ruby is aware of the consequences of her actions and knows that, at least for the time being, she won't be able to see Derek anymore. Why, then, would she choose to make such a decision? This kiss is representative of

Ruby's ability to finally use time to her own advantage; while it has thrown her in every which direction for the entirety of the film, she is finally able to switch the narrative, using the visitation ban as a way to keep herself accountable in her efforts to end her relationship with Derek. In "Judas' Gift," Adam Phillips writes on betrayals, raising an important question: if there were no such thing as betrayals, "in what ways would one ever be able to change" (Phillips)? This is a question that Ruby struggles with, as she recognizes the importance of Derek in her life. Ultimately though, she knows that putting herself first is the only way she will make a true change in her own life, and in order to do so, she must ensure that she is fully prohibited from being with Derek by means of a healthy betrayal – one that "takes time, and is of paramount importance" (Phillips).

The quote positioned in the center of the poster, which reads "the future doesn't exist until we get there," also represents the way that time changes for Ruby. This quote, which is taken from the final letter that Ruby writes to Derek, is one of the most powerful in the entire film, as it nearly sums up the entire message of the plot in that it shows just how Ruby has evolved, especially when paired with her stance on time in the beginning of the film. In the opening scene, Ruby and Derek sit in the visitation room discussing the length of time left in Derek's sentence. "Five years and good time," Ruby repeats as her husband is hesitant to say the same. In these moments, it becomes clear that Derek is unsure of his ability to behave throughout his entire sentence. More importantly, though, the audience learns that Ruby is determined to control the future and will it into playing out on her terms, which proves to not work as planned, as revealed by the remainder of the plot. The quote present on the poster, however, demonstrates Ruby's realization that the future cannot be spoken into existence and shows that she has finally come to embrace the uncertainty of time instead of letting it abuse her.

## II. Skin

Contrasting sharply with Ruby's tendency to feel belittled by time and other forces acting in her life is the ultimate resilience she exhibits throughout the film, despite the hardships and challenges she faces. Highlighting such resilient propensities is a talent of Ava DuVernay's in a number of her films, and *Middle of Nowhere* does not fall short in this regard. The repurposing of the shadow is an element that DuVernay relies upon heavily in her construction of the film, using darkness as a way to push the viewer to rethink what he or she associates with the lack of light. While a number of films, including ones we have discussed at length this semester, encourage audiences to see evil and danger in the shadows, *Middle of Nowhere* is unique in its efforts to do the exact opposite. In his article "A True Picture of Black Skin," Teju Cole tackles the meaning of the shadow, particularly as it relates to the photography of Rob DeCarava, a black artist known for his ability to capture black skin in images. Often times, these photographs go against what one might expect when it comes to photography of dark skin; while many photographers use their technologies to lighten appearance, making the subject stand out, DeCarava does the opposite, further enhancing the shadows present in his work, so as to suggest that darkness is "neither bland nor empty," but rather "full of wise light which, with patient seeing, can open out into glories" (Cole). A similar case can be observed in DuVernay's *Middle of Nowhere*; as Ruby and Brian drive home after their first night together at the club, their faces and bodies are hardly visible in the darkness of the car. The lack of light feels almost disturbing, pushing audiences to assume that something bad might happen as a result of Ruby's decision to go home with a man other than her husband. However, as the scene progresses, the viewer becomes much more aware of Ruby's comfort level around Brian, as evidenced by the natural flow of the conversation and passion demonstrated in their first kiss, which follows the car ride.



Thus, while the shots in question may originally suggest that Ruby is going down a dark path in her choosing to spend the night with Derek, DuVernay's true intentions are to code these moments as a newfound hope for Ruby and an example of her beginning to free herself of the grip that Derek holds, representing how DuVernay is able to challenge the commonly held belief that shadows and danger are intrinsically associated with one another.

In this same vein, DuVernay has quite the interesting relationship with light, putting characters in full brightness when one might least expect to see the revelation of their features. Such is the case in one of the film's most powerful scenes, in which police officers break into Ruby's home to arrest her husband. Fully caught off guard in the moment, Ruby is thrown to the ground, then immediately carried outside, where her figure can be fully perceived by the audience, and put into a police car as Derek is taken away from her. So why, in one of her darkest moments, is Ruby shown in such jarring light? It's important to analyze this scene in conjunction with one that demonstrates Ruby in perhaps her most joyful state to fully understand what DuVernay's intentions may be. About two thirds of the way into the film, once Ruby has begun to express her feelings for Brian, comes a scene in which the two share an intimate moment in the back of Brian's bus. As it has been quite some time since Ruby has had a romantic encounter, as evidenced by the rules and regulations set by the prison in which Derek resides, it is clear that Ruby is particularly enjoying the company of Brian and is perhaps more happy than she has been at any other point in the film. Once again, DuVernay exhibits a distinct talent for portraying light in this scene, as she positions both Ruby and Brian in the dark caboose of the bus, yet succeeds in keeping their faces quite visible. However, while Ruby was experiencing total emotional vulnerability and pain in the scene described above, she is now likely overwhelmed by feelings of happiness and joy, which creates an interesting dynamic and

begs the question as to why DuVernay represents the skin in a similar fashion despite the contrast in the scenes' content.

In an effort to visually represent this dynamic in my rendition of the film's poster, I created a color palette from each of these two scenes, collecting Ruby's average skin tone in a moment where she felt fully defeated, as well as a moment where she felt nothing more than euphoric. I then used these two colors to create a gradient, which I applied to the background of the poster, with the former of the two colors at the bottom, and the latter at the top. While a subtle difference between the two shades of brown can be seen upon close inspection, there is hardly any difference between the skin tone of Ruby in these two moments despite the very differing lights in which she is shown. Even on the surface level, this is quite the impressive feat when considering that, historically, "stocks, cameras, and lighting were developed taking the white face as the touchstone," as early experimentations failed to incorporate black skin as a subject of photography, resulting in the camera's preference for white skin, even to this day (Dyer). However, not only is this a testament to Ava Duvernay's ability to accurately represent black skin in two different lightings, and in an age where white skin is prioritized by photo and video technologies, but it also may be read as evidence of Ruby's resilience; though she's experiencing wildly different emotions in each scene, the consistency of her skin tone represents her ability to prevail in dark situations and provides an example of DuVernay's efforts to erase the association between physical and metaphorical darkness.

In fact, the tendency for cameras to inaccurately portray black skin may even play a role in the *Middle of Nowhere* original artwork. While the poster does an excellent job in its highlighting and celebration of the black skin by positioning it against a contrasting background, one can't help but notice that it makes Ruby's skin out to be much lighter than it is in the film

itself. Could this lightening of the skin be evidence of how early camera technologies have influenced the way that black skin is photographed? Or perhaps has the color of the skin been intentionally altered to look more acceptable to white eyes in an effort to draw in audiences in this customer segment? Regardless of the reason, it is clear that there is a sharp dichotomy between the portrayal of Ruby's skin on the film poster and in the film itself, which subtly encourages audiences to consider representations of blackness not only in this film, but in others as well.

### **III. Face**

While there may be issues with the representation of skin in the original poster for the film, depictions of the face, or lack thereof, are executed quite well. Specifically, the choice to have Derek facing away from the camera, coupled with his silhouette fading into the background, suggests that perhaps he has made mistakes that have threatened the stability of his relationship with Ruby, which the audience finds out to be true as the film progresses. However, while this hiding of the face succeeds in suggesting certain character traits about Derek, it almost seems to do the opposite of what DuVernay attempts to do in the film in that it encourages assumptions about an individual based solely upon physical features. In "Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other," Roger Burggraeve discusses the distinction between the countenance and the "other," the former of which refers to physical appearance alone, and the latter of which represents the individual as a whole – the true self, full of intricacies and nuances. One can never truly "bind or identify the other with his plastic form," but audiences nonetheless often actively engage in this behavior, reducing the "other" to a countenance by drawing conclusions about the self from the face alone (Burggraeve 30). This failure to recognize the

otherness of the other, Burggraeve discusses, is one of the truest forms of violence, as it results in a “merciless exercise of power over the other” (36).

In an effort to combat this exploitation done by audiences, DuVernay frequently uses the countenance to her advantage, pushing viewers to assume one thing based off of facial expressions, then refusing to offer the satisfaction of being correct. Such is the case near the film’s finale: the scene described in Section I, in which Ruby and Derek share their final kiss, is immediately followed by a shot of Ruby being escorted out of the prison because of her failure to follow the rules. In these moments, audiences see a drastic shift in the facial expression that she carries; immediately upon exiting the gate, she boasts a smirk of sorts, as if she’s trying to say that she’s aware of the implications her kiss holds and she is proud of herself for prioritizing her own needs and accepting the love that Brian has to offer. However, this smirk fades in an instant, leaving nothing but a look of despair on Ruby’s face, perhaps communicating the flip side of the same situation – that her relationship with Derek has come to an end and will never be the same whether she likes it or not. These conflicting facial expressions seem to suggest that, as much as the kiss was a calculated decision done in an effort for Ruby to keep herself away from Derek, perhaps it was also an impulse choice that was made out of love for him.

This shot is representative of DuVernay’s tendency to challenge the logic of reasoning throughout *Middle of Nowhere*; while many films use the face as a window into the thoughts or emotions that are being experienced, DuVernay uses the face almost as a way to confuse audiences, or at least to make them consider how facial expressions function and how engaging in presumptuous behavior based on the countenance alone can be dangerous. In order to portray this dynamic in my poster, I chose to have Ruby’s back turned towards the viewer, free of being perceived in any way. Representing the complex relationship between DuVernay and the face,

this decision refuses the audience's right to "reduce the other to [a] countenance," effectively turning down any invitation to assumption that one may think they have (30).

It is worth noting that while both posters picture a subject with their back turned to the camera, the two instances are read in entirely different ways; while the original artwork hides Derek's face so as to hint at the one-sided nature of the relationship between himself and Ruby, the new artwork removes Ruby's face in an effort to keep the audience from making assumptions about her. Interestingly enough, however, the former shows that even with the absence of the most vulnerable part of the body, assumptions are still made solely based on physical features, as observers are invited to believe that Derek has done something harmful and has his back turned out of guilt.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, plenty of thought goes into the creation of promotional material for films, as they act as a precursor for the majority of viewers, suggesting what they might expect to see in the film itself. It is important, though, to recognize the limitations that come along with poster design. As is the case with any piece of art regardless of its medium, interpretation is always up to the viewer. While an artist may include a number of elements in his or her design, many of these are overlooked by viewers, especially in the absence of context. This limitation, however, should not stop one from appreciating the beauty that is the movie poster. In fact, understanding the complexities behind a poster makes it all the more worthy of appreciation and interpretation. Regardless of how it is perceived by the viewer, though, the film poster has been and will continue to be a critical element in the attraction of audiences for as long as the film industry is around.

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