

# 11 movies that confront American racism

By Alissa Wilkinson | Jun. 2nd, 2020

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Kiki Layne and Stephan James in *If Beale Street Could Talk*.  
Tatum Mangus/Annapurna Pictures

“The opposite of racist isn’t ‘not racist,’ Ibram X. Kendi writes in *How to Be an Antiracist*. “It is ‘antiracist.’” Kendi goes on to argue that being antiracist involves, in part, understanding the problems in power and policies that prop up racial inequalities.

Understanding that power and those policies, though, can be a long process, especially for those who haven’t suffered directly, or even have benefited, as a

result of them. One way to begin is by watching great films. Images and the stories they tell shape our imaginations in powerful ways, and cinema can be a force for rewiring how viewers see the world off-screen, too.

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These documentaries and fictional movies challenge the ways films depict black life. They confront white Americans who like to think of themselves as “not racist.” They question notions about whose stories are worth telling. And they remind us about what parts of our history we might feel more comfortable sweeping under the rug. For those who want to understand where we are as a country, how we got here, and where we need to go next, these 11 films are a good place to start.

### *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* (2017)

Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun? | Official Trailer



*Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* began as a “live documentary” about one white filmmaker’s reckoning with his family’s racist past. Travis Wilkerson’s great-grandfather murdered a black man in 1946, and decades later, Wilkerson set

out for Alabama to try and figure out what happened. Through interviews, photos, music, and searing personal confession, Wilkerson told the story while sitting on stage as clips and photos are projected onto the screen. (I saw a performance of it at the True/False Film Festival in 2017, and it's among the most gutting filmgoing experiences I've ever had.) Wilkerson's anger and brokenness are palpable as he reckons with a history of white supremacy that belongs to his family and to him, too — and that translates clearly to the recorded version that you can watch at home.

**How to watch it:** *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* is available to digitally rent or purchase on Amazon.

## *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

Do the Right Thing | Restored Trailer [HD] | Coolidge Corner Theatre



Spike Lee's 1989 classic is a comedy with an angry edge, one that demands a viewing more than three decades later. On the hottest day of the summer in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, tensions start to rise, leading to an altercation. When the police arrive to break up the fight, they choke one of the participants — a black man

named Raheem — and kill him, then flee the scene, leading to more violence. Lee dedicated the film to Eleanor Bumpurs, Michael Griffith, Arthur Miller Jr., Edmund Perry, Yvonne Smallwood, and Michael Stewart, six victims of racial violence and police brutality. When it came out, *Do the Right Thing* was criticized not for its depiction of police violence but because critics like New York magazine's Joe Klein and the New Yorker's David Denby said it could incite racial violence. Now, it's brutally clear how perfectly it diagnosed and depicted how black Americans are treated.

**How to watch it:** *Do the Right Thing* is available to digitally rent or purchase on iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, and Vudu.

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## *Get Out* (2017)

Get Out Official Trailer 1 (2017) - Daniel Kaluuya Movie



Racism is sinister, frightening, and deadly. But *Get Out* isn't about the blatantly, obviously scary kinds of racism — burning crosses and lynchings and snarling hate. Instead, it's interested in skewering white liberal racism, the prejudice of

those who fancy themselves enlightened. Racism that masks itself as aggressively harmless is just as horrifying as blatant prejudice, and in *Get Out*, director Jordan Peele works to make us feel that horror in a visceral, bodily way. In the tradition of the best classic social thrillers, *Get Out* takes a topic that is often approached cerebrally — casual racism — and turns it into something you feel in your gut. And it does it with a wicked sense of humor.

**How to watch it:** *Get Out* is available to digitally rent on iTunes, Amazon, Google Play, YouTube, and Vudu.

Related

**How *Get Out* deconstructs racism for white people**

## *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (2018)

Hale County This Morning This Evening Official Trailer



As much a tone poem as a documentary, RaMell Ross's *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* is best described as "lyrical." Ross carefully assembles hours of footage he shot while living in Hale County, Alabama — of water droplets on a baby's skin, of kids goofing off in a parking lot, of churchgoers singing during mass, of old houses, of insects, and more. Together, they act as brushstrokes to create a portrait of a community, capturing a way of life in a place burdened by history. Ross's goal was to redefine the cinematic "vocabulary" that's often used when black Americans are shown on screen, so he purposely chose to shoot and edit the film in ways that suspend judgment and resist the narratives that we as viewers often bring to films. And in the few instances where Ross uses text on screen, the sentences are as carefully, elegantly structured as the images, carrying narrative and emotional weight that's deeply affecting. *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* is a major work and a richly rewarding one.

**How to watch it:** *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* is streaming on Amazon Prime and available to rent or purchase on Amazon, iTunes, Vudu, Google Play, and YouTube.

## *The Hate U Give* (2018)

## The Hate U Give | Official Trailer [HD] | 20th Century FOX



Amandla Stenberg leads a truly outstanding cast in *The Hate U Give*, an adaptation of Angie Thomas's bestselling novel. Stenberg plays Starr, one of the few black students in her private high school, who witnesses the police shoot her friend in an incident that becomes a national flashpoint. The film has a great deal to say and no apologies to make about its outspoken message, even as it presents itself as a straightforward family drama. But *The Hate U Give* strikes a perfect balance between coming-of-age story and social drama. And in never sacrificing either of those two interests, it becomes a strong example of both.

**How to watch it:** *The Hate U Give* is available to digitally purchase on iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, and Vudu. It's also available to stream on Hulu with the Cinemax add-on.

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## *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017)

## I Am Not Your Negro - Official Trailer



The stunning documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* was directed by Raoul Peck. But it was written by writer and social critic James Baldwin — who died 30 years prior, in 1987. This isn't a documentary about James Baldwin, though it certainly is about him. Instead, it gives new life and voice to Baldwin. All of the film's narration (by Samuel L. Jackson) was written by Baldwin, mostly drawn from letters and notes he made toward a novel called *Remember This House* that was never published as well as other of his books and essays. By pulling together Baldwin's own words with footage — both images of news clips and civil unrest that Baldwin would have known well and clips of the writer himself, talking with interviewers, politely tearing them to shreds — *I Am Not Your Negro* becomes a document of a country by way of a keen observer and unsparing thinker. It is a cinematic essay-memoir taking white America to task, and it's a vital, uncomfortable one.

**How to watch it:** *I Am Not Your Negro* is available to digitally rent or purchase on iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, and Vudu. It's also streaming on Kanopy.



## *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018)

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK | Official Trailer



For his follow-up to his 2017 Best Picture winner *Moonlight*, director Barry Jenkins chose to adapt James Baldwin's 1974 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Set in Harlem, the story centers on a young black couple (played by Stephan James and newcomer Kiki Layne) who grew up together and fell in love. But then conflict takes over — not originating from inside their relationship, but pressing in from the outside world. *If Beale Street Could Talk* is set in the 1970s, but thanks to the way it confronts how sexual assault allegations, policing, and racism can interlock for communities of color, it feels incredibly contemporary, too. It's hard not to fall under its beautiful, somber, lustrous spell, and as a story about black American life framed as a love story, its images are indelible.

**How to watch it:** *If Beale Street Could Talk* is streaming on Hulu. It's also available to digitally rent or purchase on iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, and Vudu.

## *Loving* (2016)

Loving Official Trailer 1 (2016) - Joel Edgerton Movie



*Loving*, about the couple at the center of the landmark 1967 Supreme Court case that invalidated laws prohibiting interracial marriage, is not really a triumphant legal drama, it's more like a romance that happens to have a Supreme Court case in the mix. In making the political personal, the movie infuses an easily politicized story with complexity and quiet passion. Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga star as Richard Loving, a white bricklayer, and his wife Mildred Jeter, a woman of African American and Native American descent, who drew the wrath of the law when they married. It's a quiet, slow film; the Lovings are reticent to seek the spotlight, and the movie is fully aware that while much in the law has changed, the sentiments haven't shifted as easily. Real freedom, *Loving* suggests, is still out there on the horizon.

**How to watch it:** *Loving* is available to digitally rent or purchase on iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, and Vudu. It's also available to stream on Hulu or Amazon with the HBO add-on.

## *Quest* (2017)

Quest - Official Trailer



Jonathan Olshefski's *Quest*, a portrait of a North Philadelphia family, was shot over a decade and finally released in 2017. The film is a cinéma vérité look at the Rainey family, who operate a recording studio. But life doesn't always go as planned, and when tragedy hits the family, the documentary takes an unexpected turn. It's essential viewing that somehow captures the hope and pain of the 2010s — including life in the city as well as the broader political and social situation in America — better than either the Raineys or Olshefski could have ever imagined.

**How to watch it:** *Quest* is available to digitally rent on iTunes.

## *Rat Film* (2016)

## RAT FILM a film by Theo Anthony • Theatrical Trailer



*Rat Film* is about rats, yes — and rat poison experts and rat hunters and people who keep rats as pets. But it’s also about the history of eugenics, dubious science, “redlining,” and segregated housing in Baltimore. All these pieces come together to form one big essay about the ways that racism embeds itself in the fabric of a city and thus perpetuates itself. *Rat Film* accomplishes this by coming at it sideways, layering vignette on top of vignette so that the meaning of each only becomes clearer in light of the whole. It’s a fast-paced, no-holds-barred exploration of a damning history, and it accrues meaning as the images, sounds, and text pile up.

**How to watch it:** *Rat Film* is available to digitally rent or purchase on iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, and Vudu.

## *Selma* (2014)

## Selma Official Trailer #1 (2015) - Oprah Winfrey, Cuba Gooding Jr. Movie HD



David Oyelowo plays Martin Luther King Jr. in *Selma*, which follows King at the height of his influence, beginning with his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize win and ending with his famous march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery the following year. Directed by Ava DuVernay, it's a stirring illumination of the difficulties that King and his associates faced in gaining the support even of those who publicly praised their work, as well as arguments about tactics and goals within the movement. The film also dramatizes the personal pressure on King from political leaders at the state and federal levels, and the myriad ways that pressure threatened his fight. *Selma* is inspiring, yes, but it's also rousing and confrontational. King's words are often trotted out in support of various people's agendas, particularly in times of racial strife. But his life demonstrates a steely, radical determination and an unwillingness to bend to anyone who might stand in the way of justice.

**How to watch it:** *Selma* is available to digitally rent or purchase on iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, Google Play, and Vudu.

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