

The Ninth Floor: A Film Review

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This review examines the 2015 film *Ninth Floor*, directed by Mina Shum and produced by Selwyn Jacob. This documentary follows the events of the 1969 Sir George Williams University riots, exploring the events that led to the uprising and the lasting impact it had on the students involved. Through interviews with student activists like Rodeny John, Robert Hubsher, Anne Cools, Clarence Bayne and more, as well as archival footage from that period, the film emphasizes the racial injustices they faced and their struggle for equality in the eyes of the university administration. The film highlights how the university mishandled their complaints against their professor and continuously dismissed their demands for change. This dismissal of their grievances leads to a large-scale protest that resulted in the destruction of an entire computer lab on the ninth floor of the university. The analysis will explore how the film portrays the mismanagement of the students complaint and the escalation that led to the computer center. As well as the lasting impacts the protest had on both the individuals involved and the broader social movements it reflected at the time. It will also examine the documentary's use of visual and auditory elements to convey its message, tone, and how it connects the historical struggle for racial justice with modern day issues.

The documentary opens with an old television displaying several Black students discussing the concept of racism before transitioning to an interview with Rodney John, one of the student protestors from this period. In his interview, John recounts how he and other Black students were enrolled in a class with Professor Perry Anderson during the academic year of 1966-1967. This course was intended to prepare them for medical school. He explains that Professor Anderson frequently missed lectures, often skipped labs, and referred to the Black students using formal titles such as Mr., Mrs., or Miss, while referring to the White students by their first names. Eight to nine Black students consistently failed Professor Anderson's classes

each year, despite their best efforts and without any clear explanation as to why. John recalled how three other White students would copy his work word for word and receive perfect scores of 10, while he was graded only a 7. In 1968, six Black students filed a formal complaint against Professor Anderson. It took 10 months for the complaint to be looked at by the university administration. In response to their complaint, the university formed a hearing committee to process their grievances and decide what should be done. The committee was composed of two Black professors, two White professors, and one East-Indian professor. The committee was tasked with gathering information from both the students and Professor Anderson and then making a judgment. However, the university provided no clear guidelines for how the judgment should be made, leading to disagreements among the parties involved. Tensions escalated when some of the Black students approached the Black professors on the committee, challenging their position. This led the two professors to resign from the committee altogether because they believed they had a bias towards the students and were sympathetic to their cause. As hostilities continued to escalate and the university took little action to resolve the issue, the students decided to take their demands directly to the Director of the university. The students went to the Director's office and refused to let him leave until their concerns were dealt with. This led to one of the leading student activists, Kennedy Fredericks, being charged with extortion and kidnapping of the Director.

Next in the documentary the audience hears from Robert Hubsher, a Jewish student activist from Sir George Williams University. He describes the school's incompetence in addressing the issue and reveals that after the resignation of the two Black professors from the hearing committee, the afflicted students were not consulted on the formation of the new committee. When the hearing finally took place in 1969, it lasted four hours but ended without

any formal conclusions. The university proved to be unhelpful and dismissive to the student's concerns. Towards the end, Professor Anderson left at his lawyer's insistence. Frustrated by the lack of progress, Kennedy Fredericks rallied the students to act. He, as well as other student activists, wanted the university to listen to their demands: that the administration declare the committee formation illegal, that they meet with the students, and that the criminal charges against students be dropped. Kennedy Fredericks' call-to-action sparked riots within the student body, leading them to the computer center on the 9th floor of the university, which they occupied for nearly two weeks. Around 200 students, all feeling similarly frustrated, joined the protest in the computer lab and outside the university, believing that direct action was the only path forward. Outside the protest, a growing fear developed that the students might become violent. There was a constant presence of police officers lining the streets, while a mix of protestors and civilians gathered outside.

On February 10, 1969, after 11 days of occupation, the university reached out with the beginnings of an agreement, leading the students to believe they would finally be heard and that the ordeal would be over. However, after students had cleaned up and left the computer center, the university defaulted on the agreement and further postponed negotiations for two days. The students felt they had no rights, and the university had no responsibility. In response to this betrayal by the university, some of the more radical students took matters into their own hands and reoccupied the computer center. They barricaded the 7th floor with chairs and tables, threw computer cards out of the windows onto the streets, shattered glass and destroyed the computers. It was no longer about Professor Anderson but about being heard. As tensions mounted with no resolution in sight, violence between outside protestors and the police escalated. The police were called to remove the students, but as they began their efforts, black smoke emerged from the

computer center; someone had set it on fire. Outside, a mostly White mob gathered, chanting for the students inside to burn. The police had to break down the doors with axes to rescue the students, but once they were freed, they were beaten and arrested. After all the students were arrested, the White protesters were released, while the Black students were interrogated and charged.

The documentary proceeds to explore how the movement was reflected in other countries and places like Trinidad, Barbados and throughout the Caribbean via the Black Power movement. The film concludes by highlighting the lasting impact of the 1969 Sir George Williams University riots, while also shedding light on present day racial tensions through the perspective of Frederick Kennedy's daughter and grandson. It also further explores the fates of the activist students involved, revealing that five out of the six original students who filed the complaint against Professor Anderson graduated and went on to pursue successful careers in law, politics, and academia.

The documentary incorporates a variety of visual and auditory elements to enhance the impact of the message it is trying to convey. The use of vintage typewriters, classic cars and old newspaper clippings are used to evoke a sense of history, transporting the audience back to the year of 1969. The different camera angles and close-up stills of the elderly student activist's faces adds an intimate and captivating visual style, focusing on the emotions of the personal experiences involved in the protests. These shots highlight the humanity behind the movement, making the audience feel more connected to the story and struggle. The imagery of snow and scenes of people walking sets the mood of isolated reflection throughout the movie. As well, the music from Frederick Kennedy's daughter adds an emotional layer and connection to the film. Her music connects the past and present struggle for justice as she tells the audience her modern-

day story and fight for equality. The music complements the visual elements as it's slow jazz fits the creative shots and elements of the film, tying the story together. Combining these artistic elements constructs a visually compelling and immersive documentary that brings the story of the 1969 protests to life.

The documentary was produced in 2015, over 40 years after the events took place. This effects the tone of the documentary because it reshapes the message being portrayed. If this film were made at the time of 1969, the tone may have come off as angry and as a call to action, whereas in 2015 the tone of the film is calm, and reflective, giving the audience a complete overview of the event. The viewers get a birds eye view of the incident, revealing the nuances of the events leading up to the riot as well as the consequences. By revisiting this moment in history 40 years later, there is both a sense of historical reflection as well as urgency. The film emphasizes that racial discrimination is not only a thing of the past but an ongoing struggle. This is seen through Frederick Kennedy's daughter as she and her son face racism in their present day lives. Suggesting that the lessons from 1969 remain highly relevant to this day. The 2015 production date contributes to a tone of continued activism and highlights the importance of understanding history to inform present-day action.

The value of the *Ninth Floor* documentary remains in its exploration of racial discrimination and student activism as well as the lasting impact of historical events on society and the people involved. Some of the more profound impacts being how one year after the incident, the Ombudsman was created to deal with human rights complaints in Canadian Universities. This was a precursor to the Canadian Multinationalism Policy a few years later, showing just how wide reaching the impacts of this protest spread. By presenting the experiences of key figures, such as Frederick Kennedy's daughter, the documentary explores the long-lasting

consequences of this moment in history, and how it affected the mental health of the students and their future families. The film also examines the broader social and political significance of the protests by linking them to larger movements at the time like the Black Power movement, showing the cultural shift taking place in a broader context. This demonstrates the societal struggle towards equality and justice against discrimination. This documentary helps serve as an important reminder of the value of activism, resistance and standing up against discrimination.

Ultimately, the *Ninth Floor* documentary honors the courage and resilience of the students who stood up for their rights but also challenges the viewer to reflect on the current state of racial justice and activism. By exploring the personal stories of key activists, like Frederick Kennedy's daughter, the film emphasizes the enduring legacy of the protests and the emotional toll these experiences had on the individuals involved and their descendants. The film also connects the events of the Sir George Williams University riots to broader historical movements, demonstrating the social and political shifts they reflected at their time. The documentary's insightful tone allows the audience to explore themes such as race, activism and resilience, making it an important educational tool for understanding racial injustice both in 1969 and today.