Before IBM mainframes took over NASA’s number-crunching duties, the organization’s “computers” wore skirts. While an all-male team of engineers performed the calculations for potential space travel, women mathematicians checked their work, playing a vital role at a moment when the United States was neck-and-neck with (and for a time, running behind) the Soviets in the space race. As brash, bright, and broad as Hollywood studio movies come, “Hidden Figures” tells the story of three of these unsung heroes, all of them African-American, who fought a doubly steep uphill battle — as crusaders for both feminism and civil rights in segregated Virginia — to help put an American into orbit.

Today, there is nothing surprising about the fact that black women could handle such a task, and clearly NASA was realistic enough to recognize this at the time. What wasn’t necessarily evident in 1962 was that these “colored computers,” as they were called by NASA, deserved to be afforded the same rights and treated with the same respect as their white male colleagues — and what director Theodore Melfi (“St. Vincent”) illustrates via his simplistic, yet thoroughly satisfying retelling is just how thoroughly the deck was stacked against these women. “Hidden Figures” is empowerment cinema at its most populist, and one only wishes that the film had existed at the time it depicts — though ongoing racial tensions and gender double-standards suggest that perhaps we haven’t come such a long way, baby. Now 98, Taraji P. Henson’s character, Katherine Johnson (after whom NASA later named a computational research facility), lived long enough to see a black president, but not a female commander-in-chief. Like “American Graffiti” or “The Help,” “Hidden Figures” takes place in a colorful, borderline-kitsch version of the American past. (Practically brandishing its vintage details and stunning costumes, the film takes place at roughly the same time and place as Jeff Nichols’ “Loving,” which offers a less splashy notion of the era in question.) An early scene shows Katherine and colleagues Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe) repairing the Chevy Impala in which they carpool, when a white police officer pulls over in a scene whose tension hasn’t dissipated one iota in half a century. Once the cop realizes who they are, he volunteers to give the women a police escort. “Three negro women are chasing a white police officer down the highway in Hampton, Virginia, 1961,” quips Mary. “Ladies, that there is a God-ordained miracle!”

If only everyone’s mind could so easily be changed. At work, Katherine is promoted to a job with the Space Task Group, where manager Al Harrison (Kevin Costner, whose gum-chewing, crew-cut look nails the era) is too distracted to notice tension between his employees, especially boss’s pet Paul Stafford (Jim Parsons, playing the sort of reductive stereotype that talented minorities have been forced to settle for over the past century — not ideal, as characterizations go, though such payback seems only fair). Meanwhile, Dorothy takes orders from a curt, condescending white lady (Kirsten Dunst), who addresses Dorothy by her first name, and offers little help with her request for a promotion to supervisor, despite the fact Dorothy is already doing the job. As a woman, Vivian can empathize with the challenges of a discriminatory workplace; and yet, as a white woman, she doesn’t get it at all, oblivious to her
 subconscious role in keeping her black colleagues down ("Y’all should be thankful you have jobs at all," she says), for which Dorothy quite rightly puts her in her place.

As in “Mad Men,” so much of the gender and race dynamics are conveyed via body language, subtext, and the telling way characters look at one another. But unlike the wonderfully subtle writing for that relatively sophisticated series, the “Hidden Figures” screenplay — which Melfi and Allison Schroeder adapted from Margot Lee Shetterly’s newly published nonfiction book — has a tendency to deliver its message via direct, on-the-nose dialogue (e.g. after defusing the segregated-bathroom problem, Kevin Costner decrees, “Here at NASA, we all pee the same color!”).

The bathroom scene is by far the movie’s most satisfying, in that it follows a series of cartoonish vignettes in which Katherine must dash half a mile in high heels, clear to the West Computing Building, in order to relieve herself — a daily humiliation amplified by the sound of a new Pharrell track called “Runnin’.” (Also a producer on the film, Pharrell puts a playful, upbeat spin on the patent unfairness these women faced, culminating in his terrifically empowering, gospel-infused “Victory.”) As vital as these scenes are, it’s practically groan-inducing to watch Henson — a talented actress whose exaggerated portrayal of a math whiz suggests Michelle Pfeiffer’s smart, yet haggard pre-Catwoman secretary in “Batman Returns” — awkwardly pantomiming someone with a bladder about to burst, but that’s the broad acting style Melfi encourages, and it’s the kind that inspires spontaneous ovations at the end of implausible monologues. (As crowd-pleasing ingredients go, “Hidden Figures” has nearly everything except a scene of a cat being rescued from a tree.)

Henson’s co-stars manage to play their own recurring challenges in more convincing ways — best exemplified as the beautiful, self-confident Mary (Monáe, launching a formidable acting career, between this and “Moonlight”) petitions the judge to let her take the necessary night courses that will allow her to apply for an open engineering position at NASA. Spencer’s Dorothy also faces obstacles at every turn, but cleverly anticipates how the IBM (which amusingly can’t even fit through the door of the empty room that awaits its arrival) will render her division obsolete, and plans accordingly, making herself indispensable.

Among the male roles, Mahershala Ali is every bit as strong as Costner at playing a skeptical man quick to recognize Katherine’s talents — supplying the film’s only romantic subplot in the process — while all-American astronaut John Glenn (Glen Powell) doesn’t so much as hesitate to accept the computers’ contributions. Before the launch of his Friendship 7 vessel, Glenn says, “Let’s get the girl to check the numbers.” When Harrison asks, “Which one?” Glenn doesn’t miss a beat: “The smart one.”

**Film Review: 'Hidden Figures'**
LOVING

Release Date: November 4, 2016 (USA)
Genre: Biography, Drama
Directed by: Jeff Nichols
Featured: Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga
Length: 2 hours and 3 minutes
Rating: PG-13 (thematic elements)

SYNOPSIS

Loving tells the story of Richard and Mildred Loving, an interracial couple living in rural Virginia in the 1950s. The film opens with Mildred telling Richard that she is pregnant, and they decide to get married in Washington, D.C., where their matrimony will be recognized. After moving back to Virginia, local law enforcement arrests them for miscegenation. Richard and Mildred are given the option to suspend their one-year prison sentence if they agree to leave Virginia for 25 years. The couple moves to Washington, D.C., and begin a new life in the busy city.

After several years of raising their three children in D.C., Mildred still yearns for the safe, open fields of their hometown in Virginia. They decide that Mildred will drive back to Virginia with the children and Richard will join them a few hours later. Fearful that their return to the state of Virginia will reach law enforcement and they will be put in jail, Mildred writes Robert Kennedy to ask for his assistance. One day, Mildred receives a call from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) offering to take on the Lovings’ case to ensure that their right to marriage is protected. The ACLU lawyer, Bernie Cohen, tells the couple that their case may go all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT
THEMES IN THE FILM

- Human Dignity
- Right to Marriage
- Separation of Church and State
- Call to Community and Participation

OFFICIAL FILM TRAILER
http://bit.ly/2gG0I69
News of this ground-breaking case reaches the media, and the Lovings are flooded with requests for interviews. All throughout the case, however, the message from Richard and Mildred is clear: they are not interested in making national news; they want the world to know that they love each other and want their marriage to be recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia. Their life goes on as normal while the case is struck down by the Virginia Supreme Court and is moved to the Supreme Court of the United States. Months later, Mildred answers the phone in their house and learns that the Supreme Court has struck down the anti-miscegenation law and their marriage is now legal in all 50 states.

*Loving* is a quiet and honest tribute to the love that Richard and Mildred Loving shared. The film focuses less on the case brought to the Supreme Court and more on their relationship with each other and their three children. Ann Hornaday of the *Washington Post* gave this review of the film: “‘Loving’ is every bit as soft-spoken and subtly implacable as its protagonists. It lives up to its title as a noun and a verb, with elegant, undeniable simplicity.”

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What was your initial reaction to this film? What scene stood out to you?
2. What message does *Loving* have for today? What are the current political debates on marriage equality?
3. The Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States refers to the protection of an individual’s life and liberty. How do you interpret the terms “life” and “liberty”? What does Catholic social thought say about protecting each person’s life and liberty?
4. What role did unions play in the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision? How was the ACLU portrayed in the film? What does Catholic social thought say about unions and protecting civil rights?
5. Richard and Mildred Loving were a quiet couple who just wanted to spend their life together as a family, yet they became the face of the interracial marriage debate. How do “ordinary” people become activists? Think of another example of an “ordinary” individual who paved the way for a social justice or civil rights issue.
6. Who stood by Richard and Mildred throughout the film? Who actively stood in the way of their marriage? How can you stand by those who are working to safeguard civil rights today?

“Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual, and cannot be infringed by the State.”

- Supreme Court
  Chief Justice Earl Warren