

Fruitvale Station tells the story of Oscar Grant III

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31 July 2013

Many viewers walk into a showing of Ryan Coogler's first feature-length film, *Fruitvale Station*, already knowing the story of Oscar Grant III's murder by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) officer Johannes Mehserle in the early morning hours of January 1, 2009. The shooting of the unarmed 22-year-old father as he lay face down on the platform at the transit station that gives the film its name was recorded by multiple witnesses and uploaded to YouTube, sparking demonstrations.

Mehserle claimed the shooting was an accident and that he had intended to taser the prone young man instead. Given the difference in weight, carrying location and safety locks that have to be disengaged on the weapons, this is highly unlikely. Mehserle's 2010 travesty of a trial was moved to Los Angeles. Black jurors were excluded from the jury and paid expert witnesses were called by the prosecution. The judge instructed the jury that it could not consider a charge of first-degree murder.

Mehserle was acquitted of second-degree murder and voluntary manslaughter charges, and convicted of involuntary manslaughter. The judge gave him a two-year sentence, and with time served Mehserle was released after 11 months.

The case pointed up the inequality of a legal system in which the police, in the face of overwhelming evidence, receive a very light sentence for murder. Meanwhile, for the vast majority of the population, even minor and non-violent offenses often result in draconian sentences. The drive for "law and order" does not apply to the ruling elite and those whose job is to defend its rule.

Taking on the story of Oscar Grant was a bold move by the filmmaker. It could have descended quickly into polemic or romanticism. Ryan Coogler, only 27 years

old, is to be congratulated on avoiding these pitfalls. What he has written and produced is a moving and powerful portrayal of the contradictions of Oscar Grant and the challenges he faced. Coogler has shed light not only on Oscar's life, but also on the lives of millions of others.

The performance of Michael B. Jordan as Oscar is understated and natural. He's a man who on the one hand has served prison time, lost his job over punctuality issues, and, in an outburst born of frustration, threatened his ex-boss for not rehiring him. He also loves his daughter, tries to make a fresh start even when things are bleakest, and treats his family well, even when doing so means digging himself deeper into a financial hole. The mistakes he makes are not given short shrift in the film, and one can see the pressures he faces as he moves through his final day.

As the film opens, we see the crime itself; the scene on the platform as recorded by witnesses on their cell phones. The shot is fired. The screen goes black. We are then brought to the beginning of December 31, 2008—the start of Oscar's last day.

It does not start well, but with a disagreement with his girlfriend and mother of his child, Sophina (Melonie Diaz) over an infidelity. This is interrupted by their daughter Tatiana (Ariana Neal). Oscar texts his mother (Octavia Spencer) a "happy birthday" before the family settles uneasily into bed. Come morning, the non-stop activity of everyday life takes hold; getting Tatiana to school, Sophina to work, and trying to take care of the business of staying afloat.

Oscar alternately starts and puts out small fires—promising to help his sister with rent even though he himself has secretly lost his job, helping a stranger get a handle on a fish fry (and enlisting his grandmother in the endeavor), trying to get his job

back, failing and getting angry. Desperate for cash, he arranges a drug deal. After thinking back to a visit with his mother while he was in jail, however, he decides not to go through with it, in an effort to turn things around for the New Year. (Even here, he does not want to disappoint, and saves enough marijuana to give the person who was to buy the drugs something for the trouble of coming to meet him).

Oscar and his friends take the train into San Francisco, though they do not make the countdown for the New Year thanks to (a very realistic and all-too-frequent) BART delay. The evening for Oscar and his friends is, as with the day, taken up with small good deeds, goofing off, and encounters with bits of hope and ugly reality.

The fight that takes place on the ride home, and for which the BART police are called, starts and ends quickly, as most fights do. By the time the police arrive, Grant and his friends try to blend back in with the crowd, but are unsuccessful. They are literally put up against a wall and made to sit. Grant tries to calm his friends and to be calm, as the police are increasingly aggressive and abusive. The crowd watches, and the train, despite the police's ordering it to pull out, does not—affording witnesses the chance to record the events that ensue.

The chaos of the crowd, which is yelling and pleading for Mehserle (unnamed in the film, as are the other BART police involved) to “let him go” as Oscar is pinned to the ground, is momentarily silenced by the shot.

Coogler's handling of the event is masterful; the scene is horrifying, tremendously sad, and enraging, effectively turning the audience into witnesses to the crime.

The immediate aftermath of the shooting is a bit unevenly portrayed. While Melonie Diaz's Sophina is consistently convincing in her grief and sympathetic, Octavia Spencer seems to be acting in a few spots, as when she views Oscar's body and confesses that she had told him to take the train.

The final portion of the film includes stills of protests and vigils for Oscar Grant and information about Mehserle's serving only 11 months after his trial. This part of the case had not been widely publicized, and there were audible gasps from the audience when this viewer attended.

While it would be impossible to fully examine the last day of any individual in 90 minutes, Coogler has created an engaging and beautiful drama.

This is a film that displays some of the best possibilities of the medium. Certainly the timing of the film, coming as it does on the heels of the acquittal of George Zimmerman, is fortuitous. However, the true strength of the film lies in its straightforward and unblinking approach to the struggles that face so many young people today.

In both the Trayvon Martin and Oscar Grant cases, there were those in the media and the political establishment who depicted these tragedies and the outcomes of the trials in purely racial terms. Questions of class, joblessness, decaying infrastructure, the encouragement of vigilantism and other forms of social backwardness—all this is ignored by those who promote identity politics.

To its credit, however, *Fruitvale Station* does not depict the life and death of Oscar Grant in these terms. The outrage over the killing of Oscar Grant was not confined to African-Americans. Coogler's film suggests that the fate of Grant, a young man who was part of the most oppressed and vulnerable sections of the working class, raises broad social and political issues.

Oscar Grant III's death was tragic, but it is hardly isolated. In an era of rising police violence, growing social inequality and the attendant increase in the militarization of society, we will see further such tragedies. *Fruitvale Station* shows the human cost of these conditions. It has been given only a very limited release, and deserves to be seen by a wider audience.



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