

Master of Light, Ayoungman, Stay Awake, Riotsville, USA: Lives and struggles of the oppressed

Joanne Laurier
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This is the fourth in a series of articles on films from the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 21-May 1) that were made available to the WSWS online. The first part was posted April 26, the second May 4 and the third May 10.

Master of Light

Directed by Dutch filmmaker Rosa Ruth Boesten, with cinematography by Jürgen Lisse, the documentary *Master of Light* chronicles the remarkable story of George Anthony Morton, an immensely gifted painter who grew up in extreme poverty in Kansas City, Missouri. Untutored, he was accepted and studied at the New York Metro branch of the prestigious Florence Academy of Art. There, he underwent rigorous training in the Classical-Realist tradition of Renaissance painters. “Beauty can emanate from darkness as well as light,” Morton asserts in the course of the film.

He was born in September 1983. The first of 11 children, his mother was 15-years-old when she had George and was incarcerated various times during his childhood. At the age of 19, Morton was sent to a federal penitentiary, where he ended up serving 11 years as a non-violent offender. He was recognized as a promising painter, and his art helped him survive the whole decade of his 20s behind bars. Morton became the first African American to graduate from any campus of the Florence Academy of Art, where he won the competitive awards for Best Figure Drawing, 2015, and Best Portrait Drawing, 2016. He is the founder of Atelier South, Atlanta, Georgia’s first art workshop/studio, modeled upon six centuries of classicism.

In the documentary, we see Morton return to his hometown of Kansas City to face his family—in other words, according to the producers, a mother who “may or may not have set George up for a 12-year federal sentence in exchange for a lighter sentence for herself; his brother who was recently stabbed; his 11-year-old nephew, who is in imminent danger of going down that same path.” Recalling many difficult memories, Morton paints portraits of family members that shimmer with the inner life of their subjects.

“The world is just set up for people to lose,” argues Morton. Referring to his mother, he observes that “the system failed her. My mother had me at 15. We pretty much grew up together. She was a hustler.”

In a poignant sequence, George’s mother asks if her portrait is finished: “Hell no! I have to make it look like you’re going to start talking.” And that he is capable of doing!

Unhappily, if almost inevitably, the filmmakers cede too much to racial politics. They attribute George’s difficulties and those of his family members solely to “systemic racism.” Racism is undoubtedly a factor in the family’s condition, but poverty plagues nearly one in six residents in Kansas City, with African Americans accounting (disproportionately) for 25 percent of the poverty-stricken.

How many painters have emerged from the white or immigrant working

class population in Kansas City?

The comments of director Boesten along these lines are as typical as they are banal. She asserts in the film’s production notes: “Being a white filmmaker from Europe, making a film about a subject from a very different background came with tremendous responsibilities.” Artists have been creating works about people from “very different backgrounds” for a couple of thousand years. It comes with the territory, or ought to.

Although Morton too has been influenced, again almost unavoidably, by the current racist narrative, more profoundly, he attributes the nurturing of his incredible artistry to the tradition of naturalism “that existed before Rembrandt and all my favorite Old Masters ... They kept the torch burning for people like me to step up and take my rightful place in it.”

Ayoungman

In March 2019, 24-year-old Kristian Ayoungman, from the Siksika First Nation, was fatally shot in a racially motivated murder near Strathmore, Alberta. Holly Fortier and Larry Day’s short but candid documentary, *Ayoungman*, centers on the reaction of the Siksika Nation and the townspeople of Strathmore to the brutal episode.

Melody Ayoungman, Kristian’s impressive mother, speaks lovingly about her son: “My boy was very well known all throughout North America. As a young kid, he was a champion traditional dancer. Everyone knew him all over in Canada and the United States all the way to Arizona. His friends knew him for his rapping, Strathmore knew him for his hockey, he went to high school here, he played for the Okotoks Bisons and he got his certification as a heavy equipment operator.”

Brothers Kody and Brandon Giffen were the perpetrators of the crime. Brandon, the actual shooter, was charged with first-degree murder, but, in the end, convicted of manslaughter and given a light sentence. Melody laments: “First Nations are always, always for years and years, always put through injustice.”

The grieving mother attended every day of the trial: “I think I’m doing my part; I’ve been standing here for my boy all along and I’ll stand up for him forever, for all of my kids, and I’ll teach them right from wrong.”

One First Nations lawyer comments: “It was a modern-day lynching ... I can’t help but wonder if the roles were reversed, what if it was an indigenous man behind the gun ... if it had been a non-Native victim. Would the judge have found the same kind of leniency?”

The documentary’s postscript reads: “In Canada, despite accounting for under five percent of the population, Indigenous people made up 27.05 percent of all homicides in 2020.”

Stay Awake

Stay Awake by Jamie Sisley is a fiction film in which two teenage brothers navigate the nightmare of their mother’s opioid addiction.

Derek (Fin Argus) is continually sacrificing his aspirations to be an actor to his mother’s habit, while Ethan (Wyatt Oleff), a high school

senior, is not prepared to put off a full scholarship to Ivy League Brown University in the same cause. Mother Michelle (Chrissy Metz) tries her best but can't break free of the drugs prescribed by a cynical physician, who allows her to deliberately taint her blood work for a script.

In the film's production notes, director Sisley divulges her personal affinity for the story: "The themes and characters in *Stay Awake* mean the world to me since they're based on my childhood. My mom has fought an addiction to prescription drugs and opioids for most of her life. As teens, my brother and I tried our best to aid her through relapses, cycle her through treatment centers, and encourage her to seek out a sober lifestyle."

Competently made with affecting flashes, *Stay Awake* tends to be somewhat predictable and passive. As such, it does not break new ground. The filmmakers, however, should be given credit for tackling a social ill of enormous dimensions.

More Americans died of drug overdoses in 2021 than any previous year, reaching a grim milestone of 100,000 deaths. This is up 15 percent from the previous year, according to the recently released figures by the National Center for Health Statistics. Since the start of the 21st century, an overdose epidemic led by prescription pain pills, and followed by waves of heroin, fentanyl and meth, has killed more than 1 million people, according to the *Washington Post*.

Pharmaceutical companies, with the complicity of the political establishment, raked in profits from Oxycontin and Percocet prescriptions as innumerable children became orphaned due to a parent or caregiver's tragic overdose.

As the pandemic worsens and warmongering governments around the world pump trillions of dollars into the financial markets and military budgets, the opioid epidemic deepens, with its victims overwhelmingly young. Between 2015 and 2019, young Americans lost an estimated 1.2 million years of life from drug overdoses, according to a study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* in January.

Riotsville, USA

The documentary, *Riotsville, USA*, by Sierra Pettengill, draws on unearthed 1960s Pentagon footage of army-built model towns called "Riotsvilles," where the military and police were trained to respond to civil disobedience. The film, however, uses this material to present history as nothing but an endless racialist assault.

Riotsville's production notes describes itself as an "historic gaze from the riots in Chicago, Newark, and Detroit to the forces that aligned against these storied moments of Black rebellions." Along the same lines, in a statement, the director asks: "And crucially, how do you situate it [the Riotsville footage] within a nation founded on white supremacism, determined to launch a war against its Black citizens, on a loop for hundreds of years?"

The massive anti-Vietnam war movement at the time involved youth and students of all ethnicities, and a rebellious working class, black and white, was engaged in a powerful strike wave. Understandably, from their point of view, the FBI and Pentagon were terrified of and rehearsed for social upheavals through various means, including infiltration of left-wing groups, provocations and training for urban warfare.

The filmmakers do not place the inner-city riots in this broader, historical context. Outbursts in Philadelphia, Harlem and Rochester, New York in 1964; Watts in 1965; Cleveland and Chicago in 1966; culminating in the massive 1967 upheavals in Newark and Detroit—turned out to be harbingers of a revolutionary crisis that rocked the world capitalist system until the mid-1970s.

Central to *Riotsville's* narrative is its devotion to the Kerner Commission—named for its chairman, Illinois Democratic Governor Otto Kerner. Created in 1967 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the commission was officially assigned the task of uncovering the causes of the riots and proposing remedies.

article, ~~How~~ however, years since the WWS Kerner report: The urban riots of the 1960s and the remaking of American racial ideology," posted in March 2018, points to the reality behind the Commission.

"First," the WWS explained, "the commission drew the famous conclusion that the US 'is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.' Second, it held that 'white racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities.' And finally, the report stated that 'white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.' ...

"In sum, the label 'white racism' was used to whitewash the predatory and violent workings of the profit system in the cities and absolve American capitalism of its crimes—including the Vietnam War, which was not mentioned by the Kerner report summary, even though it drew so many soldiers, both white and black, from the cities." The Commission's general outlook meshes with that of the makers of *Riotsville, USA*.

Flowing from its emphasis on race, the Kerner Commission called for the hiring of more black police officers and the election of more black officials. Such policies have been implemented in many localities, and social conditions are worse than ever.

The question of police violence, one of the burning issues that lay at the heart of the urban uprisings of the 1960s, is presented by pro-Democratic Party groups like Black Lives Matter, and the makers of films like *Riotsville, USA*, as a purely racial question.

While racism and social backwardness on the part of individual police are of course involved, the largest number of victims of police killings are white and such violence is directly connected to mounting socio-economic inequality.

As the WWS pointed out in 2018, "America has indeed moved towards 'two societies' ... but not 'white' and 'black,' terms which are increasingly meaningless as racial intermarriage becomes commonplace and the fastest-growing segment of the population among young people is 'inter-racial' or 'other.' The fundamental polarization is along class lines, not those of race, between the tiny super-rich elite and the vast mass of working people, between the class that owns and profits, and that class that works, produces all wealth, and yet increasingly lacks even basic necessities." To many artists this understanding still remains a closed book.



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