

Till: A new film about the 1955 racist atrocity in Mississippi

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Directed by Chinonye Chukwu; written by Chukwu, Michael Reilly and Keith Beauchamp

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago, who, while visiting relatives in Mississippi, was brutally tortured and shot to death on August 28, 1955, for the “crime” of allegedly interacting with a white woman. His murderers, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, were tried and quickly acquitted by an all-white jury.

For 67 years, every recounting of the Till story, in numerous songs, poems, paintings, books (fiction and non-fiction), documentary films and other media, has horrified and outraged popular consciousness.

Till, directed by Nigerian-American filmmaker Chinonye Chukwu, is the latest dramatic rendering of the case. One of the new film’s co-writers is Keith Beauchamp, who directed the 2005 documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*.

Chukwu’s film opens with the playful, naive Emmett (Jalyn Hall), called Bobo, excited about his journey from his Chicago home to visit family in rural Mississippi. Emmett’s doting mother Mamie (Danielle Deadwyler), who works as a civilian clerk for the military, is apprehensive because of the dangers he might face. She urges him to conform to the behavior of his cousins.

Emmett travels by train with his Uncle Moses (John Douglas Thompson), called Preacher, and has his first experience with the Jim Crow system when all the black passengers are ushered into the back of the train as it crosses the Mason-Dixon line. He arrives in Money, Mississippi, in August 1955.

Working in the cotton fields with his sharecropper relatives does not dampen Emmett’s enthusiasm. After picking cotton all day, Emmett joins some local boys for a trip to Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market to buy candy. There, he has an encounter with white shopkeeper Carolyn Bryant (Haley Bennett). An innocent wolf whistle causes a fatal chain of events. (Emmett contracted polio at age six, leaving him with a persistent stutter, which he tried to overcome by whistling.)

During the night, Emmett is seized at gunpoint by Carolyn’s husband, Roy Bryant, and J.W. Milam, who break into Preacher’s house. Several black men are accomplices in the abduction. The murder of Emmett isn’t shown, but agonizing cries suggest the heinous nature of the act.

As a gruesome result, Emmett’s disfigured and mutilated body is dragged from the Tallahatchie River. Local authorities want to rapidly bury the corpse, but Mamie insists on its return to Chicago, and further, refusing a closed casket, insists, “The whole world has

to see what happened to my son.”

Her parents, John Carthan (Frankie Faison) and Alma Carthan (Whoopi Goldberg), introduce her to a cousin Rayfield Mooty (Kevin Carroll), who works with the NAACP. Outside the church where the funeral is being held, Mamie speaks to the mourners: “That smell is my son’s body, reeking of racial hatred. Now I want America to bear witness.”

Mamie heads to rural Mississippi to testify at the trial. Defense attorneys claim that because the body is so deformed, it is in fact not Emmett’s and that the NAACP, to advance its cause, has the live victim stashed away. Mamie’s trip south is a perilous one. Among her guards is Medgar Evers (Tosin Cole), who was himself assassinated by a racist eight years later.

The trial at the Sumner County Courthouse is a monstrous travesty of justice. At one point the camera focuses in on a sign describing the town of Sumner as a “A great place to raise a boy.” *Till*’s postscript mentions that only four months after the acquittal *Look* magazine published an article entitled “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi.” Milam and Bryant received \$4,000 for an interview in which they described in detail how they beat Till and then shot him in the head.

A racist atrocity that affected millions globally fully deserves to be treated—but the manner of its treatment is also an important question. What lessons are to be drawn from the crime? What was its ultimate source?

Till’s murder angered the most conscious and politically aware sections of the world’s population. He was the latest victim of a system of racial terror that had persisted since the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction more than three-quarters of a century earlier. As noted above, innumerable artists were appalled by the tragedy and impelled to represent it, in one fashion or another, including Langston Hughes, Harper Lee, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, Rod Serling, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Emmylou Harris, Dana Schutz and many others.

For the most part, writers, poets and songwriters of an earlier day saw in the episode—not neglecting its specific component of race hatred—an event with a global significance, one that galvanized opponents of every form of oppression.

The great weakness of Chukwu’s *Till*, corresponding to the contemporary obsession with race and gender, is that it treats the murder as an almost purely black issue, as a crime committed by a group of evil white people—by implication at least, part of an never-ending struggle between blacks and whites in America.

This essentially ahistorical and moralizing attitude has artistic and emotional as well as political consequences. It helps explain the film's decidedly pedestrian and largely uninvolved character. One is not left with the idea that an event of genuinely world-historical significance is taking place.

Mamie Till-Mobley had a broader outlook. (Mamie's third marriage was to Gene Mobley, played in the film by Sean Patrick Thomas.) The film shows her explaining to a crowd, "The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of all of us" but for the most part rejects that stance in practice.

The filmmakers are incapable of calling on the strongest dramatic forms, of drawing on the noblest ideas—above all, they are not interested in making a universal appeal. In the end, behind the Till murder lay the brutal character of class relations and the savagery of social and political reaction in America. *Till's* weakness is manifested in its inability to *concretely* explain what happened, i.e., to place the episode in its specific historical setting, and its tendency to treat the event in a timeless manner, as a murder-lynching that could just as well have taken place 20 or 50 years earlier.

Chukwu advances a largely self-obsessed and racially exclusivist outlook. The director told *EW* that "I didn't want to show what was physically done to Emmett. That is not the story. I didn't want to traumatize myself as a Black woman, and I didn't want to traumatize audiences."

She continued along these lines, asserting that "one of my greatest powers or strengths as a Black woman is my joy. It's resistance. And it is really trying to tap into a light inside of me that no form of oppression can take away from me. I think that that is very hopeful and inspiring and empowering. It's a source of empowerment that I hold onto to help me navigate a lot of the darkness that exists in the world."

Chukwu commented further, "Nobody can take away the beauty and the power and the light and the joy that exists within and amongst Black folks, no matter what kinds of atrocities we're having to navigate. There can be community and love and empowerment alongside the inherent pain and frustration and sadness that comes along with being a Black person in the world."

This type of cultural-nationalist and self-pitying approach works against treating the Till murder in all its objective social and historical seriousness. It drains the event of much of its dramatic content, which expressed the collision of great social forces. There is something passive and complacent about Chukwu's willingness to bathe in her "joy," while the world goes on unchanged.

Again, the context of the Till murder and the unprecedented character of the response it evoked, unlike that generated by countless other lynchings, are important to grasp. The murder occurred during the post-World War II economic boom, as the *WSWS* explained in 2012, "which brought with it a growth of the industrial working class. Masses of Southern blacks migrated to the North to secure better-paying factory jobs. The CIO unions such as the United Auto Workers reached their membership peaks, even as the pro-capitalist bureaucracy consolidated its grip on these organizations."

Anger at discrimination and abuse, building up for decades,

"erupted under conditions of growing strength and confidence among black workers and continuing militancy among industrial workers as a whole."

It should be obvious that Chukwu's concerns lead in another direction.

In fact, *Till* deliberately and damagingly narrows its perspective, encouraging the viewer to follow suit. It devotes an inordinate amount of time, for example, to lingering, ultimately pointless close-ups of lead actress Deadwyler's visage. Chukwu defends these by arguing, "I centered on the Black female gaze ... it's also my own kind of small act of resistance by really staying on this Black woman's face, on her journey and humanity in real time. There's something really beautiful and special about that [which] I'm really proud of doing."

In fact, *Till* unhelpfully attempts to turn Mamie Till-Mobley into a saint, further limiting the drama. Although Deadwyler competently carries the weight of the narrative, that Chukwu pours almost everything into a single performance becomes a diversion and another expression of the fact the director cannot or does not want to deal with wider social issues.

In presenting the killers and their defenders in Mississippi as the embodiment of a "white supremacist" society, the filmmakers are happy to leave it at that. But as the *WSWS* wrote in June 2004: "More than 50,000 people filed past the body of Emmett Till as his open coffin remained on display in Chicago for four days, during the Labor Day weekend. Pictures of the young Chicago schoolboy with his face horribly swollen and disfigured appeared on the front pages of newspapers and magazines across the country and around the world.

"The acquittal was met with shock and repulsion throughout the world. In Belgium, France and Italy newspapers carried front-page articles denouncing the verdict, and the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* ran an article headlined 'The Sumner Trial Marks, Perhaps, an Opening of Consciousness.'"

Unfortunately, *Till* is largely uninspired and uninspiring. The Emmett Till case helped bring into being the mass Civil Rights movement, which had the potential to shake capitalist America to its foundations.

Rosa Luxemburg once argued against concentrating *only* on the suffering of the Jews, insisting on understanding anti-Semitism as part of the wider oppression. "I am just as much concerned," she wrote, "with the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Blacks in Africa with whose corpses the Europeans play catch. ... I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears."

That spirit needs to be revived in American and global cultural life.



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