

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

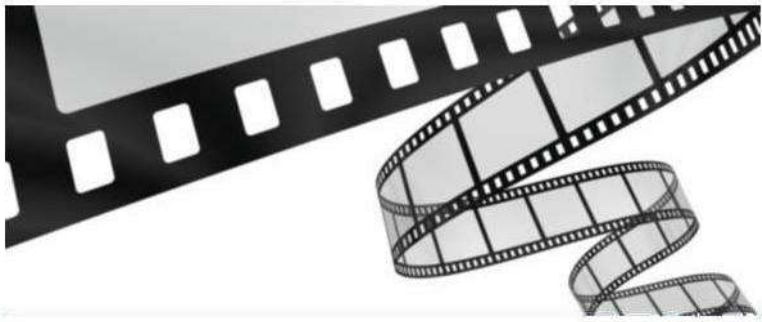
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Fruitvale Station 2013

85 mins USA

Director : Ryan Coogler

Writer : Ryan Coogler

Cinematographer : Rachel Morrison

Producer : Forest Whitaker

Cast : Michael B Jordan – Oscar Grant, Melonie Diaz – Sophina, Octavia Spencer - Wanda

The film was shot in 20 days in Oakland California and debuted at Sundance 2013 where it won the Grand Jury Prize. In Cannes the same year it won Best First Film.

The film reconstructs the final 24 hours in the life of Oscar Grant, a young black man who was shot dead by a police officer on a train platform in Oakland. The shooting happened while Grant was unarmed, handcuffed and lying face-down. (So for Fruitvale substitute all the earlier and later incidents of US police fatal incidents featuring young black men.)

The police had been called after a rowdy incident on the train; jumpy aggressive cops appeared to haul the suspects out of the carriage, and Grant was shot by an officer who later claimed that he intended to pull out his Taser, not his handgun. The incident was filmed by onlookers on their mobiles and this footage sparked rioting and an outcry. It is this footage which opens the film and by kicking it off in this manner the director acknowledges both the primacy of the authenticity and also casts a dark foreboding shadow over everything that follows.

The resulting film is a portrait of African American lives. Grant is not a heroic victim – he has a quick and violent temper, has been in prison and has shown a feckless attitude towards his responsibilities. However he is also attempting to reform himself and has the support of his family and ultimately also his girlfriend. Some episodes of his life have been conflated and some fictionally invented (in the sense that there is no eyewitness support for them.)

The end of the film makes overtly political points, which may /may not affect your overall view of it. The director gives Grant the benefit of the doubt that his life was at its crucial turning point and that he would be on the path to reform. Right up to the final credits it is not directed as an incendiary film as it focuses on the subject's humanity and assesses the tragedy as a personal one. It is also a slice of black-focused low –key drama in its own right. Some parallels have been drawn with Ken Loach's working class anti-heroes and his similar portrayal of volatile but deeply sensitive protagonists.

Fruitvale was released in July 2013 which coincidentally was just as George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering black teenager Tray von Martin. Both Coogler and Ava Du Vernay (director of Selma) led a retail protest after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri in November 2014. The subject matter of the film has become political even if the dramatization of the events does not read like this as you watch it.

Peter Bradshaw Guardian and BFI

Club Notices:

The next film – Exhibition - will be shown on June 2nd, starting at 8:00pm.