

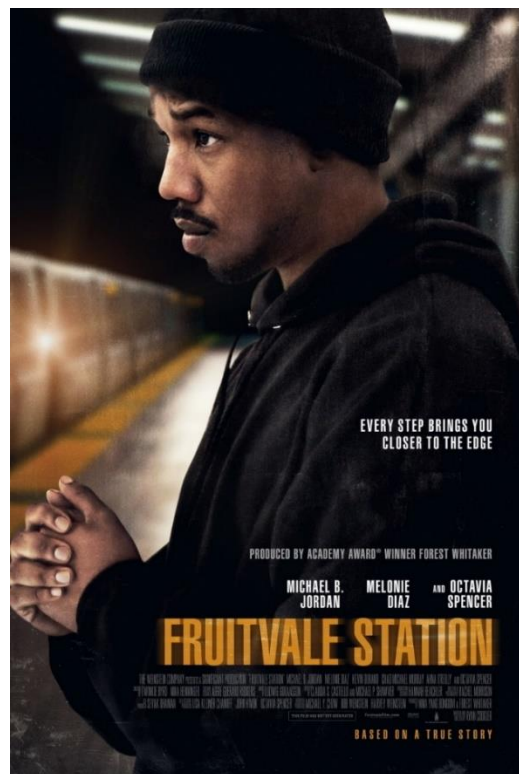
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Master 1 Essay

Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*:
The depiction of a racial crime in a post-racial America?



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Introduction

On New Year's Eve 2009, a young 22 year-old African American father named Oscar Grant III was fatally shot by a BART Police Officer on the Fruitvale BART Station in San Francisco, California, in front of multiple witnesses. Oscar Grant was unarmed when BART Police officer Johannes Mehserle shot him, claiming he had mistaken his gun for his Taser. The young African American father died in the hospital that morning leaving behind a four year-old daughter, Tatiana, and a grieving family. Oscar Grant's case is reminiscent of the beating of Rodney King in 1992 as both events were heavily mediatized due to the presence of video footage serving as evidence that establishes an undeniable truth that these events do occur. In Oscar Grant's case, several witnesses recorded videos via cell-phones and uploaded them on *Youtube*. They were instantly watched by thousands of Americans. The video of Oscar Grant being executed in front of a multitude of witnesses went viral and triggered riots all over the country, especially after Johannes Mehserle was convicted for involuntary manslaughter but acquitted of murder in 2010.

When Ryan Coogler, a rookie filmmaker from the Bay Area watched the video of Oscar Grant's shooting, he was deeply moved and affected by it as he realized that he and Oscar had a lot in common and that it could have been him on that platform, shot to death; so he decided to make a motion picture based on this story.¹

Black filmmakers like Melvin Van Peebles and Spike Lee have tackled race relations in the past and their daring and audacious depictions of an American flawed society earned them recognition as exceptional filmmakers. But the social context of the country has evolved and so did the film industry. Because of the development of social media, topics that were unmentioned or forgotten in the 1980s and 1990s resurfaced in the 2000s and 2010s. That is the case of racial tensions and police brutality. By choosing to cinematographically represent Oscar Grant's story, Ryan Coogler tackles both subject matters in *Fruitvale Station*. The film covers the last twenty-four-hours of Oscar Grant before his death as he interacts with his family and friends, deals with personal issues and live his life as a 22 year-old would. The success of the film is partly due to a talented director, to an exceptional ensemble cast like Michael B. Jordan, Melonie Diaz or Octavia

¹ *Fruitvale Station* Production Notes on the *Weinstein Company* website (<http://twcpublicity.com/movie.php?id=169#production>) 3.

Spencer who had just won an Oscar for *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011) and to well-known black producers such as Forest Whitaker and Oprah Winfrey. The other element that made it successful is that it is based on a true story as that alone conveys immediacy to an audience.

Analyzing the racial context in which the film was released will determine the importance of race in Ryan Coogler's depiction of the death of a young African American by the hands of a white law enforcer during an African American presidency. Some scholars claim that the election of Barack Obama confirmed the beginning of a post-racial era where race would be meaningless. This research paper will therefore focus on examining Ryan Coogler's representation of Oscar Grant's shooting in relation with the film's contemporary context of an alleged post-racial America to conclude how his portrayal shows the complexity of race, policing and prejudices.

In order to understand and analyze the film's position on these given topics, I will first focus on the question of race and its importance in the film. This first part will use various definitions and illustrations of post-racialism that will then be confronted with Coogler's depiction of race and race relations in the film. Then I will focus on the representation of police misconduct in Coogler's motion picture and other films to underline *Fruitvale Station*'s intricate and direct connection with America's contemporary context. This second part will also outline aesthetic similarities between Coogler's *Fruitvale Station*'s portrayal of black youth and New Jack Films of the 1990s. Finally, I will demonstrate that the filmmaker's narrative gives special attention to its central protagonist Oscar by centering the narrative on Grant's relationships and actions as a human being in order to trigger empathy from the spectator for dramatic purposes.

I. *Fruitvale Station*: A depiction of American racialization

The question of race in America has always raised debates among many scholars because mentioning race engenders tensions among white and nonwhites.² The Oxford dictionary defines race as “a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language.”³ It is interesting to note that no biological reference to race is made in the dictionary’s definition which confirms professor Yehudi O. Webster’s belief that race is not a biological component nor is it a matter of skin color but a problem of racial classification that “bedevils American society.”⁴ To Webster, racial classification is problematic and enlarges the gap between races. Comforting Webster’s theory on race, Joshua Glasgow holds that race should be regarded as a social construction and not as a biological component.⁵ To Glasgow, race is defined by who an individual becomes in society and not who he or she was born as. Categorizing people by their skin color has brought tensions for centuries, first through slavery, then by decades of legal racial segregation in southern states. In spite of these assumptions, as early as 1903, W.E.B Dubois wrote in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* that, “the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line”, reaffirming the existence of a clear division between being Black and being White in America.

Less than twenty years after the Civil Rights Act, in 1981, Donald Kinder and David O. Sears coined the notion of “symbolic racism”, a modern subtler form of racism based on the belief that black people are inferior to white people and are responsible for their precarious conditions⁶. Sears also believed that symbolic racism acted as a replacement of the segregation legislation, which was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1954.

Although some Americans took refuge in a subtler form of racism, others did not hold back their deep-rooted hate for black people and committed hate crimes against black individuals. According to the LA County District Attorney’s Office, a hate crime is “a criminal act or attempted criminal act against an individual or group of individuals because of their actual or perceived race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, or disability.”⁷ The

² Yehudi O. Webster, *The Racialization of America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 2.

³ The *Oxford Dictionary* online (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/race>).

⁴ Webster 27.

⁵ Joshua Glasgow, *A Theory of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2009) 7.

⁶ Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears (1981). "Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism versus Racial Threats to the Good Life". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 40 (3): 414–431.

⁷ Definition found on the Gender Equity Resource Center at UC Berkeley. (http://geneq.berkeley.edu/what_is_a_hate_crime).

particularity of Oscar Grant is that what could be seen as a hate crime occurred within a police arrest. In depicting Grant's death on screen in *Fruitvale Station* (2013), Ryan Coogler chose to focus on racial tensions, the victimization of black men and the flaws of law enforcement in America. Whether or not Oscar Grant's murder was depicted as a hate crime – or racial crime – depends on the filmmaker's choices of representation, but, first, the context in which the film was shot and released needs to be explained in order to understand the director's filmmaking decisions.

1.1 American history: From racial segregation to discrimination

From the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896, race-based practices were legally allowed through what Eric Schnapper called in 1985 “race-consciousness”⁸ which is the process of considering race as a standard classification of oneself. The process resulted in racial separatism practices such as the “Separate but Equal doctrine” legalizing racial segregation in the South. Thus, the racial barriers between black and whites could not have been stronger as it literally divided the South of the United States into two distinct racial groups. Therefore, the doctrine supposedly aiming at equality actually legally promoted the classification of a Black and White race and clearly categorized Southerners by their skin color up until the Supreme Court decisions of the 1950s and the 1960s. The 1964 Civil Rights Act also put an end to discrimination notably on the basis of race. While affirmative action was seen as a means to alleviate the impact of thousands of years of segregation and discrimination, it was quickly seen as a form of discrimination. In 2015, Sherrow O. Pinder described affirmative action as a “race-conscious program to address the complex genealogy of the unequal position of black people and other racialized ethnic groups”.⁹ Even before Pinder, in 1992, Webster qualifies such resolutions as dangerous by stating:

Racial solutions are developed for racial problems; these solutions, however, generate more racial problems. Jim Crowism produced the civil rights movement, which called forth affirmative action, black power and multiculturalism, which foster tensions between nonwhites and whites. Identical discussions of racial problems repeat themselves decade after decade, indeed century after century. Such are the fruits of racialization. Neither whites nor blacks, benefit from it.¹⁰

⁸ Eric Schnapper, “Affirmative action and the Legislative History of the Fourteenth Amendment”. 71 Va. L. Rev. 753. *Virginia Law Review* (June, 1985).

⁹ Sherrow O. Pinder, *Colorblindness, Post-Raciality, and Whiteness in the United States* (New York: Suny Press, 2015) 1.

¹⁰ Webster 7.

In this statement, Webster alludes to the fact that racial history is repeating itself and is marked by “solutions” that still frame race as a central element of the said solutions. It is therefore interesting to consider the concept of post-racialism, as the latter strictly eliminates race.

1.2 Post-racialism in the age of Obama: A myth or reality?

As Sherrow O. Pinder indicates, “post-raciality simply means that, in the United States, race no longer matters and racism is disappearing.”¹¹ Could the election of a black president illustrate a colorblind America or lead Americans to believe it? As Sandra Barnes and Zandira Robinson suggested, “the election of a black man to the highest office of the most powerful country in the world signifies, for some, the end of the “race problem” and constitutes the ultimate reparations for slavery and Jim Crow.”¹² But for some others, like history professor Clarence E. Walker, as “American democracy was created on a racial foundation” the simple election of a black president did not “signal the end of a ‘White America’”¹³. Indeed, to Walker, racialization is so anchored in American minds that it would take several generations to totally erase the racial stratification on which America was based.

Thomas J. Sugrue brings another analysis and insists on the fact that it is a matter of individual or group perception. He suggests that white people are more likely to accept America as a colorblind and post racial nation, whereas black people are more skeptical, and still tend to perceive the country as race-conscious. Supporting Sugrue’s analysis, Beth Roy, a sociologist, holds that: “to have a black man in the White House marks significant social progress on so many different levels. Some Americans (mostly white) believe it means that there is no racism in America anymore. Others (mostly people of color) fear it means the end to confronting racism.”¹⁴ Roy adds that considering the fact that black Americans are more likely to experience discrimination, they are less likely to believe that race does no longer exist¹⁵.

¹¹ Pinder 2.

¹² Sandra L. Barnes and Zandira F. Robinson, *Repositioning Race: Prophetic Research in a Postracial Obama Age* (New York: State University New York Press, Albany, 2014) 3.

¹³ Clarence E. Walker, *Daedalus, Race in the Age of Obama, Volume 1* (Winter 2011).

¹⁴ Beth Roy. *41 Shots...and counting: What Amadou Diallo’s Story Teaches Us about Policing, Race, and Justice* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009) preface/xvi.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

President Barack Obama's opinion on the issue is illustrated in a speech on July 19th 2013, in the context of the murder of a young African American, Trayvon Martin. Barack Obama's function as President requires him to be able to reach out to all citizens and consider them only as Americans. According to Marcia Dawkins, Obama's success at reaching out to Americans lies here, in his exposition of his mixed-race origin as he uses it as a political tool to address to all racial groups¹⁶. In the following excerpt, Obama suggests that, although behaviors and positioning regarding race look promising, America is not a post-racial society yet:

And let me just leave you with a final thought: that as difficult and challenging as this whole episode has been for a lot of people, I don't want us to lose sight that things are getting better. Each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race.

It doesn't mean that we're in a post-racial society. It doesn't mean that racism is eliminated. But you know, when I talk to Malia and Sasha and I listen to their friends and I see them interact, they're better than we are. They're better than we were on these issues. And that's true in every community that I've visited all across the country.¹⁷

In this statement, President Obama tries to bring an optimistic note to the tragedy that hit Florida and Trayvon Martin's family by comforting African American people that progress has been made. However, by putting so much emphasis on "better", the statement also reveals Obama's skepticism regarding a present post-racial era. Most importantly for this current research, in spite of the context of his address, that is the murder of a black teenager, Obama frames his analysis of post-racialism along racial progress in the conclusion of the speech. Here, his conclusion differs from Cornel West's analysis in *Race Matters*:

Racial progress is undeniable in America. [...] Yet, the legacy of white supremacy lingers – often in the face of the very denials of its realities. The most visible examples are racial profiling, drug convictions and death-row executions. And the less visible ones are unemployment levels, infant mortality rates, special education placements, and psychic depression treatments.¹⁸

While Barack Obama acknowledges racism and ends on an optimistic note putting the emphasis on the behaviors of future generations, here Cornel West admits that progress has been made but points to a new form of structural racism.

¹⁶ Marcia Dawkins. "Mixed Messages: Barack Obama and *Post-Racial* politics". *Spectator* Vol.30 (2): 9-17.

¹⁷ Transcription of remarks made by President Obama in *The Guardian.com* "America is not a post-racial society" on July 19 2013.

¹⁸ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, 2001) Preface Viii.

Although one must note that Cornel West's analysis was written in the early 1990s, in 2014, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva sums up the situation as he suggests that "the new racial order that has emerged – the "new racism" – unlike Jim Crow, reproduces racial domination mostly through subtle and covert discriminatory practices that are often institutionalized, defended with coded language, and bonded by the racial ideology of color-blind racism."¹⁹ Bonilla-Silva also introduces an interesting point as he suggests that color-blindness is used to both "preserve white privilege" and "deflect charges of racial discrimination". In other words, colorblindness is used so as to take distance from the responsibility of practicing racial discrimination. In addition, by using a colorblind vocabulary, by mentioning the social class of a person instead of his or her race, racial discrimination is hidden and coded as suggested above. Similarly, Robert L. Reece illustrates color-blind racism²⁰ by taking the example of white people being asked about their take on affirmative action. Even though they assert that they are colorblind, they tend to oppose affirmative action programs raising questions such as "Why should we use discrimination to combat discrimination?" and "Two wrongs don't make a right"²¹. Reece even adds that some even blame black people for "playing the racial card" which demonstrates that some people are not colorblind but are driven by a past of racial references and that race still matters.

On a higher political scale, another example of a subtle racist codification is found in Thomas J. Sugrue in *Le Poids du Passé, Barack Obama et la question raciale*, who makes an interesting point as he suggests that Obama was the first president suspected of being "Un-American" as a lot of Americans speculated that he was born outside the United States²². Thomas Sugrue implies that because of Obama's blackness, and therefore because of his race, Obama's legitimacy as the 44th President of the United States was challenged and questioned more than ever before. Such information emphasizes American skepticism regarding post-racialist theories and frames the racial conceptual context in which Ryan Coogler narrated the murder of Oscar Grant in 2013.

¹⁹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva with Trenita Brookshire Childers in *Repositioning Race*, 24.

²⁰ Robert L. Reece, *Repositioning Race* 73-74.

²¹ Reece 74.

²² Thomas J. Sugrue, *Le Poids du Passé/ Barack Obama et la question raciale* (Translated by Caroline Rolland-Diamond and Ninon Vinsonneau, Princeton University Press, 2010)143-144.

1.3 *Fruitvale Station*: A representation of post-racial skepticism?

In this subpart I will demonstrate that Ryan Coogler's depiction of Oscar Grant's murder in *Fruitvale Station* debunks the theory of a post-racial America and illustrates the filmmaker's skepticism on racial blindness.

1.3.1 Depicting race relations

When watching the cinematographic adaptation of Oscar Grant's case, it becomes clear that according to the filmmaker, "race matters"²³. As the film is a fictional construction of a true story, it relies on the filmmaker's representational choices. Indeed, what a director chooses to represent can help understand his or her point of view. In *Fruitvale Station*, Ryan Coogler's racial consciousness is omnipresent because the question of race relations is everywhere in the film pointing to the fact that race centrally matters to the director. The first indicator of that racial consciousness is the fact that very few white characters are depicted in the film. The cast is mostly ethnic and minority-oriented, either African-American or Hispanic (Oscar and Sophina's family and friends). Some white characters are either in the background, or are antagonist to the main character (for instance, Oscar's white cellmate who will trigger his death toward the end of the film).

However, there are still some attempts at interracial discussions but they seem really staged and intrusive given the fact that they are bluntly introduced to the narrative. Indeed, both times Oscar initiates a conversation with white characters, it is a hazardous environment that suggests a forced conversation that Ryan Coogler conveniently uses to express his post-racial skepticism. The particular scene I am referring to is the one at the supermarket where Oscar gives a piece of advice on which fish to fry to a white female customer named Katie. Beyond depicting a friendly interracial conversation, the scene emphasizes the characters' racial consciousness. Indeed, in a very short discussion he has with Katie, Oscar finds time to mention the question of race when he asks her if her friend is black pointing to the fact that racial classification is strongly anchored in the film's central characters.

²³ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Second Edition, Boston: Beacon, 2001).

Additionally, the scene puts forward a racial distance between the two characters, as first, Katie's problems seem less important than Oscar's as she only worries about which fish to fry while he tries to keep his job or get it back. Then, the way Katie is portrayed points to Ryan Coogler's skepticism of racial blindness. Indeed, the female character seems bothered when Oscar questions her about her friend being Black. At the beginning of the scene, Katie's body language suggests that she is uncomfortable with him because the camera is positioned so as to depict Katie distancing herself from Oscar as she shifts right to the extremity of the camera when he addresses her.



00:11:51 – Oscar advising a white female customer at the supermarket where he used to work.



00:11:59 – Katie slightly steps away from Oscar.

She also looks down when she answers that her friend was not black but probably knew a lot of black people, suggesting that race is a sensitive subject for white characters but not for black ones. Ryan Coogler defends this scene by claiming that in the Bay Area, race “comes up in discussion,” adding “people talk about it more in real life than they do in movies,” and concludes “I wanted to capture of that reality of how we talk about things, both in public situations and in private situations.”²⁴ On the other hand, Katie's discomfort is explained by movie reviewer Steven D. Greydanus as follows:

From Katie's perspective, a young, unknown black man on the near side of the deli counter talking to her is an intimidating presence; a black man on the far side of the counter wearing an apron is a safe, trustworthy one. When the latter vouches for the former, that makes Oscar trustworthy too. If you are tempted to protest that this doesn't make Katie a racist, you're missing the point. The point is the sort of constant challenge that Oscar faces every day of his life because of the color of his skin.²⁵

²⁴ Alyssa Rosenberg. “Fruitvale Station Director Ryan Coogler on Filming Police Brutality, the Bay Area, and Trayvon Martin”. *Thinkprogress.org*. July 12, 2013.

²⁵ Steven D. Greydanus. “Black Lives Matter: Watching ‘Fruitvale Station’ one year after Eric Garner”. *The Crux*. July 17, 2015.

While I would not go as far as considering Katie as racist, Steven D. Greydanus does submit an interesting point here by underlining that Katie's behaviour sets an example for what the character may have experienced on a daily basis when approaching white young women because of the color of his skin, hence underscoring Katie's distancing from Oscar while politely and respectfully interacting with him. Although the scene may not reveal Katie's racism, as suggested by Greydanus, it unveils her race/color consciousness.

Another interracial scene is introduced in the narrative when Oscar and Sophina are out celebrating the New Year and a married couple comes when the pregnant wife needs to go to the bathroom. While the wife and Sophina are out of the shot, the camera centers on Oscar prospecting the man's hand when he sees a wedding ring and his body language suggests that he envies the white man or at least that he would consider marrying Sophina, if he could. Oscar then engages a conversation with him about wedding and probable future plans.

OSCAR: How long have you been married?

WHITE MAN: 8 years. Are you thinking about it?

(Oscar nods)

WHITE MAN: What's stopping you?

OSCAR: No money.

WHITE MAN: Sure ain't easy, we had nothing when we got married. I wasn't working at all.

OSCAR: No shit?

WHITE MAN: I wasn't working at all and she's a teacher.

OSCAR: How did you get the ring?

WHITE MAN: I stole it. I was good with credit cards. I will not go down that road.

OSCAR: I'm cool with that.

WHITE MAN: Then I got my business started. I bought her the ring she wears now.



00:56:30 – Oscar chats with a white man.

This dialog is paradoxical here because on the one hand, the conversation between the two men establishes that poverty and theft are not race-related as the white man used to be poor and first stole a ring for his fiancée but on the other hand, it is revealed that the white man eventually became a successful self-made businessman and encourages Oscar to do the same – as emphasized by a camera close-up on the man giving Oscar his business card – although his death at the end of the film deprives him of occupying such a position. So, like the previous scene with the white customer, although this scene may seem random and casual, it is part of the filmmaker’s attempt at establishing a racial distance between the characters. It is notably stressed by Oscar as he seems amused that the white man was poor to begin with suggesting that Oscar associates white people with success. Indeed, Oscar’s body language and the dialog suggest that the white character acts as a model of success for Oscar. Still, the racial distance is visible on screen as Michael B. Jordan portrays Oscar as hesitant and not confident that he will succeed one day which reinforces the racial barrier between the two characters.

In conclusion, both these interracial scenes contribute to accentuate the characters’ racial consciousness but it seems that those scenes serve another purpose of drawing empathy and sympathy from the audience. The filmmaker used these scenes as motifs to reinforce Oscar’s altruistic personality and make him a likable person by portraying him as friendly and forthcoming to white people. Ryan Coogler’s intention was surely not to put white characters at the center of the narrative, it was to point out that the racial problem is valid and serves *Fruitvale Station*’s context.

1.3.2 Depicting an impoverished black neighborhood

In 1978, in *The Declining Significance of Race*, William Julius Wilson, an African American sociologist, illustrated the theory that race was replaced by social class and that more and more factors pointed toward the notion that being poor meant being black because black people composed the “underclass” category of class²⁶. Wilson showed that social inequalities equaled racial inequalities. In 2008, President Obama supported such reading and reported on America’s sad heritage by declaring:

²⁶ William Julius Wilson. *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Third Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011) 157.

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools...the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students. Legalized discrimination...meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white... A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of black families – a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods...all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.²⁷

In this speech, Barack Obama places the African American people as “victims” of America’s historical heritage in order to give a logical explanation as to why a large majority of African Americans are suffering from poverty and unemployment. Indeed, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics report for 2008 highlights that black or African Americans are twice as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts (7.9% for black or African Americans to 4.3% for white Americans)²⁸. Although Obama was setting the context for his welfare program, he blames a century of racial discrimination and acts as a witness of the painful consequences of such practices on black families. He also blames a former American system once heavily based on racial consciousness and underlines the fact that the various stages in American history make the nation responsible for the precarious living conditions most of black “students”, “men” and “families” are subjected to. Similarly, two years before, Robert D. Crutchfield, Ross L. Matsueda, and Kevin Drakulich suggested:

Social disorganization theory suggests that neighborhoods with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities may have high rates of violence in part because of low socioeconomic status, resulting from joblessness and low-quality jobs, which contribute to community disorganization, loss of control over youth, and high rates of crime and violence.²⁹

In their book, these scholars argue that because poor African Americans are confined in already poor neighborhoods, the high rates of crime and violence is justified by what Obama called above “a lack of economic opportunity” as also illustrated by Kalil and Whiteman:

According to 2009 Census statistics, almost 26% of Blacks are impoverished—at least twice the rate of both Whites and Asians. Additionally, more than 50% of Black children are growing up in poverty.

²⁷ Barack Obama. “A more perfect union” (March 18 2008).

²⁸ US Bureau of Labor Statistics (Household data: Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population by sex, age, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2008 annual averages.)

²⁹ Robert D. Crutchfield, Ross L. Matsueda, and Kevin Drakulich. *The Many Colors of Crime: Inequalities of Race, Ethnicity, and Crime in America* (New York: New York Press University, 2006) 199.

Whites are more likely than their Black counterparts to complete high school (89.4% and 80.0%, respectively) and to earn a four-year college degree (30.0% versus 17.3%, respectively)³⁰

These alarming numbers show, as Wilson stated, that African American social opportunities are limited to poverty, unemployment leading to a lack of carrier opportunities. Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station* also correlates post-racial skepticism as a product of a lack of social progress regarding the Bay Area African American population. Indeed, the director puts the emphasis on settings using a "Ghetto" aesthetic in order to show the lack of integration in schools. For instance, in the scene where Oscar picks up his daughter at school, the camera follows Oscar through a tracking shot as he walks across the local school's classroom and out to the playground so as to put the spectator in a witness position and make him or her aware of the conditions the film's character live in. Besides, as the scene primarily focuses on the father/daughter relationship between Oscar and Tatiana, Ryan Coogler seized the opportunity to show the characters' surroundings by panning the camera around them in order to underline the presence of a black teacher and other black pupils, which reinforces the racial barrier between the characters. Camera rotation makes it also clear that the school does not have the funds to provide more proper and sophisticated educational equipment. This problem can be seen as the result of this confinement and lack of economic prosperity that characterizes these enclosed neighborhoods. Putting Oscar in such environment victimizes even more his condition as an impoverished black character drawing additional empathy from the audience. Besides, employment is also precarious in *Fruitvale Station* and ethnic minorities are depicted as having low paid jobs such as waitressing or working in supermarkets.



00: 30:37 – Oscar picks up his daughter at school.

³⁰ See Kalil and Wightman 2010 "Parental Job Loss and Children's Educational Attainment in Black and White Middle-Class Families."

1.3.3 Depicting an American “racial-consciousness”

As suggested by Thomas Sugrue previously in this research, black people are more likely to think about race as a determining factor of division than white people. In other words, they are more likely to be conscious of racial differences while Sugrue holds that white people tend to think race is not a social factor anymore³¹. As Sherrow O. Pinder stated, post-racialism will only occur if people stop using race as a classifying factor and move away from racism³². Yet, in his representation of Oscar Grant’s family, Ryan Coogler puts the emphasis on their black identity. In the contemporary context the film was shot in, Coogler depicted a sense of black pride pointing at race-consciousness within Grant’s own family mostly through Oscar’s social encounters with his close family. For instance, when Oscar’s sister calls him, she asks him to buy a birthday card for their mother and she stipulates “Don’t get me no fake-ass card with white people on it. I want a black card”. A series of analyses can be made here: Oscar’s sister is expressing her black identity by taking distance with white people and with having representations of her own. Moreover, a few scenes later, Oscar is seen with that birthday card but with white people on it, the exact opposite of what his sister wanted and when Oscar shows the card to his uncle and grandfather, they are portrayed as having the same reaction his sister probably would have had. Coogler’s choice to depict that scene is interesting because it demonstrates that Coogler wanted to portray black families as proud of who they are. Another scene depicts this notion of “black pride”³³ in the scene in which Oscar’s grandfather and uncle have a conversation on football teams and his uncle mentions that he is cheering for the Steelers because they have black uniforms, black players, and that black coach have black wives. Their insistence on blackness may be to assert their racial belonging. Very interestingly, Coogler puts the emphasis on a united family along racial identity, especially when considering the filmmaker’s empathic construction of the central character. Most revealingly, it also alludes to the race-consciousness of Grant’s family.

³¹ Sugrue 101.

³² Pinder 8.

³³ Lois Tyson. *Learning for A Diverse World: Using Critical Theory to Read and Write about Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 20.



38:40 - Oscar holding a birthday card with white people on it.



40:00 – Oscar's family discussing supporting Football teams.

In all the points made in this analysis, the skeptical reading of the post-racialist theory among the film's African American characters has been illustrated by Coogler's depiction of the race-conscious characters he chose to introduce. I would argue that Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station* does not only reject post-racialism as a theory but also puts the emphasis on "regressive race relations" as Kimberly Fain puts it³⁴.

It is also important to note that the film was theatrically released in 2013 in the United States, during a decade marked by the extensive mediatized coverage of interracial manslaughter acts committed by law enforcement officers against African Americans, among them were Ramarley Graham, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams shootings in 2012 and Jonathan Ferrell, Renisha McBride shootings in 2013. This fact is important because it is determinant in the sense that moviegoers see the film with a particular point of view given the contemporary context of "regressive race relations" and mass media depictions of police misconduct on black people. This exact relation of racial tensions and police excessive use of force in the contemporary context of *Fruitvale Station* is the primary focus of the second part of this research analysis.

³⁴ Kimberly Fain. *Black Hollywood: From Butlers to Superheroes, the Changing Role of African American Men in the Movies* (California: Praeger, 2015) 185.

II. *Fruitvale Station*: Race, violence and policing

I previously mentioned that, although Ryan Coogler's vision of America could have improved with the election of Obama, he had reasons to reject post-racial theories. First, because according to the U.S Census Bureau, in ten years, African Americans still have the highest poverty rate (23.9% African Americans were beneath the poverty threshold against 10.3% white Americans in 2002 and 27.6% black citizens against 12.7% white people or families in 2012)³⁵. Then, because African Americans still are the target of racial discrimination regarding employment, mortgage denials and incarceration. For instance, a National Bureau of Economic Research report suggests that people with African American names seeking employment are more likely to be turned down than people with White names.³⁶ An analysis made by *Zillow*, a real estate website, claims that "in 2013, 27.6 percent of blacks and 21.9 percent of Hispanics who applied for a conventional mortgage were denied, while only 10.4 percent of white applicants were denied."³⁷ The analysis suggests that African Americans have the highest mortgage denial of all three ethnic groups (Whites, Latinos and Blacks). Finally, Christopher Ingraham notes in an article for the *Washington Post* that "White people are more likely to dealing drugs, but black people are more likely to get arrested for it" as suggested by his analysis of a 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.³⁸ Consequently, it is in that particular racially unequal context that Ryan Coogler decided to make *Fruitvale Station*. In fact, Ryan Coogler chose to cover more than just racial tensions and disparities between black and white people, he also depicted the flaws of American law enforcement policies such as racial profiling and the much criticized use of excessive force by some police officers that resulted in the death of American citizens in some cases.

This part will focus on the filmmaker's point of view on Oscar Grant's shooting in relation with the contemporary context of racial profiling and police brutality, and a second point of analysis

³⁵ Current Population Survey and Annual Social and Economic Supplements by the US Bureau of Statistics (A comparison between 2002 report and 2012 demonstrates that African Americans still have the highest poverty rate in America.)

³⁶ Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan. "Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination" *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 9873* (July 2003) 10.

³⁷ *Zillow* Analysis: "Black Applicants More Than Twice as Likely as Whites to be Denied Home loans". (<http://zillow.mediaroom.com/2015-02-09-Black-Applicants-More-Than-Twice-as-Likely-as-Whites-to-be-Denied-Home-Loans>).

³⁸ Christopher Ingraham. "White People Are More Likely to Deal Drugs, but Black People Are More Likely to Get Arrested for It." *The Washington Post*. September 30, 2014.

will aim at demonstrating an aesthetic connection between Coogler's *Fruitvale Station* and the ghetto centric or "New Jack" films of the 1990s period.

2.1 Representing racial profiling on screen

In Ryan Coogler's depiction of Grant's last twenty-four hours, legal racial profiling is also present. According to Fred C. Pampel, racial profiling is defined as:

Any police-initiated action that relies on race, ethnicity or national origin rather than the behavior of an individual or information that leads police to a particular individual who has been identified as being or having been engaged in criminal activity.³⁹

The definition implies that racial profiling relies on a person's complexion, physical appearance and racial group membership rather than relying on a specific criminal behavior. Therefore, the definition of racial profiling leads to question the role and influence that stereotypes and pigeonholing have on police actions. Indeed, stereotypes allow a categorization of people into different groups which is discriminatory as Pampel suggests:

A stereotype inflexibly generalizes all members of a group based on the behavior or traits of some members. Stereotypes may in some cases have validity: ex-convicts must report to parole officers because some return to crime immediately on release from prison. However, stereotypes applied to race, ethnic, and national-origin groups rely on appearance rather than behavior, rarely, if ever, have validity, and violate American principles of individuality.⁴⁰

The problem of stereotypes is that they are part of a social lifestyle and they are deeply anchored in people's mind. However, Jeffrey Bumgarner, a professor in Criminal Justice states:

Profiling is related to stereotyping but is not the same thing. Profiling is an act. In criminal justice, profiling involves the taking of some action by criminal justice officials based on observable conditions, behaviors, and activities. Stereotyping, on the other hand, is not action oriented; it is perception oriented.⁴¹

The difficulty with Bumgarner's statement is that racial profiling is not always relying on observable behaviors in real police actions and sometimes, stereotypes take over. According to Pampel, they may not even be consciously aware of the discriminatory aspect of such beliefs but racial categorization continues to shape the American society mainly through the education of

³⁹ Fred C. Pampel, *Racial Profiling* (New York: Library in a book, 2004) 5.

⁴⁰ Pampel 32.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Bumgarner. *Profiling and Criminal Justice* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2014) 35.

children but also through media coverage⁴². As the scholar underlines, the result of such belief is “informal rather than formal” and appears in subtler ways. Pampel suggests that racial profiling relies on judgments on who a person is and not on who a person chooses to be.

As Russell D. Feingold put it:

Victims of racial profiling are forced to endure an incredibly humiliating experience, sometimes even a physically threatening one, on roadsides or in the back seat of police cruisers. Why? Because of the color of their skin. Not just African Americans and Latinos, but all Americans should feel threatened when any one of us is denied our personal liberty in such an insidious and humiliating way.⁴³

Notwithstanding the fact that Grant’s shooting illustrates such frustration, but he also comforts the former U.S Senator from Wisconsin who asserted that police treatment “angered and humiliated” victims of racial profiling.⁴⁴ From that statement, there is indeed a sense of intrusion in the lives of the victims that could be considered discriminatory and as Pampel suggests, “humiliating” for the victims because part of racial profiles include “Stop-and-Frisk” policies – frisk being the act of conducting a body search on someone. Such intrusion, in the arrest scene of the film, is depicted through a camera that is held closely to the characters involved, especially the black characters sitting on the deck.

In Ryan Coogler’s representation of racial profiling, the victimization of the characters through Stop-and-Frisk is recognized in the film. When reading interviews of *Fruitvale Station* director, Ryan Coogler, it becomes clear that he was very much aware of the complex racial context surrounding Oscar Grant’s shooting. In an interview with Mychal Denzel Smith from *The Nation*, when asked about his motivation for making a film on Oscar Grant’s last twenty-four hours, Coogler stated that he had been affected by Grant’s death as they were very similar – they had the same age, same profile, wore the same clothes, had the same friends and concludes that it could have been him on that platform shot to death⁴⁵. That identification process interestingly suggests a similar racial profile that perhaps facilitated his connection with Oscar’s dramatic story which affected him to the point that it could have been reflecting in the filmmaking process of *Fruitvale Station*. What I try to emphasize is Ryan Coogler’s connection to Oscar Grant’s story and how his

⁴² Pampel 32.

⁴³ *Idem*.

⁴⁴ Pampel 18.

⁴⁵ Mychal Denzen Smith. “Rewriting Black Manhood: A Conversation with ‘Fruitvale Station’ Director Ryan Coogler”. *The Nation*. July 18, 2013.

personal life may have reflected and shaped the representation of racial problems in *Fruitvale Station*.

Racial profiling has been cinematographically represented on screen many times but the most striking example of a precursor of racial profiling is represented in Bruce Beresford's *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). In a scene situated an hour through the film, police officers see a black man with an expensive car and systematically assume that the car did not belong to Morgan Freeman's character, Hawk. Then, they approach him and intrusively ask him without any manners to provide registration papers and Hawk's license.

More recently, racial profiling was also depicted in Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2005). It only take seventeen minutes into the film to witness several examples of racial profiling. In the scene, a white officer (Matt Dillon) arrests an African American couple in an expensive SUV. Although the patrol is only assigned to look for a special model of cars, his racial biases push him to assume that black people are less likely to be driving such expensive cars. Very interestingly, one film's plot is set in the 1950s segregated Atlanta, while the other is set in a contemporary Los Angeles; while *Driving Miss Daisy* uses backdrop of the film's setting and period, in *Crash*, it is set as a triggering element of the film's plot.



Bruce Beresford's Driving Miss Daisy (1989) – 55:10 – Police officers stop and ask a black man registration and license papers.

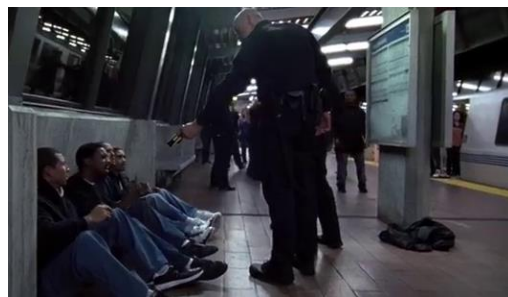


Paul Haggis' Crash (2004) – 17:00 – Police Officers arrest an African-American couple.

Similarly, racial profiling in *Fruitvale Station* is depicted as an act that will lead to the main character's death. The most striking scene depicting racial profiling is the scene occurring within the one hour mark of the film. Oscar and his friends are involved in an altercation and BART Police is called on the scene. They are taken out of the train and asked to sit on the platform of BART's Fruitvale Station. After several friends of Oscar's are neutralized by BART officers, racial profiling then occurs when BART Police Officer Caruso is searching for the instigator of the altercation in the train. The scene in which the officer enters the train is filmed through a point of view shot. Camera angles are interesting here as they force the spectator to be a witness of racial profiling and police violence. Indeed, the hand-held over-the-shoulder camera shot establishes a witness perspective depicting the officer focusing on Oscar out of everyone else, most likely because his physical appearance matches with the rest of the group and bluntly urges the main character to step off the train. Using a tracking shot to convey proximity with the viewer, Ryan Coogler depicts the officer grabbing Oscar by the neck and yanking him off the car and on the platform. The humiliating construction of racial profiling goes through a construction of the Grant character as a dominated animal. In the sequence, both additional characters and the audience – because of camera angles – are witnesses of the police misconduct being displayed on screen. Coogler accentuates the importance of placing the viewer as a witness by introducing eye-leveled camera movements as illustrated when the camera pans left and shifts its focus from the witnesses to the police officer. By forcing a witness perspective on the spectator, Ryan Coogler sheds light on police oppression and black victimization along with denouncing racial profiling as humiliating. In the film, Ryan Coogler points to these wrongful practices by putting forward black victimization which is a central point of focus in Coogler's representation of Oscar Grant's shooting. Police brutality is, along with racial profiling, the main concern of Coogler's narrative.



1:00: 00 – BART officer in the action of racial profiling.



1:04:00 – BART Officers neutralize Oscar and his friends.

2.2 *Fruitvale Station*: Representing race and police misconduct

Race-related police misconduct and crimes are part of an ongoing issue in America since the mediatized beating of Rodney King in 1992, and more so now with the deaths of African American Michael Brown and Eric Garner by law enforcers in 2014. In *Fruitvale Station*, Ryan Coogler's portrayal of police misconduct is impactful for the narrative as it will lead to the death of Oscar Grant, the protagonist. As the director depicted the main character's death as a racial crime, the racially-biased and aggressive policing of BART characters needed to be enhanced and contrasted with African American characters who are portrayed as victims. Obviously, Ryan Coogler's portrayal of BART Police is supported by witnesses and video accounts of Oscar Grant's shooting that depict some form of violent altercation between Oscar, his friends and BART Officers. It is also supported by a report from the BART Police Office of Internal Affairs published in 2010 and made public on BART's website which suggests that black people are more than twice more likely to file complaints than white people which positions African Americans as victims (*see Appendix I*). However, as *Fruitvale Station* is a fictional representation of the BART Police, characters are heavily prejudiced for the sake of dramatization. In the film, BART Officers are depicted as aggressive, rude and violent as suggested by harsh dialogs and camera shots reverse shots.

Moreover, they are not being taken seriously which is suggested when one of Oscar's friends in the film challenges the white police officer on his police status as he exclaimed "you are not even real police, where is your *** badge." In fact, the police needs to be depicted as despicable in order for Oscar's "humanization" to be put forward, even though the filmmaker still attaches human qualities to BART characters to build three dimensional characters.

Police brutality perpetrated on black people is not new, but what constituted a major turning point in these violent acts, is the rise of the mediatized coverage of police misconduct. Media were able to cover various aspects of police brutality, especially the violent acts committed on African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. It was the first time the whole country was able to witness graphic police violence on black people. In a more contemporary point of view, media coverage helped filmmakers in creating an historical film or an autobiographical film as Delphine Letort suggests:

The memory of the twentieth century was fashioned by the media, which recorded most watershed events that occurred in the world and can provide archival footage to craft an illustrated, informative, historical narrative of the past.⁴⁶

On the other hand, media coverage and especially news coverage can have an either positive or negative effect on the viewers, as proposed by Regina Lawrence:

Police use of physical force is a particularly controversial issue in American crime fighting. Given the considerable ambiguity that surrounds the issue, whether police use of force is presented as police brutality and whether brutality is understood as a problem depend greatly upon which voices the media emphasize.⁴⁷

According to Regina Lawrence, the point of view of society regarding American crime fighting is shaped by what the media chooses to represent. Indeed, if the media covers an important number of cases featuring young African-Americans or Latinos stealing cars or selling drugs, the image reflected will impact the minds of Americans and shape their perception of ethnic minorities.

Regarding *Fruitvale Station*, there is no doubt that Ryan Coogler was influenced and guided for his depiction of Oscar Grant's story, by what was portrayed on the media, by video footage broadcast on social media and by interviews of Oscar Grant's family and friends. What I would like to demonstrate in the next part of this research is that Ryan Coogler was also influenced by urban-ghetto-centric-realist films of the 1990s known as "New Jack" films.

2.3 *Fruitvale Station*: A "New Jack" depiction of black manhood?

The term "New Jack" was coined by black American writer, producer and director Barry Michael Cooper to describe the growing number of realism-based films imaging blackness on screen and painting a gritty version of life in impoverished black neighborhoods of large cities (e.g. Brooklyn, Watts, and Harlem) taking *New Jack City* by Mario Van Peebles in 1991 as the primary reference for films like *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *South Central* (1991), *Straight out of Brooklyn* (1991), *Juice* (1992), *Menace II Society* (1993) and *Poetic Justice* (1993). This new trend of urban films, following the Blaxploitation era of the 1970s, started with Spike Lee, a prolific African American actor and director of the 1980s and 1990s, known for *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988) and the most relevant to this study, *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Régis Dubois gathered

⁴⁶ Delphine Letort. *The Spike Lee Brand* (New York: Suny Press, 2015) 63.

⁴⁷ Regina G. Lawrence. *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of police brutality* (California: University of California Press, 2000) 18.

several common characteristics shared with these ghetto-centric films of the 1990s and suggests that, first, characters profile are often similar in their depiction of young black men living in poverty-stricken neighborhoods and expressing a negative point of view of America. The second point Dubois underlines is the realism and sometimes hyperrealism that these movies claim to portray and that is supposed to correct Hollywood's misrepresentations of impoverished black males. The third common point is a refusal from the directors to portray an optimistic point of view of American society and, last but not least is the criticism of society and urban films' desire to spread a message to viewers across the country⁴⁸.

In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guererro explains this wave of ghetto-centric representation in the early 1990s and states:

The black movie boom of the 1990s has materialized out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions that African Americans continue to endure in the nation's decaying urban centers.⁴⁹

These conditions presented by Guererro were also part of *Fruitvale Station*'s social context of the 2010s in spite of the 20 years' difference. Therefore, a comparative analysis between Ryan Coogler's *Fruitvale Station* (2013) and films focusing on the African American condition of the 1990s will be conducted in this research in order to point out thematic and aesthetic similarities in the representation of the ghetto and violence in relation with black manhood.

To a certain extent, *Fruitvale Station* is similar to 1990s hood films in its representation and depiction of a poor black young man living in an impoverished neighborhood. These "New Jack" movies include themes like unemployment, poverty, drug/alcohol consumption, the depiction of the neighborhood as a prison, black-on-black crime, the lack of a father figure, black young men as victims of the American capitalist system, racial tensions and black nihilism as a result of white oppression. Twenty years later in the 2010s, some of the issues are still shown in spite of the prevailing concept of post-racial America. In Ryan Coogler's depiction, unemployment, poverty, black victimization, drug trafficking and post-racial skepticism are themes central in *Fruitvale Station*'s contemporary narrative and black imagery is part of Coogler's aesthetic representation of Oscar's manhood.

⁴⁸ Régis Dubois 217.

⁴⁹ Ed Guererro. *Framing Blackness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 159.

For instance, a parallel can be drawn between Hughes brothers' *Menace II Society* in 1993 and *Fruitvale Station* (2013) in the depiction of a flawed character seeking redemption and turning his life around as fate catches up with him and the main character gets killed. *Menace II Society* centers around a young African American man named Caine who grew up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike, Tre, the main character in *Boyz N the Hood* directed by John Singleton, Caine lacks parental figures as he watched his drug-dealing father get killed and his mother died of an overdose. Caine lives with his religious grandparents who try to act unsuccessfully as parental figures to Caine but the pressure of the hood is too strong and he gets involved in a number of criminal activities with O' Dog, who is according to Caine, "America's worst nightmare... young, black and didn't give a fuck"⁵⁰. Caine is depicted as a very influential character as he needs someone to look up to. Several surrogate father figures are depicted in the film to offer Caine a chance to turn his life around. Father figures include Sharif's father, Mr. Butler (Charles S. Dutton) who urges him to go to Kansas with his son and start a new life away from the neighborhood, Pernell, a convicted felon who acted as another surrogate father figure to Caine until he was sent to prison leaving his wife, Ronnie and son, Anthony, behind. Ronnie, eventually convinces Caine to follow her to Atlanta and step away from the criminal life of the ghetto, until he is fatefully killed in a drive-by shooting.



1:30:00 – Caine gets killed in retaliation during a drive-by shooting.

A parallel can also be drawn between *Fruitvale Station* and *Menace II Society* because of the directors' depiction of black young males as animals⁵¹. In the Hughes' representation of black-on-black crimes, Mr. Butler warns Caine that "being a black man in America isn't easy." He adds "the hunt is on! And you're the prey!" Similarly, although *Fruitvale Station* deals with an interracial

⁵⁰ *Menace II Society* (The Hughes brothers, 1993).

⁵¹ Karen S. Glover develops the stereotype of "an animalized youth of color" in *Racial Profiling: Research, Racism and Resistance* (United States: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) 16.

crime, black young men are also treated like animals which is demonstrated by the scene depicting BART police officers containing black young men.

Because *Fruitvale Station* is based on the true story of Oscar Grant, Ryan Coogler needed to provide authentic information on Oscar's personal life and therefore depicted a young black man living in a seemingly poor San Francisco neighborhood with his Latina girlfriend and mixed-race daughter. While Oscar is surrounded by his loving family, he also lacks a father figure as only his mother, grandparents and siblings are depicted throughout the movie. Just like Caine's character in *Menace*, Oscar is involved in criminal activities and is portrayed by Michael B. Jordan, as a flawed character who just lost his job, who cheated on his girlfriend and was convicted for illegal activities but tries to turn his life around. Indeed, in Coogler's portrayal of Oscar Grant, the central character decides to quit selling drugs, reconcile with his girlfriend, be a reliable father to his child and find a respectable job but his redemption prospect is literally killed off when Oscar is shot to death by a BART Police Officer on New Year's Eve, ironically cancelling his New Year's resolutions and, just like Caine, Oscar finds redemption in death and not in life with his loved ones. bell hooks, a black feminist, wrote about *Menace II Society*:

When you finally decide to imagine a way out, that's when you get blown away. The deeper message of the film is: Don't imagine a way out, because the person who's still standing at the end of the film has been the most brutal. *Menace II Society* suggests – mythically almost – that the genocide we are being entertained by is not going to be complete, that there will be the unique and special individuals who will survive the genocide, but they're not the individuals who were dreaming of a way out.⁵²

bell hooks suggests that while Caine died, O' Dog's character, the embodiment of black nihilism⁵³, survived. hooks condemns the fatalistic vision of the film. Indeed, the film suggests that there is no escape from the hood for characters who seek redemption but that victimizers are spared in order to perpetrate more deaths. Similarly, *Fruitvale Station* vehicles that there is no way out of racism and of racial oppression as Oscar was arrested and killed because of a judgment on his racial profile. However, a major distinction remains between the New Jack Films and *Fruitvale Station*, the former's black-on-black violence against the latter's interracial acts of violence. In spite of this, both insist on the representations of black youth's living conditions on screen, which does not convey an optimistic portrait of American society.

⁵² bell hooks. *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 146.

⁵³ bell hooks develops that . *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (London: Routledge, 1994) 45.

2.3.1 A “New Jack” depiction of violence and black youth victimization

Although the context *Fruitvale Station* was released in differs from the one of the 1990s, violence is still depicted in a brutal way. The assimilation of Coogler’s motion picture with hyperrealist black-centered films of the 1990s is relevant in the sense that both generations of aesthetic representation of realism and claims of drawing an authentic portrait of violence are similar. Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Ryan Coogler’s *Fruitvale Station* offer similar depiction of interracial police violence. Even though Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* does not focus on the gritty war on drugs or the black-on-black criminal aspect of the hood, it raises the issue of ethnic relations and interracial violence in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn in New York. Spike Lee successfully recreates the black imagery⁵⁴ of the 1980s neighborhood while creating interesting and conflicted characters like Mookie, an African American employee at Sal’s Famous Pizzeria owned by an Italian-American named Sal and his two sons Pino and Vito. Buggin’ Out and Radio Raheem are other protagonists of the film. Mookie, the main character lives in the neighborhood with his sister and like Oscar in *Fruitvale Station*, Mookie and his girlfriend Tina, have a child but he is not depicted as a caring father as Tina points it out.

On the “hottest day of the year” according to Mister Senor Love Daddy, a local DJ, Mookie’s friend, Buggin’ Out who does not hide his black pride, asks Sal why there are not any pictures of famous black people on his Wall of Fame given the fact that black people constitute his main clientele and therefore, his main source of income. Sal replies that since it was his restaurant, only Italian Americans were to be featured on the wall, which Buggin’ Out disagrees with. Later, Buggin’ Out, followed by Radio Raheem enters Sal’s restaurant and asks for pictures of black people to be added on Sal’s wall, blasting Raheem’s radio up. Sal asks for the radio to be turned down but as they do not agree, Sal takes a baseball bat and trashes the radio into pieces which leads to a violent fight between them. The police finally comes to break the fight and a police officer apprehends Radio Raheem by putting him on a chokehold which eventually kills him. Realizing they had killed Radio Raheem, police officers placed the body in their patrol car and drove off leaving the crowd to start a riot against Sal and his sons.

⁵⁴ Paul Gormley. *The New-Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Oregon: Intellect Books, 2005) 31.



1:34:00 – Officer kills Radio Raheem in a chokehold.



1:34:55 - Worm's eye shot of a police officer realizing the death of Radio Raheem.

The violence of the police brutality scene is intensified by the crowd watching helplessly as the police slowly kills Radio Raheem. After Radio Raheem is taken away, one of the characters watching says “It’s as plain as day, they didn’t have to kill the boy” pointing at Lee’s focus on the uncomprehensive and racist behaviors of the white police officers rather than on the behavior of black people which he deals with in the riot scene. Addressing directly the audience is a way for Spike Lee to make the viewers witnesses of the racial conflicts taking place before their eyes and to reinforce black people’s position as victims of society.

Ryan Coogler plays on that same aspect of black victimization when he depicts witnesses helplessly watching or taking cellphone videos of Oscar Grant and his friends being violently subdued by the BART Police or Grant being shot. Even though characters do not directly address the viewers in this scene, Ryan Coogler uses hand-held camera that almost comes in contact with the characters with various close-up and pan shots highlighting the oppressive and stressful atmosphere black characters are under, hence emphasizing their victimization as black characters. The victimization process is even clearer than in *Do the Right Thing* because, as Spike Lee relies on the portrait of a “bad nigger”⁵⁵, Coogler constructed Oscar as a likeable martyr character as he carefully depicted him as a flawed but human character that did not deserve to die. In each of these representations of violent police-related actions lies a criticism of American society and its flaws regarding its handling of racial conflicts by the police or of the use of racial stereotypes.

In some of his films, Spike Lee plays with the stereotype on black manhood as depicted in *Jungle Fever* in 1991, two years after his visual masterpiece *Do the Right Thing*. In *Jungle Fever*, although considered as a comedy, Spike Lee depicts a scene in which the main character is having

⁵⁵ Mark A. Reid. *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Films Now* (United States: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 53.

an argument with his white lover. The police is called on the scene for a black aggression on a white woman and the film's central black character is violently restrained by police officers until the white lady tells them that the man is her lover. The scene emphasizes the stereotype of the violent black body resulting from white fear of black masculinity and from the segregation era where interracial marriage was prohibited because of the fear it would eradicate the white race. With *Jungle Fever*, Spike Lee is once more critical of American society, articulating police brutality, racial oppression and remaining racial stereotypes in the police force.

After Spike Lee, black victimization was a trend widely used by black directors of the 1990s who wish to be highly critical of society by adopting a new form of realism to convey “what really goes down in the ghetto”⁵⁶ and develop narratives reflective of society and of what filmmakers believed to be the authentic conditions that black youth had to grow up with. Manthia Diawara calls this new generation of urban gangster films new black realism films⁵⁷.

2.3.2 A “New Jack” realism

The most important element that makes the comparison between *Fruitvale Station* and “New Jack” films viable is the realist aesthetic and their assertion that these films are telling “the truth”. Indeed, these new black realism films of the 1990s rely on a hyperrealist aesthetic of the hood, violence and social issues that black youth had to deal with on a daily basis. These films such as *New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *Juice* or *Menace II Society*, offer an extensive range of black imagery and aesthetic such as rap music, gritty settings, and the black body (gangsta jewelry, gang tattoos, etc.) These captures of various films taken in a twenty year span of African American filmmaking are proof of the importance of black imagery in urban films. Indeed, cars are synonyms of independence and here, they are depicted as the main setting for interactions and social meeting but they also are set to blast rap/ hip hop music, a fundamental element of black imagery creating authenticity and realism. For instance, in *Fruitvale Station*, even though the film was released in

⁵⁶ Paul Gormley. *The New-Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Oregon: Intellect Books, 2005) 80.

⁵⁷ Manthia Diawara. ‘Noir by Noirs: Towards a New Black Realism’ in Copjec, Joan ed. *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993: 261-79) 261.

2013, Coogler carefully chose to play 2009 songs to create an authentic connection with 2009, the year where the film is supposed to be set in.



Boyz N the Hood (1:07:00)
(John Singleton, 1991)



Menace II Society (00:48:00)
(The Hughes brothers, 1993)



Fruitvale Station (00:28:00)
(Ryan Coogler, 2013)

Furthermore, according to Régis Dubois, the authenticity of these films rely on a particular production system. Indeed, he mentions that these films have a low budget, the privilege of on-location shooting, they use few settings, have unknown actors and directors refuse to be judgmental on their characters' actions.⁵⁸ In fact, filmmakers of the 1990s insist on constructing flawed protagonists, anti-hero characters instead of Hollywood-fashion villains.

To produce realism and authenticity, these filmmakers use video footage to convey authenticity. This tool was used anachronistically in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) in which he displayed in his opening scene, video footage of Rodney King's beating in 1991 whereas the story is supposed to be set in the 1960s. Melvin Donaldson points out, in *Black Directors in Hollywood* that Lee's use of video footage "suggests that the contemporary status of black men in 1992 was not so far removed from the earlier decades of the 1940s – 1960s covered within the film."⁵⁹ Donaldson points out that in incorporating mainstream footage of Rodney King's beating, contemporary people of the 1990s will have a glance of the violence that was perpetrated against black people at the time. It also highlights the proximity between these two events, which emphasizes that, according to Spike Lee, some problems are not evolved and are in fact very similar to the 1960s'. The video footage of the 1965 Watts riots in *Menace II Society* (1993) serves the same purpose, that is to say, to highlight what has happened before in Los Angeles and the impact it had on American society.

For Ryan Coogler, the use of video footage in *Fruitvale Station* is similar to Spike Lee's because it draws a proximity between the 2009 shooting and the film released in 2013. Indeed, as

⁵⁸ Régis Dubois. *Le cinéma des noirs américains entre intégration et contestation*. (Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2005), 228.

⁵⁹ Melvin Donaldson. *Black Directors in Hollywood* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2003) 111.

this research pointed out in the previous chapter, the situation has little changed as the racial problem in relation with police brutality is still perpetrated on minorities and it is a way for the filmmaker to bring forward the immediacy of the various problems depicted in the film.



Opening scene – Oscar Grant's shooting, video footage.

But even though realism and authentic use of video footage create an urgency and immediacy to the problem, for Eric Pierson, these 1990s ghetto-centric realism films constitute a problem as he argued in 1997:

How can violence against black males be stopped when they are constantly portrayed as the instigator and perpetrator of their own condition? The films of “the Hood” construct the black male as being synonymous with violence. The longer this trend continues, the greater the danger of it becoming an internalized part of culture.⁶⁰

Eric Pierson questions the representation of violence, claimed by filmmakers to be realistic representations as indicated by the movie posters. Indeed, on *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), the tag line is “Once upon a time in South Central L.A. It ain’t no fairy tale.” And *Menace II Society* (Hughes brothers 1993) poster’s tagline is “This is the truth. This is what’s real.” As a result, Pierson is right to question the impact of realistic features claimed by filmmakers, as part of the film’s aesthetic, and its impact on the viewers. For Eric Pierson, “In film, what one gets is not reality, but a version of reality that they are willing to accept.”⁶¹ As it is true for ghetto-centric films, it is also accurate for *Fruitvale Station* and Pierson’s question on the problem of realism may lead to questioning Ryan Coogler’s point of view and its effect on the audience as an “accepted truth” or as one version of the truth.

To conclude, even though Ryan Coogler’s *Fruitvale Station* has a similar aesthetic realism to those of the 1990s films aforementioned, the contemporary context of the 2010s guides Ryan

⁶⁰ Eric Pierson. *Black on Black Crime: Hollywood's Construction of the Hood* (United States: Ericarchive, 1997) 3.

⁶¹ Pierson 22.

Coogler to have a more optimistic perspective of black life than filmmakers had twenty years ago. The film suggests that racial tensions, although not completely solved, have downgraded as demonstrated by several scenes depicting Oscar and white people sharing a conversation and by the director's point of view of the hood which is less dramatic as he portrays the opposite of a confined space and prison like-neighborhood. Indeed, the subway in motion is depicted throughout the film for two possible reasons. Firstly, the subway train foreshadows Oscar's death on a BART platform. Secondly, *Fruitvale Station's* settings are not structuring the 'hood as a prison like the confined settings of *Boyz N the Hood* or of *Menace II Society*. *Fruitvale Station's* settings open new perspectives of ghetto neighborhoods as they do not represent violence and confinement but family and reunion. In hood films, negative portrayals of poverty-stricken neighborhoods were produced. These movies often featured dysfunctional or inexistent families whereas Coogler really focused on depicting family moments in Oscar's troubled life as an entire sequence of the film was devoted to depicting the familial birthday celebration of Oscar's mother, while another focused on the relationship between Oscar and Sophina's relatives. Therefore, it is evident that while Coogler focused on humanizing Oscar Grant by reproducing his relationships and his personal feelings, filmmakers like the Hughes Brothers in *Menace II Society*, centered on depicting ghetto neighborhoods as violent, dangerous and inescapable confined spaces with few or no lasting relationships. In addition, the structure of these two films suggests a diverging approach at depicting the importance of human life because while Coogler devotes time to develop the main character's last day before he gets killed, the Hughes Brothers established from the opening scene when O'dog kills two people for no reason, that human life is valueless. So, in order to understand Ryan Coogler's own fictional representation of Oscar Grant's shooting and his humanization of a mediatized black victim, a closer look at the filmmaking process of *Fruitvale Station* is required.

III. *Fruitvale Station*: Dramatizing a true story

The creation of a motion picture relies on a collective effort from the director, the cast and crew. It also requires a lot of research to provide an entertaining and realistic depiction of an event, when the film dramatized real subject matters. In *Fruitvale Station*, Ryan Coogler and his team focused on providing an original and accurate depiction of a real person, an African American young man who was taken away from his family and friends. In empathizing with Oscar, the filmmaker felt a responsibility to depict his own version of the events that had unfolded on December 31st, 2008. Hence, Ryan Coogler decided to focus on Oscar Grant's last twenty-four hours and filmed his every move to step into his shoes for the audience to better understand the character as the narrative focuses on Oscar's actions and emotions. This part will thus focus on the mechanisms used by the filmmakers to dramatize a true story. I'll demonstrate how he forces empathy onto the film's audience and then frames the film's message both within a black-centered story and a universal approach.

3.1 Creating an empathic motion picture

The *Oxford Dictionary* online qualifies empathy as “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another”⁶². There are many ways to create empathy in the process of filmmaking and as demonstrated earlier in this research paper, Ryan Coogler's filmic narrative is framed around that search for an empathic connection between the actors, the characters and the spectators. In fact, what he aims at is making the audience understand Oscar and identify with him. In order to achieve this goal, Ryan Coogler used filmmaking tools like dramatization and aesthetic representation in order to create a fictional universe around the true facts of Oscar Grant's last twenty-four hours.

3.1.1 An aesthetic dramatization

According to *Collins dictionary* online, dramatization is “the reconstruction of an event, novel, story, etc. in a form suitable for dramatic presentation.”⁶³ Ryan Coogler does offer a personal

⁶² Oxford Dictionary online
(<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/fr/definition/anglais/empathy>).

⁶³ Collins dictionary online
(<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/dramatization>).

cinematographic reconstruction of Oscar Grant's last day but, as Stephanie Zacharek suggests in an article for the *Dallas Observer*, "Coogler dramatizes Oscar's last day by choosing not to dramatize it."⁶⁴ In other words, she implies that *Fruitvale Station* recounts a series of casual events in the main character's life without overtly dramatizing it which compels the audience to assimilate the fiction as much as possible and to easily identify with the character.

In order to trigger the spectator's empathy, Ryan Coogler heavily relies on camera actions and techniques because, as V. I. Pudovkin puts it, "the lens of the camera is the eye of the spectator. He sees and remarks only that which the director desires to show him, or, more correctly put, that which the director himself sees in the action concerned."⁶⁵ Indeed, what the director chooses to represent on screen is vital for the spectator to understand the film's point of view. Similarly, the viewer's empathic response also depends on how the filmmaker represents the characters' actions on screen. Adriano D'Aloia, an assistant professor of cinema in Rome, focused on that empathic reaction drawn from the spectator and he developed a concept by Albert Michotte as he quotes: "Michotte states that participation depends on a psychological distance of the spectator from the screen: the more empathy, the less distance, and vice versa"⁶⁶ Considering Michotte's concept, the closest the audience is to the action, the more likely the spectator's empathic response will be. *Fruitvale Station's* filmmaker Ryan Coogler, plays with that character/spectator proximity and it is visible through camera techniques.

For instance, in the scene when Oscar befriends a stray dog at a gas station, camera angles contribute to the proximity with the viewer which helps trigger empathy. Coogler uses a tracking shot to give the viewer the opportunity to follow Oscar's moves as he runs down the road. The camera's lens here acts as a window in which the viewer is projected through, allowing him or her to witness the scene. The hand-held camera conveys proximity and focuses on Oscar in a medium close-up and Coogler chose to let the dog out of the shot to emphasize Oscar's emotions. Oscar calls the pit bull "bro" as he would a brother, and tries to calm the dog. While the camera centers on Grant in a medium close-up, the dog agonizing on the sidewalk is framed in a close-up as only

⁶⁴ Stephanie Zacharek. "Fruitvale Station, the Story of Oscar Grant III, Makes a Man of a Martyr". *Dallas Observer*. Thursday, July 18, 2013.

⁶⁵ V. I. Pudovkin. *Film Technique and Film Acting* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954) 92.

⁶⁶ Adriano D'Aloia. 2010. "Edith Stein to the Movies. Empathy as Film Theory" in Francesco Casetti, Jane Gaines, and Valentina Re, eds., *Dall inizio, alla fine. Teorie del cinema in prospettiva/ In the Very Beginning, at the Very End. Film Theories in Perspective* (Udine: Forum, 2010. 491-498) 493.

Oscar's hand soothing the dog is visible to illustrate the attention Oscar gives the pit bull until the camera tilts back up on the central character in a worm's eye shot conveying intimacy. This is reinforced by the lack of witnesses and other characters in the scene.



00:20:18 – Tracking shot of Oscar walking back to the dog.



00:20:50 – Close up on the dying dog and Oscar's hand.



00:21:00 – Worm's eye shot of Oscar.

As demonstrated, the aesthetic in this scene is crucial to entice the viewer to identify with Oscar and trigger an emotional response based on what the audience experiences through the camera lens but Ryan Coogler has an interesting take on why he chose to include that scene.

According to Coogler, the scene with the dog was invented to fill in the blank of Oscar's day, but, in a *Huffington Post* interview, he explains that the real reason the scene was introduced in the narrative was because a scene with a dog, especially a pit bull, was essential to build an analogy for black youth:

“When you hear about them [pit bulls] in the media, you hear about them doing horrible things. You never hear about a pit bull doing anything good in the media. And they have a stigma to them ... and, in many ways, pit bulls are like young African-American males. Whenever you see us in the news, it's for getting shot and killed or shooting and killing somebody — for being a stereotype. And that's what you see for African-Americans in the media and the news.”⁶⁷

In that statement, the filmmaker points to the anecdotal dimension of the scene, but he was aware that the latter would be polarizing to the audience because they felt manipulated. Indeed, one can wonder if that scene was used as a tribute to Oscar Grant's love for dogs or if it was part of manipulative dramatic process to force the audience to further empathize with the central character. As a matter of fact, the aesthetic of that scene points to the latter, partly at least because Ryan Coogler's intimate camera choices do enhance the spectator's empathy. Similarly, another scene in which the aesthetic representation calls for an empathic response is the scene where Oscar picks his daughter at school and races her to the car. That scene uses slow motion over a dramatic music. The purpose of such technique is that it stretches the scene so that the viewer spends more time

⁶⁷ Mike Ryan. "Ryan Coogler, 'Fruitvale Station' Director Defends His Controversial Scene". *The Huffington Post*. July 12, 2013.

living the action. Slow motion is observed through a long shot of Oscar and his daughter racing. Extending that father/daughter moment accentuates the dramatic aspect of the scene because the audience knows that it is the last time Oscar picks his daughter at school. As a result, the viewer can only witness and sympathize with the central character, and he or she is in a way manipulated by the filmmaker's aesthetic representation. In fact, all scenes featuring Oscar and his daughter could be considered as emotionally manipulative because of the degree of emotion each father/daughter sequence produces, as not only does the audience empathize with Oscar, but also shares feelings with Tatiana's character in the film. Camera techniques are not the only means through which the viewer is able to identify. Indeed, the spectator needs to feel a proximity with a character depicted on screen and it is only possible if the character is three-dimensional.



31:26 – Slow motion long shot of Oscar and his daughter racing to the car.

3.1.2 A three-dimensional character

Michael B. Jordan, who portrays Oscar on screen, recalled in an interview:

I was surprised by Ryan's take. It's genius, the more I think about it, to approach this story as "a day in the life of..." It's always easy to judge somebody that you don't know, but if you walk a mile in somebody's shoes, you'll get to know that person a little bit better. You'll know how it feels. A day in the life of, the last 24 hours—sometimes I feel like that's a little bit more compelling than movies that take place over four or five years of a person's life. You really grow fond of somebody in a day. Spend a whole day with somebody, be a part of their daily routine—by the end of the day, you'll really get to know what that person is like and get to know their character.⁶⁸

Actually, *Fruitvale Station's* scenario stands out from other biographical filmic productions like *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992), or more recently *42* (Brian Helgeland, 2013) and *The Butler* (Lee Daniels, 2013) as the latter unfold over the course of several years or decades. Instead, in his film, Coogler adopts a twenty-four-hour perspective of Oscar Grant's life which was previously used by

⁶⁸ Matt Barone. "Fruitvale Station: How a 27-Year-Old Rookie Filmmaker Humanized an American Tragedy." *Complex*. July 12, 2013.

Spike Lee for *Do the Right Thing* in 1989 and by French filmmaker Mathieu Kassovitz for *La haine* in 1995. Interestingly, both movies also depicted police brutality in the suburbs which may have influenced Coogler's choice to adopt this timeframe. In fact, setting the narrative in a twenty-four-hour structure is a compelling choice in *Fruitvale Station* as it creates intimacy between the character and the viewer considering that every detail of Oscar's last day is displayed for the audience to witness. It is precisely that intimacy that Ryan Coogler searched for when he decided to portray Oscar as a multifaceted character experiencing a whirlwind of emotions. In an article for *Complex*, Matt Barone observes:

In Oscar Grant, Coogler saw a flawed young man who was also a loving father, a well-meaning boyfriend, and a warm-hearted son. Most people who read the newspaper reports, however, couldn't get past the facts that Grant was also a drug dealer and wore baggy jeans and black hoodies. *Fruitvale Station* is about breaking through those surface-level perceptions.

Matt Barone puts the emphasis on the fact that Oscar, like many African American young men (Trayvon Martin or more recently Michael Brown), were either labeled as criminals or as mere victims. In fact, to Ryan Coogler, "[Oscar] was a human being. Everybody has made mistakes. He didn't deserve to die."⁶⁹ Through his fictional depiction of Oscar's last day, the filmmaker rejects depicting Oscar as a criminal or a mere victim and instead pictures him as humanly as possible by detailing his feelings and his struggles. Several sequences single Oscar out from other characters and place him in suitable settings for reflection which offers the spectator an intimate perspective of his thoughts and inner struggles. From the beginning of the movie, a shower scene featuring Oscar, the main character, is displayed and Michael B. Jordan's portrayal of Oscar is so expressive that the viewer is able to analyze Oscar's emotions through Jordan's body language. In the shot below, Oscar is filmed in a medium close-up, his arms resting on the wall and his head down, pensively troubled. Consequently, the viewer mechanically empathizes with Oscar and feels concerns for him.

Throughout the film and until the very end when he gets shot, Oscar is struggling with his emotions alone, never asking for support from other characters but implicitly, the support he gets is from the audience. In another scene, where Oscar waits for a client in his car, he is once again represented alone and struggling with his thoughts. The camera focuses on a picture of him and his smiling daughter putting the emphasis on their complicity. Coogler's decision to focus the camera

⁶⁹ *Idem.*

– the eye of the spectator – on a picture of Oscar and his daughter provides a motive for his actions, here selling drugs, for the viewer to understand his decisions and why he is troubled.



00:05:35 – Oscar in a medium close up taking a shower.



00:21:30 – The camera focuses on a picture of Oscar and his daughter.

Then, Ryan Coogler exposes Oscar's disturbance in a setting adequate for a re-assessment of his life, when he gets out of the car and is depicted in a tracking shot walking toward the edge of the path where he kneels in front of a body of water extending as far as the eye can see, and starts remembering his time in prison through a flashback. The setting is interesting here as it harmonizes Oscar's troubled thoughts with an enhanced diegetic sound of sea waves in the background. The camera angle is delineating a proximity between the spectator and the character in a close-up on Oscar demonstrating his thoughtful facial expression.



00:21:55 – Oscar contemplates the sea, thoughtful.

When the narrative cuts to the flashback, the viewer understands that Oscar's thoughtful expression is linked with a memory of his time in prison materialized in an analeptic visual form. According to Maureen Turim, "flashbacks provide keys to character psychology and fill in the audience on a fictional past which is presumed to determine the present action."⁷⁰ Here, the flashback is introduced with a desynchronized voice of a man juxtaposed on Oscar's scene before the editing cuts to the darkened interior of a prison. As Maureen Turim suggests, here the flashback provides a backstory for Oscar's character and enables the spectator to catch a glimpse of his past. Therefore, Ryan Coogler's mise-en-scene of a flashback serves the empathic process of the film as

⁷⁰ Maureen Turim. *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989) 68.

it offers an additional proximity to the audience but the filmmaker does not only use visual techniques to trigger empathy. Actually, he also relies on diegetic and non-diegetic material to offer a meaningful representation of Oscar Grant's last day.

3.1.3 Emotion, music and empathy in *Fruitvale Station*

Although *Fruitvale Station* does not provide a significant amount of music, Ryan Coogler used diegetic and non-diegetic sounds⁷¹ strategically, either to create emotion, to emphasize specific decisive actions or to stress realistic seriousness. An analysis of diegetic sounds concludes that normally the latter, city sounds mostly, are often enhanced through non-diegetic sound effects in order to emphasize their importance. These sounds, such as the enhanced noise of subway trains, police sirens, the bang of fireworks flare guns or, as mentioned earlier, the sound of the sea waves, are crucial details that the viewer needs to pay attention to. A particular attention was devoted to intensifying, through sound effects, the gunshot sound heard by characters on the Fruitvale Station platform after Officer Ingram shoots Oscar. These diegetic sounds used in the film are what Michel Chion calls "Ambient or Territory Sounds" which are sounds that "envelops a scene and inhabits its space."⁷² As the city is an important part of the film, enhancing its sounds may trigger a familiar response from the audience. Regarding non-diegetic sounds, the score was composed by Ludwig Göransson and the soundtrack mostly featured black performers.

I believe that, in *Fruitvale Station*, lyrical music, or songs, are integrally used to promote black culture and that is why a subpart will be devoted to that latter in this research paper. Therefore, I would like to focus on the instrumental music, or score, provided by Ludwig Göransson and its role in creating emotion, hence triggering an empathic reaction through music as well.

Fruitvale Station's score is subtle and sometimes barely audible. Ryan Coogler only uses it to emphasize emotionally demanding scenes such as cheerful family moments on the one side or tragic events as in the prison scene or in the murder scene on the other. Indeed, music is present when Oscar reunites with his family for his mother's birthday, when he picks his daughter from

⁷¹ Diegetic sounds are visible on screen such as dialogs, object sounds and non-diegetic sounds are considered as invisible on screen such as a narrator's voice, added sound effects and soundtracks/scores.

⁷² Michel Chion. *Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 75.

school or when the pit bull dies. An entire theme song is devoted to Tatiana emphasizing her importance as an emotional empathic tool and in the narrative. The spectator is able to recognize which scenes bear the greatest emotional importance to the director precisely because music is used during these moments and diegetic sounds (noises here) are tuned down instead of being enhanced when music plays.

Stephen Davies establishes a link between music and the concept of emotional contagion:

I have long been interested in the expression of emotion in music and in the response this calls forth from the listener. One such response is a mirroring or echoing one; sad music tends to make (some) listeners feel sad and happy music to make them happy. This mirroring reaction is brought about by what I have called emotional contagion. We tend to resonate with the emotional tenor of the music, much as we catch the emotional ambience emanating from other people.⁷³

This process of emotional contagion may apply for film analysis as Davies continues, “one is more likely to catch another’s mood by attending to his emotions and signals of affect than by ignoring them. Filmmakers are aware of this and focus spectators’ attention on characters’ facial features in order to elicit emotional contagion or empathy.”⁷⁴ Consequently, it applies to film music and to *Fruitvale Station*’s use of a score triggering emotional contagion and empathy.

There is a restriction to the demonstration of Ryan Coogler’s search for empathy through camera, character manipulation and music choices as Adriano D’Aloia explains that empathy is perceived differently depending on the spectator’s personality.⁷⁵ Therefore, I would argue that when watching *Fruitvale Station*, the level of empathy experienced by the viewer depends on his or her personality but it is also determined by the filmmaker’s construction of the narrative and the context in which the spectator sees the film.

3.2 Creating a black-centered drama

As *Fruitvale Station* narrates the story of an African American young man, a mimesis of black culture and what it represents to the protagonist seems evident, especially when the director undertaking that project is himself very attached to his identity as an African American. That is

⁷³ Stephen Davies. “Infectious music: music-listener emotional contagion”. Peter Goldie & Amy Coplan eds. *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2011) 2.

⁷⁴ *Idem* 13.

⁷⁵ D’Aloia 493.

why Ryan Coogler offers a very black-centered dramatization of the events leading to Oscar Grant's death. It is also a way for the filmmaker to confirm a black presence in the multicultural city that San Francisco is and to denounce using fiction, a certain immediacy with the context that the film depicts.

3.2.1 The promotion of black culture

As previously mentioned, *Fruitvale Station* concentrates on the last twenty-four hours of Oscar Grant, a black young man from the San Francisco Bay Area, California. According to a Harvard student publication written by Katherine Blaisdell, Eliot Glenn, Christine Kidd, William Powers, and Rebecca Yang, the Bay Area “has a long history as a center of black culture”. They had that: “Oakland looms in the national black consciousness”.⁷⁶ In Ryan Coogler's film, himself a Bay Area native, the city is personified as a character of its own as this research demonstrated that Coogler devoted time to enhance city sounds and developed a soundtrack mainly composed of black performers. It is a justified choice given the fact that Oakland is popular for its hip-hop culture.⁷⁷ *Fruitvale Station*'s important promotion of black imagery derives from Ryan Coogler's desire to convey a racial consciousness and a black pride through his motion picture. In earlier comparisons of *Fruitvale Station* with 1990s Ghetto-centric films, I demonstrated that although they shared some common aesthetic features, Ryan Coogler's film differed from New Jack Films, mostly because of their diverging social context. While New Jack films relied on heavy pessimistic mimesis of black culture⁷⁸ to materialize blackness, *Fruitvale Station* reverses the tendency and promotes black pride instead of black nihilism through its imagery. Many examples illustrate the film's position regarding race; among those are the many sequences depicting a multiethnic neighborhood, the representation of African American recipes, performers, entertainers and sportsmen. An examination of the construction of these scenes may shed light on their significance in the narrative.

⁷⁶ Katherine Blaisdell, Eliot Glenn, Christine Kidd, William Powers, and Rebecca Yang. “Race, Place and Police: The 2009 Shooting of Oscar Grant”. *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*. April 27, 2015.

⁷⁷ *Idem*.

⁷⁸ Gormley 31.

The filmmaker's exhibition of the Bay Area is meaningful for several reasons. Primarily for accuracy as Ryan Coogler's depiction of the Bay Area needs to reflect the actual city. But as *Fruitvale Station* remains a fiction, other intents may be attributed to city settings depicted in the film. One is that Ryan Coogler's numerous shots of African American citizens were used to put the emphasis on the importance of a black community among a multiethnic demography in the San Francisco Bay Area, as illustrated by the following screen captures.



00 :08:12 – Young black men walking.



00:08:28 – Black mother and child walking.



00 :37:32 – Black families walking.

Here, Ryan Coogler portrays black youth and black families using Oscar's perspective as the camera is positioned in Oscar's car window space in order to convey a positive image of the black community as families are synonym of innocence and the fact that they are depicted walking may illustrate their freedom. Contrastingly, Bay Area settings are also used by the filmmaker as foreshadowing elements to the final denouement of the film – the central character's death – as illustrated below.



00:05:23 – BART Subway train.



00:10:13 – A Sign of Fruitvale Avenue.



00:18:15 – A police car is depicted on the road.



00:44:52 – A window shot of young men firing Fireworks flare guns.

Using environmental settings to foreshadow Oscar's death is meaningful in the sense that these depictions could be interpreted as factors leading to the main character's death hence suggesting that Oscar's environment was responsible for his death or that the latter was bound to happen. In *Fruitvale Station*, Coogler chose to represent specific mimesis of black culture by introducing powerful black symbols into his narrative framework such as a shot on Oprah's TV show and performers of rap and hip-hop music.



00:37:05 – A shot on Oprah's TV show.

Displaying iconic figures into the film reminds the audience that there are successful black people in America and reinforces Ryan Coogler's depiction of a black pride in his motion picture. It is the same with hip hop music as the Bay Area was once home to famous artist Tupac Shakur in the 1990s. An analysis of the songs used in the film concludes that Ryan Coogler is emotionally attached to details as he features a song entitled *Hey Little Mama* performed by Oakland native Stanley Petey Cox also known as Mistah F.A.B, part of the "hyphy" movement which originated in the Bay Area.⁷⁹ The attachment to details is also explained by his connection to the Bay Area as he mentioned in an interview that he "wanted to make a project that was specific to the Bay Area because it was important to him."⁸⁰ Additionally, he also refers to his work as a "love letter to the Bay Area"⁸¹ underlining how emotionally involved he was to undertake that project. Furthermore, Ryan Coogler's carefully detailed mimesis of black imagery in the film accentuates his urge to immerse the spectator into the narrative and eases the empathic response that such representation calls for. Coogler's insistence on depicting the black community serves the purpose of demonstrating that Oscar's surroundings and relationships are realistic and that anyone can identify

⁷⁹ According to the *Urban Dictionary*, the Hyphy movement is "the period of time where certain talented artists were discovered and soon changed the face of Bay Area music". (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hyphy%20movement>).

⁸⁰ Youtube video. "Fruitvale Station Interview with Michael B. Jordan and Ryan Coogler". *Youtube*. January 7, 2014. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6U8EhNEj5OI>).

⁸¹ Scott Macaulay. "Ryan Coogler Talks with Ava DuVernay about Fruitvale Station". *Filmmaker Magazine*. July 12, 2013.

with the film's characters or at least sympathize with them. An analysis of *Fruitvale Station*'s supporting characters will further emphasize Ryan Coogler's devotion to create a compelling black-centered drama.

3.2.2 The depiction of a black family

Family is an important aspect of the film because Coogler took on the perspective of Oscar Grant's family to depict the events that shaped Oscar's last day. It is precisely why many sequences of the film feature Oscar's relatives and friends. In addition, showing Oscar Grant surrounded by family and friends is a way to build a three-dimensional character and to picture him as a social, charismatic and likable character. That is visible through his relationships with Oscar's sister Chantay and his grandmother Bonnie that were unable to have a physical conversation with him but can connect through phone conversations. Throughout the film, the director gives significant importance to Oscar's cell-phone as every time Oscar dials or texts someone, special visual effects represent the conversations on screen. The filmmaker justified his choice by claiming that Oscar used his cell-phone on a daily basis to connect with his family and friends "even on the last day of his life."⁸² Additionally, Coogler's decision to accentuate the role of cell-phones throughout the motion picture is appropriate considering the fact that video footage of Oscar Grant's shooting were taken by cell-phone cameras and that these footage helped established a baseline for Ryan Coogler's scenario.⁸³



00:04:35 – Oscar texts his mother.



00:15:55 – Oscar's sister calls him.

Displaying numerous family interactions not only humanizes Oscar's character but also emphasizes the consequences of Grant's death, as the director explains: "I was always focused on the fact that he died unnecessarily, and the fact that his death had an impact. Not the impact that

⁸² *Fruitvale Station* Production Notes on the *Weinstein Company* website (<http://twcpublicity.com/movie.php?id=169#production>) 6.

⁸³ *Idem.*

came from the media, or from the results of the trial, but the impact on the people who knew this person, who expected him to come home and were deeply hurt when he didn't."⁸⁴ Actually, when watching the entire film, the audience realizes that the primary focus of *Fruitvale Station* is to restore Oscar Grant's human qualities before he became a mediatized figure to put the emphasis on the impact his unjustified death had on his family and friends. Indeed, as one would expect the film to end after the death of the main character, the filmmaker decided to include in his fiction, real footage of a memorial held on New Year's Eve 2013 to illustrate the intimate and collective impact of Oscar Grant's death on the community.



1:19:20 – Real footage of Oscar Grant memorial on New Year's Day 2013.

Still, according to Coogler, beyond upsetting an entire American community, Oscar Grant's death principally affected his daughter's life. And that is why the director devoted so much effort to develop a strong father/daughter relationship on screen. Indeed, among all the characters that Oscar interacts with, the most impactful and emotionally moving chemistry revolves around Oscar and his daughter Tatiana. Because Coogler insistently depicts a perfect father/ daughter relationship between the two characters, one may question the purpose of the filmmaker to portray Oscar as an outstanding and beloved father.

3.2.3 The portrayal of a beloved black father

Even though it was previously established that the filmmaker decided to portray Oscar as a human being with feelings and flaws as opposed to the symbolic figure the media depicted him as, Coogler somehow attributed outstanding qualities to his character during sequences with Tatiana.

⁸⁴ Matt Barone. "Fruitvale Station: How a 27-Year-Old Rookie Filmmaker Humanized an American Tragedy." *Complex*. July 12, 2013.

As a result, it is interesting to examine the director's reasons to depict him in such a way. First, I would argue that representing Oscar as a flawless father contributes to developing him as likable protagonist in order to trigger the spectator's empathic response. Besides, assuming that most spectators watching the film are themselves parenting, it makes the identification process effortless.

Then, because Oscar Grant is an African American character, Coogler's portrayal of the latter is compelling because it debunks the myth of the absent black father⁸⁵ that was depicted in many films of the 1990s such as *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992), *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993) or *Clockers* (Spike Lee, 1995). Those films portrayed black young men who often lacked patriarchal figures as the father was either dead or in prison, and that struggled to live in confined spaces with no rules. Twenty years later, Coogler challenges the myth of the absent black father in *Fruitvale Station* and offers a radically opposed cinematographic depiction of a loving and caring black father.

Ryan Coogler's special attention to maintaining a strong father/daughter relationship shows how he was conscious of the fact that Oscar's daughter was the one who had to live and grieve her father's loss.⁸⁶ The sequences including Oscar and Tatiana are carefully chosen to emphasize the impact that Oscar's death had not only on the American community but on his family and especially on his daughter. The complicity between the two characters is explicitly depicted on screen through emotionally scenes which compels the viewer to empathize or at least sympathize with both Oscar and Tatiana. For instance, in the slow motion sequence previously mentioned, the lengthened out father/daughter moment is an important scene for the construction of a search for an empathic response. Similarly, the final father/daughter conversation illustrates that Tatiana's character will not see her father again which is implied by the serious tone of the scene as dialogue may prove.



00:47:15 – Oscar and his daughter chat for the last time.

⁸⁵ Dorothy Roberts. "The Absent Black Father" in *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America*, 144-161 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

⁸⁶ *Idem.*

OSCAR: Me and mom are gonna take off, okay? [...] But, we'll be back before you wake up though, okay?

TATIANA: Nooo! Don't go. I'm scared.

OSCAR: Scared of what?

TATIANA: I hear guns outside.

OSCAR: You know what, baby? Those are just firecrackers. You'll be safe inside, with your cousin.

TATIANA: But what about you daddy?

OSCAR: Me? Baby, I'll be fine.

The dialog puts the tragic aspect of the film into perspective because while the character of Tatiana is unaware of the events that will unfold, the spectator and the actors do, which reinforces the dramatic irony of the scene.

Regarding the end of *Fruitvale Station*, Coogler declares: "It was important for me to end the film with his daughter, and not with any of the trial or what happened after his death, because that was what I was more interested in. It's more about the intimate impact, because those are the people who are affected the most by these tragedies."⁸⁷ The final scene is set after Oscar passes away in the hospital, Sophina picks her daughter up from her sister's house and they are both depicted taking a shower in the same setting Oscar was depicted in at the beginning of the film. The camera focuses on Tatiana in a close up in order to emphasize the importance of her innocence and of her loss, an emotion that transpires to the viewer through that shot. The dramatic tone of the scene is strengthened by the disconcerting silence between the two characters, established by a lack of dialog or music and by the camera's painfully long focus on Tatiana.



1:18:00 – Tatiana asks her mother about her father's whereabouts.

⁸⁷ Matt Barone. "Fruitvale Station: How a 27-Year-Old Rookie Filmmaker Humanized an American Tragedy." *Complex*. July 12, 2013.

In the film, Coogler insists on Oscar's obsession with trying to redeem himself and make his daughter and family happy. Depicting him trying to overcome his problems and turn his life around encourages the audience to mourn the character's death even more as fate prevents him from becoming a righteous man and deprives his daughter of a father figure. Ironically, although Ryan Coogler presented a positive image of the black father in his film, through his death, *Fruitvale Station's* central character becomes an absent black father to his child which is what Coogler insists on by showing a close-up shot of Tatiana Grant mourning her father in 2013.



Ending scene – Video Footage of Tatiana Grant.

3.3. *Fruitvale Station*: A message film

Douglas M. Beaumont wrote: “Because audiences watch a movie primarily for its story, they can be extremely resistant to movies that forcefully promote a message with the intent to persuade rather than entertain them.”⁸⁸ Regarding *Fruitvale Station*, most of the American audience who decides to see the film knows – more or less – the basic draft for the film's plot. However, the following analysis will demonstrate how the filmmaker successfully and subtly conveyed his symbolical message across, including its reception.

3.3.1 Ryan Coogler, a devoted filmmaker

I already mentioned earlier in this paper that Ryan Coogler identified with Oscar because they shared physical similarities (same age and same clothes) and their social life was similar in some aspects. But Coogler's initial motivation for the film is described below:

⁸⁸ Douglas M. Beaumont. *The Message Behind the Movie: How to Engage with a Film Without Disengaging Your Faith* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009) 32.

When this tragedy happened, I was the same age as Oscar. I had such a close proximity to it. I've been in similar circumstances before. My friends look like his friends; I actually cast my friends to play his friends in the film. That was the initial attraction to the subject for me. Then I started seeing the fallout afterwards, and how people were making Oscar into this fallen icon.⁸⁹

Ryan Coogler's identification with Oscar Grant enabled him to develop a creative license and to shape a character around the person he described as a "fallen icon". Likewise, acting in *Fruitvale Station* also allowed actor Michael B. Jordan who had also been affected by the death of Oscar in 2009 and later by Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 and who did not know how to express his dismay and found in Ryan Coogler's scenario, an outlet to materialize his feelings as he declared that he "felt a certain responsibility to take this role."⁹⁰ It is in a way how one may consider Ryan Coogler's work, as a responsibility to pay tribute to Oscar Grant and his family, but also as a collective responsibility to raise awareness among Americans of all races on the matter of racial injustices, as even though *Fruitvale Station* is a fiction by essence, the death of a human being shaping the film was real. One may also argue further by questioning Coogler's role as an activist or rather as a devoted storyteller. Interviews with him converge to assume that Ryan Coogler may be attributed both roles as he was passionate about depicting Oscar as a three dimensional human being, while attempting to impact the audience and perhaps make a difference in their understanding of Oscar's story as he recalls that he "saw the riots and the frustration [following the shooting], and they didn't have an effect," and he continues "if I can get two hours of people's time, I can affect them more than if they threw a trash can through a window."⁹¹ Ryan Coogler's statement shall lead to question the directing methods that Coogler used within the film's narrative to develop such a racially sensitive and painfully sore motion picture that will emotionally impact spectators of all races and ethnic background without damaging the film's credibility or offending its viewers.

⁸⁹ *Idem.*

⁹⁰ Matt Barone. "Fruitvale Station: How a 27-Year-Old Rookie Filmmaker Humanized an American Tragedy." *Complex*. July 12, 2013.

⁹¹ Scott Macaulay. "Ryan Coogler Talks with Ava DuVernay about Fruitvale Station". *Filmmaker Magazine*. July 12, 2013.

3.3.2 The dual challenge of race-conscious films

In his preface, Melvin Donaldson claims that what directors seek when making a film is to attract and reach the widest audience possible.⁹² As a result, it may be problematic for racially conscious films like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Coogler's *Fruitvale Station* or Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2014) to please the audience at large since race remains a sensitive topic for some people. The fact that Ryan Coogler promotes black imagery, introduces random black and white interactions and that the protagonist of his narrative is black and depicted as a victim while the antagonist is a white law enforcement officer, may convey a desire from the director to dehumanize white characters and glorify black ones which may to some extent offend one or both racial group while watching the film. Unlike Spike Lee whose racial denunciations are crystal clear in his films, Coogler's work is subtler and he does not seek to punish the white officer and mystify the black victim. Instead, he aspires to offer a final representation that will ultimately tell the story of an African American young man. That is why, despite an evident racially biased point of view of Oscar Grant's shooting, Ryan Coogler manages to offer a harmless pacifist and compelling narrative. Indeed, by deciding to demonstrate the feelings of both black and white characters, Ryan Coogler trusts the audience to understand that no direct offense was intended through these representations and that he only dramatized the facts. The most obvious examples of that are the portrayal of BART Officers Ingram (BART Officer's real name was Johannes Mehserle) and Caruso portrayed by actors Chad Michael Murray and Kevin Durand. Even though they portray antagonists to Oscar's character, they both are depicted with demonstrative emotions which illustrates Coogler's neutral position in the matter as what he chooses to portray are humanly-driven characters and not heroes or villains. Therefore, spectators may themselves be hesitant in their judgment to qualify BART Police Officers as perpetrators of Oscar's death in opposition with their certainty to consider Oscar as a victim. In the sequence where Officer Ingram has just pulled the trigger on Oscar, Coogler tried to depict his reaction as humanly as possible as his emotions are shown through a close-up shot of his facial expression. Ingram's emotions are unclear though, because Ryan Coogler only briefly focuses the camera on his face in order to let the audience make their own judgment on Ingram's intentions. Similarly, Caruso's character is even portrayed as sympathetic to Oscar's pain. The reason why he is depicted that way is unclear

⁹² Donaldson, preface ix.

as Coogler did not precisely give any information on Caruso's empathic response to Oscar's shooting. It could either be because he cared about human life or because he was scared for his employment position if Oscar died.



1:05:10 – Medium close-up of Officer Ingram looking aghast after he shot Oscar Grant.



1:05:50 – Close-up shot of Officer Caruso looking stunned.

Moreover, in the very brief sequence when Oscar gets shot, the camera is positioned below the waist of Officer Ingram and focuses on a close-up shot of the character's hand pulling the trigger is visible on screen so as to remain neutral on the white character's culpability and to maintain a certain anonymity of Oscar's shooter. In making white BART Officers' emotions and motives unclear, Ryan Coogler obtains the sympathy and compassion of white viewers.



1:04:30 – Close-up shot on BART Officer Ingram's hands pulling the trigger. The chosen camera angle does not show his face.

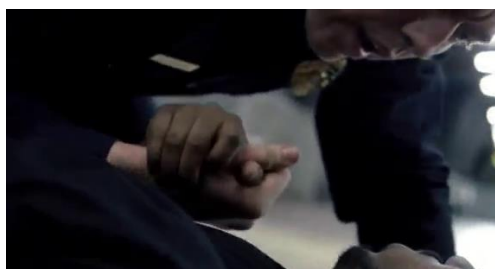
Additionally, it is interesting to note that actors portraying white BART Police Officers are well known actors (action star Kevin Durand and teenage heartthrob Chad Michael Murray) as their presence may have induced additional sympathy and compassion of black spectators for BART Officers.

Coogler's representation of Oscar's character dying is interesting as its structure echoes the dying dog sequence portrayed in the middle of the film. The role of the camera in both of these scenes is determining as close-up shots convey proximity and intimacy with the viewer as he or she is forced to witness a dog or a man dying. In *Fruitvale Station*, as the dying dog is comforted

through death by Oscar, and the latter by a BART Officer, the spectator is present as well through the camera lens to witness them both drawing their last breath. Coogler's dying scenes are painfully long and disconcerting to watch as the sequences are lengthened out and no music is added over them.



00:20:50 – Close up on the dying dog and the camera focuses on Oscar's hand, patting the dog.



1:06:17 – Close up shot of Officer Caruso holding Oscar's hand.

Moreover, by depicting both the dog and Oscar as victims of unjustified lethal crimes, the filmmaker establishes a connection between them which reinforces the comparison Coogler had suggested between Pit bulls and African Americans and how they were negatively perceived. Actor Michael B. Jordan made a similar comment in an interview with Oprah:

“Black males, we are America’s pit bull. We’re labeled vicious, inhumane and left to die on the street,” Jordan says. “Oscar was kind of left for dead. So many of us young African-American males left for dead...”⁹³

Jordan’s statement offers some explanation for Ryan Coogler’s decision to feature a character that would accompany the dog and Oscar instead of depicting them dying alone.

At once, I believe that a single analysis on the filmmaker’s dramatization choices are not subsequent enough to fully understand the audience’s reception of the film. Therefore, it would be compelling to examine *Fruitvale Station*’s general reception in relation with its particularly meaningful context at the time of its release in July 2013.

⁹³ Oprah Winfrey. “Powerhouse Performances with Idris Elba, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Michael B. Jordan”. *Oprah’s Next Chapter*. Season 2, Episode 246. Aired on December 12, 2013.

3.3.3 *Fruitvale Station*'s reception in the age of Obama

Unfortunately, since the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, several young African American lives have been deplored and extensively mediatized. Coincidentally or not, before the election of a black president, few black people were getting that much attention through the media except for Rodney King or Amadou Diallo. The reason may be that before 2008, social media were still developing and it was still difficult for regular citizens to report or capture a proof such event. By 2008, the world became acquainted with the death of several black young men murdered by white citizens or law enforcement officers such as Oscar Grant in 2009, Trayvon Martin in 2012 and more recently Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014. In 2012, it is in the context of Trayvon Martin's death that Ryan Coogler and his crew started shooting *Fruitvale Station*. Trayvon Martin was a 17-year-old African American student who was shot to death in Florida by George Zimmerman, an insurance underwriter. A year later, in July 2013, the film was released and George Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder.

I believe that the context in which the spectator sees a film shapes his or her understanding and perspective of the film. *Fruitvale Station*'s corresponding release with George Zimmerman's trial undeniably adds a racial perspective to the already well-established black perspective of the film. Hence, when watching *Fruitvale Station* in theater, the theme and message of the film provides a painfully vivid image of reality. In an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, Steven Zeitchik explains:

Audiences who come out to see [*Fruitvale Station*] will ride down a kind of two-way street of fact-based moviegoing. *Fruitvale* might help them understand the Martin case. Or the Martin case might make them yearn to learn more about the events described in *Fruitvale*. After all, Coogler's film is the kind that gnaws at your soul, even if it's not ripped from the headlines.⁹⁴

To Steven Zeitchik, the connection between Oscar Grant's fictionalized depiction and Trayvon Martin's case is irrefutable but to some critics, the convenient simultaneous release of Coogler's film and Trayvon Martin's case trial are not coincidental. Indeed, several critics and reviewers have been particularly keen on emphatically establishing the convenience between the two. Commenting on that handy parallel, Matt Barone satirically begins his article by declaring:

Oh, that clever marketing and distribution genius Harvey Weinstein—he sure knows how to effectively release his movies. Originally, *Fruitvale Station* was scheduled for a mid-October release,

⁹⁴ Steven Zeitchik. "In '*Fruitvale Station*', parallels to Trayvon Martin." *The Los Angeles Times*. July 11, 2013.

but in April, The Weinstein Company pushed its release date up to mid-July. Now, it's debuting theatrically in the midst of the hot-button, televised Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman trial.⁹⁵

Barone implies that given the fact that the Weinstein Company is famous for its marketing campaigns, *Fruitvale Station*'s release may well have been pushed back to fit the immediate racial context of Trayvon Martin's death perfectly. Actually, the Weinstein Company is a well-known production Company that has substantial financial means and that notably that year, released two black-centered motion pictures (Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and Lee Daniels' *The Butler*) which may have boosted Ryan Coogler's production. Brett Brownell comforts a potential convenient push forward of *Fruitvale Station*'s release by the Weinstein Company as he confirms the company's involvement in promoting *Fruitvale Station* merchandising and marketing campaigns because the film was related to an important immediate theme⁹⁶. Obviously, the company was not without knowing Trayvon Martin's trial and consciously or not, helped institute a link between Coogler's film and Trayvon Martin's case. A link that the audience watching the film on its release may have well considered while analyzing the film's message. Painfully, if one was to watch *Fruitvale Station* nowadays, a similar link will be established between the newest African American victims and Ryan Coogler's adaptation of Oscar Grant's unfair shooting. Indeed, similar cases of police shootings continued to occur after the release of *Fruitvale Station* in 2013. For example, according to an article for *the Guardian*, "young black men were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police officers in 2015," despite the fact that they "make up only 2% of the total US population."⁹⁷

According to interviews mentioned earlier, the making of *Fruitvale Station* was as painful to make for the director, the cast and crew as it was to watch for the audience. Considering how relevant the film's subject matter still is today, Ryan Coogler's fiction may lead other directors also affected by racial crimes to further take creative license and offer their own point of view of other true contemporary tragedy.

⁹⁵ Matt Barone. "*Fruitvale Station*: How a 27-Year-Old Rookie Filmmaker Humanized an American Tragedy." *Complex*. July 12, 2013.

⁹⁶ Brett Brownell. "*Fruitvale Station* and the Weinstein Company's Push for Social Justice". *Mother Jones*. July 13, 2013 (see appendix 2)

⁹⁷ Jon Swaine, Oliver Laughland, Jamiles Lartey and Ciara McCarthy. "Young black men killed by US police at highest rate in year of 1,134 deaths." *The Guardian*. December 31, 2015.

Conclusion

I showed in this research paper that Ryan Coogler rejects the theory that America has entered a post-racial era after the election of Barak Obama. On the contrary, the filmmaker insists on transposing a black identity to the film instead of making Oscar's predicament a universal theme which consequently reasserts and debunks a total disappearance of racial awareness. In his depiction of the shooting, Ryan Coogler puts the emphasis on the racial nature of the crime committed by a white BART Police officer without entirely condemning him as a racist murderer unlike Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* which bluntly condemns race as an intricate source of tension and violence.

Although Coogler's creative license enabled him to portray a real victim of race-related crimes, this research is limited to the boundaries of reality vs. fiction where Coogler's film is one representation of the events that were recorded on New Year's Day 2009. As an independent film, *Fruitvale Station* was able to transcend the question of race relations and showed a different side of black manhood away from classic Hollywood restrictions as its main character is flawed and three-dimensional. Moreover, because of its independent nature, the film's aesthetic choices were able to convey through camera, on-location shooting and rookie actor performances a proximity, intimacy and immediacy to the audience that Hollywood productions fail to exchange because as Sherry B. Ortner puts it, "where studio films are in the business of "entertainment", independent films often set out to challenge their viewers with relatively difficult subject matter or techniques or both."⁹⁸ Even though Ryan Coogler depicts generally accepted characters, the representation of the events surrounding Oscar Grant's shooting exudes from the filmmaker's own perception of facts and testimonies from Oscar Grant's case. Sherry B. Ortner points out that "many independent filmmakers [by contrast to Hollywood movies] make films to please only themselves and a small handful of people who share their tastes."⁹⁹ Intrinsically, because of its racial connotation, *Fruitvale Station* is bound to knit some people's brow but the film's basis crucially remains a difficult contemporary subject matter.

⁹⁸ Sherry B. Ortner. "Against Hollywood: American independent film as a critical cultural movement" (HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory Vol.2, No 2, 2012. 1-21) 2.

⁹⁹ *Idem* 12.

According to Ortner, even though Hollywood movies are for entertaining purposes and often feature happy endings, some Studio films still relate difficult subject matters like Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2009), Steve McQueen's *12 Year's a Slave* (2012) or Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2015). It means that Hollywood has improved in its choice of depicting African American manhood and in its confidence to let black directors undertake such projects.

As a significant number of black-centered films made by either African Americans (Lee Daniels' *Precious*, 2009; Justin Simien's *Dear White People*, 2014 or by Caucasian directors Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*, 2009; Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, 2012 were critically acclaimed worldwide and received a positive reception among the audience, it is justified to examine the evolution of the film industry and to question if the presidential election of Barack Obama played a meaningful role or not in the increase of African American filmmakers' notoriety and success.

Harvey Weinstein, the chief of the Weinstein Company studio that released *Fruitvale Station* asserts that the increasing number of African American-centered stories released in theater results from Obama's election as he claims: "hopefully, it signals, with President Obama, a renaissance. He's erasing racial lines. It is the Obama effect. It's a better country. What a great thing."¹⁰⁰ Interestingly here, Weinstein's comment is paradoxical and somewhat ironic given the racially conscious content *Fruitvale Station* discloses, a film that his company distributed. While it is true that major Hollywood studios have considerably focused on developing black stories, Brooks Barnes suggests in an article for the *New York Times* that studios are reluctant to finance black-centered films because according to Joe Pichirallo, a veteran producer, studios "want assurances that film projects have the potential to attract a significant white audience."¹⁰¹ Brooks Barnes declares that "Hollywood's open-mindedness only goes so far. Studio executives remain hugely skeptical that moviegoers are impartial to race." Indeed, when analyzing the Academy Awards nominations, the color-blind Hollywood that Harvey Weinstein praises is limited in its post-racial actions. *New York Times* journalists Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott denounce Hollywood's

¹⁰⁰ Sharon Waxman. "Harvey Weinstein on Rise of African American Film: 'It's the Obama Effect'". *The Wrap*. September 10, 2013.

¹⁰¹ Brooks. Barnes. "Race and the Safe Hollywood Bet". *The New York Times*. October 18, 2008.

whiteout at the Oscars and explain that “this retreat from race by big studios partly explains the emergence of a newly separate black cinema with its own stars and genres.”¹⁰²

Spike Lee is among many other black artists to reject the post-racialist theory as he explains regarding Tyler Perry’s representation of the African American image: “We’ve got a black president, and we’re going back.”¹⁰³ Indeed, even though, through the course of fifty years, many social measures were taken for “all men to be equal” and that Hollywood’s image of black manhood improved, a backlash threatens America. Actually, many African American lives are still daily discriminated and black living conditions remain unequal to whites which is mirrored in the film industry by a lack of recognition for black directors and black-centered films. Thus, it may be that America is irremediably missing its goal of erasing race and becoming post-racial.

¹⁰² Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott. “Hollywood’s Whiteout. *The New York Times*. February 11, 2011.

¹⁰³ *Idem*.

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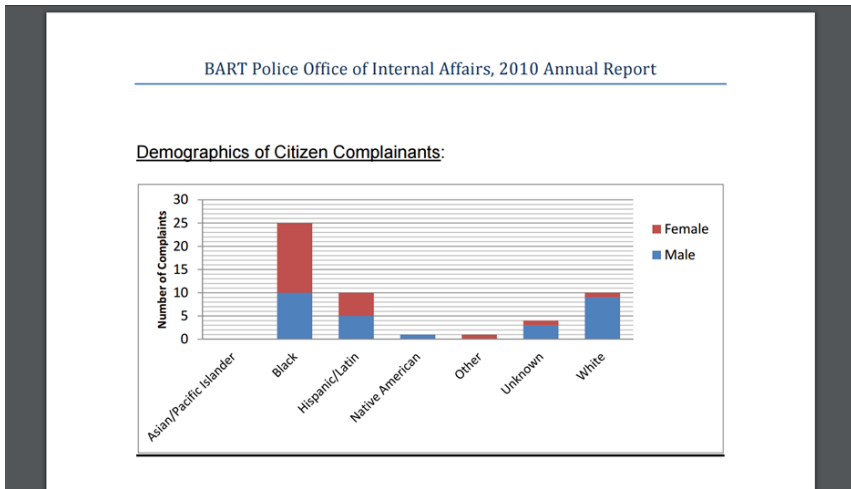
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Appendixes



Appendix 1 - Retrieved at bartgov.com



Appendix 2 – Marketing product by the Weinstein Company.
Source: Brett Brownell for Mother Jones article.