

EDITORIAL

The Political Role of Documentaries Today

Although cinephiles have had access to a proliferation of films online during the current Coronavirus pandemic, none of them possessed the raw visceral impact of the eight-minute-and-forty-six-second video that chronicles the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and his three colleagues. A. S. Hamrah's recent contention in *The Baffler* magazine that "this one horrific motion picture has changed the course of history" is indisputable. Floyd's killing triggered a long overdue national reckoning with America's racist past and present that also quickly spread overseas as Europeans re-examined the damage wrought by a tragic legacy of colonialism.

The film community's response to the wave of protests that assailed the pervasiveness of police violence aimed at communities of color has been, predictably, uneven. Netflix's decision to categorize a group of films on the African American experience available for streaming as the "Black Lives Matter Collection" seemed nearly as cynical a commercial maneuver as Goldman Sachs and Amazon's sudden emergence as corporate warriors determined to fight for racial equality.

Despite the inevitable bad faith of corporations eager to jump on what they consider a Black Lives Matter bandwagon, many institutions, both well known and obscure, have taken the opportunity in the wake of this transformational moment in American political history to fuse cinephilia and consciousness-raising. The Criterion Channel, for example, removed part of its paywall to allow the public access to classic films by Black directors such as Oscar Micheaux, Charles Burnett, William Greaves, and Julie Dash. In addition, many publications and institutions have disseminated playlists that can be used as organizing tools to combat the wave of extrajudicial murders that have shocked and galvanized the country. One of the most useful, on the University of St. Andrews Centre for Screen Cultures site—<https://screenculture.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk>—foregrounds documentaries exploring race and police violence in the United States.

It's also heartening that community initiatives have entered the fray and sponsored Web screenings and Zoom Q&A sessions that can serve as springboards for activism. BLK Docs, for example, a joint project spearheaded by the Luminal Theater in Brooklyn and North Carolina's Speller Street Films, is focused on building "an authentic documentary film culture within the African American community" with the aid of "film screenings, online classes, and webinars."

In late June, BLK Docs presented a screening of Christopher Everett's *Wilmington on Fire*, an eye-opening overview of the 1898 massacre in Wilmington, North Carolina that obliterated a prosperous Black community and provided a grim forewarning of better-known racist assaults on African American enclaves in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921 and Rosewood, Florida in 1923. The interviewees provide moving testimonies explaining how the brutal legacy of the Wilmington Massacre is pertinent to our ongoing racial strife. Larry Reni Thomas, a journalist and radio broadcaster, emphasizes the complicity of the North Carolina Democratic Party in facilitating the massacre. Dr. Lewin Manly reminds viewers of the fact that the parents of his grandfather—Alexander

Manly, who founded Wilmington's *The Daily Record*, the only black-owned newspaper of its era—had survived slavery. Events such as the Wilmington Massacre solidified the dominance of Jim Crow laws, and we are all still living with the consequences.

Another recent documentary, Spencer Wolff's *Stop* (released this year on DVD by Kino Lorber), highlights a precursor to the current wave of resistance to police malfeasance—the battle to repeal former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's much-loathed "stop-and-frisk" policy. Stop-and-frisk reinforced decades-old tensions between the Black community and the police. Its defenders, especially Bloomberg and his police commissioner Ray Kelly, maintained that stop-and-frisk was a commonsensical strategy merely devised to fight crime. Opponents, of course, argued that this form of policing constituted blatant racial profiling.

The film's protagonist, David Ourlicht, a plaintiff in *Floyd v. the City of New York*, a case that eventually eliminated stop-and-frisk on the grounds that it was unconstitutional, ably demolishes Bloomberg and Kelly's apologies for heavy-handed policing by literally *documenting* how he was frequently harassed by the cops near his home in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood not usually associated with a preponderance of violent crime. The film's upbeat ending, however, is a bit misleading. Despite the victory for the plaintiffs in this case, the racism exemplified by stop-and-frisk persists today in New York City and around the country.

Even though a large percentage of white Americans seem to have only recently learned about the role of the police as an occupying force in Black communities, prescient African American writers and critics have been issuing clarion calls for years. In a 1966 essay in *The Nation* entitled "A Report from Occupied Territory," James Baldwin asserted that the police "are simply the hired enemies of this population. They are present to keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests, and they have no other function. They are, moreover—even in a country which makes the very grave error of equating ignorance with simplicity—quite stunningly ignorant; and, since they know that they are hated, they are always afraid. One cannot possibly arrive at a more sure-fire formula for cruelty."

As we confront the challenges posed by one of the darkest periods in American history, it would be naive to argue that online film events or playlists offer panaceas. As a caveat, it should be noted that it would be myopic if topical documentary films, no matter how informative or even revelatory, merely functioned as therapeutic tools for, in the phrase du jour, fragile white audiences. Nevertheless, cinema, especially documentary cinema, continues to perform a vital pedagogical function.

An excerpt in this issue from the forthcoming second edition of *Cineaste* editor Richard Porton's *Film and the Anarchist Imagination* discusses some of the most significant new documentaries that address police violence, and how some of the most effective that align with the agenda of Black Lives Matter are not primarily designed to assuage white liberal guilt, but instead attempt to undermine what has been labeled the American "carceral state." As Baldwin—who notably wrote film criticism himself in *The Devil Finds Work*—observed, "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."—**The Editors**

CINEASTE

Founder and Editor-in-Chief
GARY CROWDUS

Editorial Board
ROBERT CASHILL
RAHUL HAMID
CYNTHIA LUCIA
RICHARD PORTON

Consulting Editor
DAN GEORGAKAS

Contributing Editors
ROY GRUNDMANN
LEONARD QUART
DENNIS WEST

Assistant Editors
DAVID NEARY
CYNTHIA ROWELL

Associates
ANTOINE DE BAEQUE
THOMAS DOHERTY
JEAN-MICHEL FRODON
JOHN HILL
ADREW HORTON
ADRIAN MARTIN
LOUIS MENASHE
JARED RAPFOGEL
DEBORAH YOUNG

Contributing Writers
Susan Carruthers, Robert Koehler,
Stuart Liebman, Jonathan Murray,
Adam Nayman, Darragh O'Donoghue,
Catherine Russell, Christopher Sharrett,
Michael Sicinski, J. E. Smyth,
David Sterritt

Production Assistance
KEVIN GAOR

Web Director
JESSICA Y LEE

Technology Consultant
VI CONCEPTS, INC.

Advertising Information
TELEPHONE (212) 209-3856
EMAIL cineaste@cineaste.com

Manufactured and Printed in
the United States of America

Cineaste (ISSN 0009-7004) is published quarterly at 155 East 44th Street, 5th Floor, New York, New York, 10017, telephone (212) 209-3856, Website www.cineaste.com, email cineaste@cineaste.com. Subscription address: P.O. Box 180, New York, NY 10009-9998. All articles represent views of their authors and not necessarily those of the editors. Copyright © 2020 by *Cineaste*, Inc. For permission to photocopy material published in *Cineaste* for business or academic uses, contact Copyright Clearance Center, info@copyright.com, www.copyright.com. *Cineaste* is available in full-text electronic format, on a subscription or individual article download basis, from ProQuest, JSTOR, EBSCO, and Exact Editions (see Digital Editions on our Website). Microfilm/fiche copies are available from NA Publishing, Inc., www.napubco.com. This issue published in September 2020. *Cineaste* is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to support this magazine.