Haley McGraw

English 129

Professor Sarah Boyd

April 27, 2018

Longform Essay: *Fruitvale Station*

On January 1st, Oscar Grant, a 22 year old unarmed black male, was shot and killed by a white police officer at the Fruitvale Station.The unjust killing sparked protests across America, with participants demanding justice and raising further questions about police brutality in the United States. About four year and a half years after the shooting occured, the film *Fruitvale Station* was released, grossing $17,385,830 globally. The summer of the films release was coincidentally the day before the jury of the Florida v. George Zimmerman case found Zimmerman not guilty on all accounts. As a result, many individuals compared the murder of Oscar Grant to the murder of Trayvon Martin. The film, *Fruitvale Station*, was directed by Ryan Coogler and stars Michael B. Jordan as Oscar Grant. *Fruitvale Station* relives the last 24 hours of Oscar Grant’s life and aims to show viewers how Grant was unfairly perceived by the white police officers , as well as the deplorable act that took place on the first day of 2009. *Fruitvale Station* exhibits the tendency for black men to be villainized and misrepresented in the media, as well as revealing the complexity of black manhood in America.

*Fruitvale Station* opens with footage recorded by an observer from the train that witnessed the police officer fatally shoot Oscar Grant. The footage, relatively far from the scene with constant camera shaking and overall poor quality, makes it hard for viewers to understand what is happening in the video. The clip begins by showing the group of men sitting against the wall with three white police officers towering over them, and eventually reveals the violence the police officers used as an attempt to control the men and force Oscar Grant into handcuffs. As the audience tries to make out what is happening in the video, the sound of a gun is heard and the screen goes black, followed by the gasps and screams of those who witnessed the shooting. By starting the film with this real footage, the director essentially “spoils” the ending of the movie, although the film is based on true events. The footage sets the tone of the film as serious and uneasy, causing the audience to feel anxious about watching the events leading up to this moment. Presenting the viewers with the authentic footage in the opening scene allows the individuals to focus on the reasoning and means behind the murder of Oscar Grant, instead of the murder itself.

An early scene in the film shows Oscar is pumping gas and witnesses a car hit a Pitbull and proceed to drive off, as if nothing had happened. Oscar chases after the car, urging them to stop, and then returns to the road to pick up the injured Pitbull and remove him from the road. As he places the dog down, he starts rubbing the dog’s head and comforting the dog while he takes his final breaths. We see Grant getting choked up as he watches this helpless animal die in front of him, knowing there is nothing he can do at this point. The quick scene in the film appears almost out of place and random. Upon researching the scene, both Michael B. Jordan and Ryan Coogler mentioned the metaphorical meaning of the Pitbull in interviews. Jordan stated “black males, we are America’s Pit Bull. You know, we’re labeled ‘vicious,’ you know, ‘inhumane,’ and left to die on the street. Oscar was kinda like left for dead, so many of us, you know, um, young African-American males are left for dead. We get branded a lot.” Similarly, Coogler strengthens this comparison by saying “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…whenever you see us (young black males) in the news, it’s for getting shot and killed or shooting and killing somebody–for being a stereotype.” Black manhood is often jeopardized by erroneous perceptions and misguided stereotypes of their behavior, which in the case of Oscar Grant, resulted in his death. The media notoriously distorts information to villainize black men and justify the way society treats them, in the same way the media portrays Pit Bulls as vicious animals. Using the Pit Bull as a symbol to represent black men further justifies the complexities of black manhood in America and the oppression and injustice these individuals are forced to endure solely because of their skin color.

Throughout the film, various characters allude to race relations and issue of equal representation in their daily conversations. Oscar’s sister calls him to inform him that she will not be able to make it to their mother’s birthday party because she is working overtime. She proceeds to ask Oscar to pick out a birthday card for their mother, but warns “don’t get no fake-ass card with white people on it. I want a black card.” By asking Oscar to purchase a card with people that look like her and her family, Oscar’s sister alludes to the underrepresentation of black individuals in different aspects of media and everyday life, such as on greeting cards. Oscar’s sister wanted her mother to have a card that portrayed a happy, black family celebrating a birthday because the card can represent their own family and their own contentment. Despite his sister’s wishes, Oscar goes to the store and chooses a card with a white family on the front as a joke. Later at Oscar’s mother’s birthday party, one family member states his inclination to cheer for the Pittsburgh Steelers in the Super Bowl, although he is an Oakland Raiders fan. When Oscar questions his decision, he states “black players, black uniforms, black coach. Coach even has a black wife. I’m going for the Steelers.” Oscar’s family member embraces the “blackness” of the Steelers and wants the team to succeed because he can identify with the black individuals within the organization. The greeting card and Steelers comments signify the importance of an equal representation of race, as a way of destroying racial barriers about who can be seen as happy or successful. When individuals belonging to a minority appear across the media in a positive light, others can feel empowered and hopeful about future accomplishments. Because black individuals are rarely represented positively in the media, non-blacks use the misrepresentations presented in the media to form their predispositions about the entire black community. The black experience in America encompasses the complexity of dealing with both the underrepresentation of black people in a positive light and misrepresentation of black people in the media, which creates a prejudiced and ignorant society.

Grant and friends were traveling back from San Francisco via the Bay Area Rapid Transit, when a fight broke out on the train, causing the BART officers to arrive at the scene. Although Oscar retreats to the train after the friend group decided to split up, an officer scans the inside of the train looking for others involved and immediately grabs Oscar, the only black male on the train, by the neck onto the platform with his friends to be detained. Oscar and his friends start recording the officers using their cell phones, until the officers demand they put their phones away, and Oscar questions “what they (the officers) have to hide?” Oscar continues to provoke the officer by calling him a “bitch ass n----,” which immediately infuriates the officer and causes him to retaliate by calling Oscar a “bitch ass n----” as well. Oscar warns the officer not to say that word, which further angers the officer and motivates him to force Oscar to the ground and push his head against the floor. The camera angle switches about every two or three seconds leading up to the moment of the shooting. After the gun is fired, there is a close-up on Oscar’s face, as his eyes widen and blood begins to fill his mouth and drip down his lips. In the moments after he is shot, Oscar addresses the officer and says “ I got a four year old daughter. You shot me.” The shooting of Oscar Grant is the crux of the film, which shows how an innocent and unarmed black man lost his life to a racist cop and inequitable society. After receiving the call about a fight, which was actually started by a white male, the officers clearly assumed those involved were black males, which explains why the officer is quick to target Oscar on the train and assume his responsibility for the dispute. Oscar is further villainized because of his unwillingness to cooperate with the aggressive officers and his use of foul language when speaking to those accusing him of wrongdoings. Clearly upset with the way the officers treated him, Oscar rightfully felt offended and emotional about the detainment and physical abuse of the officers. Within this scene, the white police officer refers to Oscar using the “n word,” alluding to the continuation of white people using this offensive and hateful term without regards to the impact on black individuals. Although Oscar is forced to his stomach with his hand are behind his back, essentially powerless, the white police officer decides to shoot Oscar Grant in the back. The white police officers demonized Oscar Grant to the point where they felt he deserved to die for his behavior.

Shortly after the film was released, Kyle Smith, a contributor to Forbes, posted an article on the Forbes website questioning the accuracy of the film’s depictions of the events. Smith questions the purpose of fabricating politically charged events for dramatic effect, and claim that *Fruitvale Station* “treats the facts as disposable in pursuit of a larger point about justice that simply isn’t justified.” While Coogler admits to having made up the scene about the Pit Bull and exaggerating the scene where Oscar throws the bag of weed into the ocean, Smith uses these made up scenes to justify and defend the shooting of Oscar Grant. Kyle Smith, the author of this article, is writing to the majority white audience of Forbes. By attacking the scenes of the film that demonstrate a sense of compassion and hope in Grant, Smith provides the white audience with reason to believe the movie to be incredible and the shooting to not be “the kind that should spark rallies and riots and federal charges.” Smith’s commentary further demonstrates the complexities of black manhood because of Smith’s validation of the shooting of an unarmed black man, based on the events of a film that were intended to reveal a deeper truth about black life in America.

Our society justifies police brutality by villainizing these innocent black men and allowing these acts of violence to persist, almost always without punishing the perpetrator. The officer that shot and killed Oscar Grant, named Johannes Mehserle, was eventually convicted of involuntary manslaughter because he claimed to have been reaching for his taser gun, and mistakenly used his real gun. Mehserle was sentenced to two years in prison, but was released after 11 months. Unlike Mehserle, police officers are indicted for killings rarely, fewer than 1% to be precise. Of those that have been convicted, their sentences have not exceeded four years. In 2015, unarmed black men were killed by the police at a rate five times higher than the rate of unarmed white men killed by the police. These alarming facts allude to the deeper issues of villainizing black men and the tragic aftermath of the demonization of these individuals. In “A Small Needful Fact,” by Ross Gay, Gay writes about the murder of of Eric Garner by police officers, after repeatedly telling the men he could not breathe. Gay’s poem represents how society often shifts the fault from the police officer to the black man, by investigating the black men’s past and using their background to victimize them. Black men in America are forced to live in fear of being pulled over, or questioned by a police officer, because these encounters with law enforcement may lead to their death. *Fruitvale Station* exemplifies how black manhood is demonized by America’s white predominance, misrepresented in the media, and the greater complexities of life as a black male. Films and other forms of media that reveal the injustices occurring everyday must continue to develop, in order to bring attention and awareness to the issues and initiate change in society.

Works Cited

“Fruitvale Station's Metaphorical Scene Makes a Clear Point.” *SwayLove.org - Pit Bull Advocacy via Creativity*, 1 Jan. 2014, www.swaylove.org/fruitvale-stations-metaphorical-scene-shines-a-light-on-multiple-realities.

Gay, Ross. “A Small Needful Fact.” *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 29 Apr. 2016, www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/small-needful-fact.

Smith, Kyle. “'Fruitvale Station' Is Loose With The Facts About Oscar Grant.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 5 Feb. 2014, www.forbes.com/sites/kylesmith/2013/07/25/fruitvale-station-is-loose-with-the-facts-in-an-effort-to-elicit-sympathy-for-oscar-grant/.