A New Voice in Film: Urban Youth cast an analytical eye on the state of the nation

A Report and Resource Guide

For many years, month after month, I ran a program for filmmakers called – rather unimaginatively, I felt – “Show us your Stuff – for IFP/Miami”. The evening was a gathering of filmmakers who screened up to 10 minutes of their work and received feedback from an audience of their peers. Sometimes the work included short films, and at other times the 10 minutes was part of a larger work in progress.

At the same time I was running an independent cinema. (Alliance Cinema, Miami Beach 1990 – 2002). We had a reputation for showing great films that often had the kind of New York Times 4-Star review that a wide variety of people traveled great distances to come to see. And I was in charge of closing that same cinema as the multiplexes began to show those same high quality films and the American Independent film came into strength at the Box Office.

Our cinema also had a reputation for showing gay films. We showed all the films of Derek Jarman, and the early works of Todd Haynes, Gus Van Sant, Greg Araki and so on. What I witnessed during that period, was the extraordinary creativity born from a passion to speak and be heard - coupled with a very limited access to funds - that comes when a minority begins to find its voice in the medium of film.

What I witnessed on December 5th,  2013, was another minority beginning to find its voice in the medium of film in a way that has power, authority, and endless creativity despite not having two pennies to rub together: young men of color. This is not to say that there haven’t been great movies made by young men of color in the past: “Sweet, Sweetback’s Badass Song,” Smoke Signals,” and countless films that show what it’s like to be black and living in an urban nightmare of drugs and violence: “Boyz in the Hood,” “New Jack City,” “Anuvahood,” “Clockers,” “La Haine,” “City of God,” and more.

However, like the wave of young gay filmmakers that emerged in the mid-80’s, these young filmmakers of color are both confident in the digital medium at the same time as being able to deconstruct the distribution and exhibition system that has them trapped in invisibility. These young men are not merely describing the world they live in, but analyzing, commenting on, and offering alternatives. Oakland-based filmmaker, Ryan Coogler’s “Fruitvale Station” has now set a new bar for conscious filmmaking from the perspective of a young black man in 21st century urban America.

Part of the deconstruction these filmmakers engage in is the clarity that unless they find a path through the chosen medium of film, one of the pitfalls is that their voices will continue to *not be heard*. Because they understand exactly how the system works to silence them, erase them, render them voiceless and invisible, they have to find tools to circumvent those built-in structures.

For these young men, the foundational element of their world is violence. According to the [Brothers on the Rise](brothersontherise.org) piece, “Rising Above Violence,” all the young men and boys of color in Oakland have witnessed and heard shootings, personally know another young man who has been shot, and many have been shot at themselves. Secondly, the issue of voicelessness is central at home, at school and in the community.

Once youth learn that there are options when dealing with the foundational issue of the constant presence of violence, then they can start to learn “to open up about the challenges they face,” ([Brothers On The Rise](http://brothersontherise.org/), Rising Above the Violence), build a supportive community of other men, and speak up politically to make change in their environment. The short film “Black Men in the Media” was produced by the Determination Media Group at [United Roots](http://unitedrootsoakland.org/), one of the media programs for young people in the Bay Area. The piece discusses the impact of images of young black men in the media, and the significance of positive role models.

Some of the pieces in the show provided the context, the environment and life of the young men, in addition to the concept of initiation and rites of passage for youth of color.

“One of the functions of the initiation is to bring the young person into the community. And all young people have a longing for that,” ([Rites of Passage](http://www.warriorfilms.org/rites-of-passage)) Director, Frederick Marx, “Rites of Passage” attended the event to show a selection from his film and discuss filmmaking.

“[Rites of Passage](http://www.warriorfilms.org/rites-of-passage)” is a feature-length film that looks at the costs and devastation of youth violence. It is based on the premise that when young people do not receive initiation and mentoring into adulthood, chaos ensues. “If we do not initiate the young, they will burn down the village to feel the heat.” African Proverb. The film looks at how creating initiation ceremonies, rites of passage, and adult male mentorship turns young men’s lives around.

Perhaps the most accomplished, technically-speaking, of all the films was the sumptuous animation, “Two Spirit,” from “[Injunuity](http://injunuity.org/)” directed and produced by Adrian Baker, and produced by Manny Lieras of the [American Indian Child Resource Center](http://aicrc.org/). The film was bathed in desert color and told Native American stories with an authentic voice. You can catch a screening somewhere in town or on KQED or on the web.

“[History in these Streets](http://bavc.org/sites/default/files/factory/historyinthestreets/index.html)” involved a film crew documenting the homes and meeting places of the Black Panther Movement. This piece commented on both the complete erasing of this significant history from the streets and the neighborhoods of Oakland, making the Movement entirely invisible, even to those who live there now, while at the same time making visible a team of young men doing the documentation.

Director, Peter Nicks, “[The Waiting Room](http://www.whatruwaitingfor.com/film/),” also showed a section of his documentary in which a young man is rushed into surgery in Highland Hospital, Oakland, after a shooting. We watch as the narrative-free documentary follows the medical team working on the youth, the mother arriving, and the doctors making a decision as to who is going to pass on the notice of death. Close ups of blood dripped on to the operating room floor and the boy’s shoes were deeply poignant.

Perhaps my favorite piece of the evening, “[Street Literature](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PHOWoRqCy0),” by the [RYSE Center](http://www.rysecenter.org/), includes a number of rap singers rhyming about life on the streets for a black man. Meanwhile the images show each of them in day-to-day situations in Oakland. The camera watches them with a gaze of fear, racism and discrimination. One singer walks along the Fruitville train station and looks down at where Oscar Grant died. Another buys Skittles and a drink in a store while the camera watches with suspicion. As the music video progresses, each of the young men, puts up a black hood on their hoodie and they all turn into Trayvon Martin, one of “the young people of color taken from us too early” for whom the piece is dedicated. As we watch, we can only hope these young men actually survive the environment they walk in and describe in their song. This music video is a beautiful elegy to Trayvon Martin and uses music, voice, poetry, images, themes and concepts in a truly sophisticated and extremely powerful way.

There were 3 incredibly well told digital stories of local heroes by Killari Meredith, Danny Ruiz and Carlos Canul of the [Conscious Media Crew](http://consciousyouthmediacrew.org/). And a piece about the transformation of Latino men as they set aside their macho cultural beliefs and become available to family and relationship told in “Los Hombres de Casa C.H.E.” from “Historias de la Comunidad,” Group Leader, Juan Cuba.

And “[Our Lives Matter](http://vimeo.com/71511344)” produced by [Forward Media](http://forwardevermedia.com/) and Justin Davis, [Kapor Center for Social Impact](http://kaporcenter.org/). The opening titles state: “ In the wake of the Trayvon Martin tragedy, much has been said about and to young Black men. At **College Bound Brotherhood**, we thought it was time to hear from young Black men themselves.” It’s extremely powerful to hear these young men talk about the way they are perceived by society, all the while trying to succeed in college.

The evening was filled with great film, the generous comments of successful filmmakers, young men and their mentors – some of whom are filmmakers. It will be interesting to watch the future of this work. Go and join one of these organizations and make some movies!

Joanne Butcher is a former fundraising consultant to Brothers on the Rise and a big fan of nonprofit film and film as art.