

Oscar's last day

reviewed by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [September 4, 2013 issue](#)



AN ORDINARY MAN: *Fruitvale Station* explores the shooting of Oscar Grant (played by Michael B. Jordan). © 2013 THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Ryan Coogler's first feature-length film, *Fruitvale Station*, is a powerful, meditative exploration of one ordinary life that met an extraordinary and tragic end. Oscar Grant (played by the electrifying Michael B. Jordan) was shot to death by a transit police officer after a fight with another passenger at the BART Fruitvale Station on his way home from the New Year's fireworks in San Francisco on January 1, 2009. Because Grant was a black man shot by a white police officer, the film deals implicitly with larger themes of racism, racial profiling and systematic injustice.

For a movie that touches on America's deepest psychic wounds, *Fruitvale* is remarkably reserved. While Grant's death is clearly portrayed as unjust, the film does little to investigate the motives or defenses of Grant's shooter, Johannes Mehserle. (He claimed he was reaching for his Taser and pulled his gun instead.) Rather than debate the legal questions surrounding the case, the film offers us an intimate portrait of Grant's final day.

The film has been praised unanimously for its honest, balanced portrayal of Grant. He is neither a demon nor a saint. He is an ordinary man, which is to say, a flawed one. He is funny, caring, proud, confused, bitter, hopeful, aggressively joyful and sometimes just plain aggressive. He loves his young daughter, his mother and his daughter's mother, though in the latter case he has not always been faithful. We learn that he has sold drugs in the past (for which he served two prison sentences), but we watch him struggling to find a new hand to play with a deck stacked against

him.

As I often do when watching movies charged with questions of race, I looked for *Fruitvale*'s "sympathy surrogate." These are the "good" white characters that show up in movies where themes of systematic racism and institutional injustice are in play. They give white viewers a way to locate themselves in the story as more than just beneficiaries of white privilege or enforcers of injustice. (As I wrote some months ago in this column, the absence of any such character in *Django Unchained* was one of the most unnerving aspects of that movie's racial politics.)

Coogler offers such a surrogate in Katie, a composite of two women Grant interacted with in real life. In the film, Grant meets Katie at the grocery store where he used to work, and they share a moment of awkward suspicion that transitions into harmless flirtation and genuine goodwill. This interaction sets up Katie as a unique witness to Grant's death: she is on his train that night and films the shooting with her cell phone camera. Because of their earlier interaction, she recognizes Grant as a human being, not a nameless black guy fighting with the police, and she channels the fear and outrage the audience feels watching Grant get shot.

But this is not Katie's story, and once the train pulls away from the station, we never see her again. Even in appeasing our anxieties ("see, not all white people are racists") she draws attention to the limits of her own empathy. Confusion, shock and anger flash across her face as the train doors close. But we know, even more than her character does, how little she knew the man she has just seen killed. Grant's full humanity demands our attention. We are witnesses, in some way, to his life, not just his death.

Paying attention as Coogler does to Grant in this film may seem like paltry work when it comes to our national sins of racism and racial injustice. The film opened in limited release the day before George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin, and while there are many differences between the two real-life shootings and their aftermaths, it is impossible not to draw comparisons between them.

If *Fruitvale* offers anything to the current conversation, it is that paying attention is, in fact, a moral act. The outrage over racial profiling in both cases is in part anger that young black men are not given the chance to be known or treated as individuals, but must stand in for social anxieties, fears and statistics. The social sins

that lead to their respective deaths are only exacerbated by lumping them together as “dead black men.”

As a young black man himself, living in the Bay Area at the time of Grant’s shooting, Coogler was dismayed to see Grant vilified as a thug who “got what he deserved” or held up as a paragon of innocence. In both extremes, there was no room to know the real man whose life ended too soon. This was another injustice heaped on top of his violent death, and one that Coogler hopes his film can help to rectify.

In the aftermath of Zimmerman’s trial, I have had many conversations with people who are ready to throw up their hands in despair at entrenched systems of injustice and prejudice that seem impossible to fix. Or who feel paralyzed by guilt for participating in such systems, often without conscious awareness, but who do not know how to take action for justice. Watching a movie won’t end racism or racial injustice. But in inviting us to see Oscar Grant’s life through his lens, Coogler gives us a way to pay attention to Grant without turning away in disgust or shame or fear or anger. Such attention is surely one step toward loving our neighbors as ourselves, and Coogler’s film is a potent, prophetic witness on this path.