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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Literature and Race

Course Code: ENG5EJ303(2) • Module 4 Notes

Unit 13: Fruitvale Station – Dir. Ryan Coogler (2013)

Ryan Coogler and the Cinematic Humanization of Black Lives

Ryan Coogler's monumental directorial debut *Fruitvale Station* (2013) remains one of the most powerful cinematic achievements in contemporary American cinema. Winner of both the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, the film dramatizes the final twenty-four hours in the life of Oscar Grant III, a 22-year-old African American man who was fatally shot in the back by BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) police officer Johannes Mehserle on the Fruitvale Station platform in Oakland, California, on the morning of New Year's Day 2009.

Subverting the Stereotype: Oscar Grant as a Complex Human Being

Coogler deliberately avoids hagiography or one-dimensional martyrdom, portraying Oscar (played with extraordinary nuance and emotional depth by Michael B. Jordan) as a flawed, vibrant, loving, and deeply striving young man. We witness Oscar struggling to support his four-year-old daughter Tatiana and his partner Sophina, attempting to secure legitimate employment after serving time in San Quentin, coping with frustration, and resolving to give up selling marijuana. By immersing the viewer in the mundane textures of Oscar's day—buying groceries, helping a stranger with a fish fry recipe, tending to a dying stray pit bull, and celebrating his mother Wanda's birthday—Coogler restores full, radiant humanity to a black body that mainstream white media routinely criminalized and dismissed.

The Terror of the Panoptic State and Police Impunity

The climax on the cold concrete platform of Fruitvale Station is filmed with devastating realism. Coogler begins the film with actual cell-phone footage captured by BART passengers, linking fictional narrative to undeniable archival evidence. When white transit police officers aggressively pull Oscar and his friends off the train, they unleash verbal abuse and disproportionate physical violence, pinning Oscar face-down onto the concrete before shooting him point-blank. *Fruitvale Station* serves as an agonizing visual indictment of institutional police brutality and the cheapness of black life within the American criminal justice system, anticipating the explosive rise of the global Black Lives Matter movement.

Unit 14: Short Films: Critical Deconstructions of Racial Microaggressions

1. Good Hair – Dir. Fray Forde and Catherine Dee Holly

This provocative short film tackles the deep political, cultural, and psychic significance of Afro-textured hair. In Eurocentric societies, natural black hair (kinky, coily, afro, locs) has historically been coded as "unprofessional," "unruly," or "dirty," forcing black individuals—especially women—to spend vast financial sums on chemical relaxers, weaves, and heat treatments to achieve straight European hair standards. The film deconstructs how hair policing functions as a subtle yet pervasive instrument of white racial supremacy, celebrating natural black hair as a crown of ancestral pride and self-determination.

2. What Kind of Asian Are You? – Dir. Ken Tanaka

Ken Tanaka's viral short comedy delivers a brilliant, satirical takedown of the "perpetual foreigner" trope endured by Asian Americans and racial minorities. The film portrays a well-meaning white male jogger encountering an Asian American woman in a public park, repeatedly asking her "Where are you from?" When she answers "San Diego," he persists: "No, where are you originally from?" He then congratulates her on her English and begins bowing and spouting fragmented phrases in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. The woman brilliantly reverses the gaze by interrogating the white man's ancestral origins ("Are you English?

German? Let me guess, fish and chips, schnitzel!"). The short lays bare the everyday microaggressions that deny full citizenship and belonging to non-white citizens.

3. Smile More – Dir. Dembe Dan Kimbowa

In *Smile More*, director Dembe Dan Kimbowa explores the exhausting psychological burden of racial gaslighting and emotional labor imposed upon black people in predominantly white professional and social spaces. The film analyzes the white gaze's demand that black men must constantly perform compliance, cheerfulness, and harmlessness ("Smile more!") to soothe white fragility and neutralize white fears of the "angry black man." Kimbowa exposes how this compulsory emotional performance suffocates authentic self-expression and exacts a severe somatic toll on black mental health.

4. Sometimes You're a Caterpillar – Dir. Chescaleigh (Franchesca Ramsey)

Created by prominent activist and media personality Franchesca Ramsey (Chescaleigh), *Sometimes You're a Caterpillar* is a whimsical yet profoundly brilliant animated allegory explaining privilege, intersectionality, and allyship. Using a snail and a caterpillar attempting to cross a wooden fence, the animation demonstrates that privilege does not mean one's life is free from hardship; rather, it means that certain structural barriers (like a fence that a caterpillar can slip under but blocks a snail's shell) do not impede you. The film dismantles defensiveness, teaching that recognizing one's privilege is not an accusation of moral guilt, but a moral invitation to listen with empathy and work collectively to remove institutional obstacles for others.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

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2. Global Circuits of Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Dispossession, and Anti-Blackness

Connecting the poetic, fictional, and cinematic texts across this course reveals the interconnected global architecture of modern racial capitalism, as theorized by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism*. From the brutal slave plantations of the Americas and the diamond mines of Southern Africa to the violent dispossessions of Australian Aborigines and Canadian First Nations, the global capitalist economy was historically built upon racialized dispossession, forced labor, and racial genocide.

Achille Mbembe's concept of *necropolitics*—the sovereign capacity to dictate who matters and who is disposable, who may live and who must die—finds tragic realization in contemporary police killings of black bodies like Oscar Grant, the environmental degradation of indigenous tribal territories, and the carceral state's hyper-incarceration of racial minorities. By examining how diverse racialized communities—Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Hispanic—articulate their lived realities, literature emerges as a primary site of internationalist solidarity, forging coalitions of resistance against global imperial hegemony.

3. Aesthetic De-Alienation and the Reclamation of Radical Futurity

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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