

three larger, unrelated stories of African-American characters: Renaldo and Titus, two young brothers living with their single mother in workaday Mississippi; Judy Hill, a Louisiana bar owner and abuse survivor; and the Southern chapter of the New Black Panthers Party, marching in protest of the then-recent murders of innocent civilians Alton Sterling, Phillip Carroll, and Jeremy Jackson. Shooting in stately, high-contrast black and white, Minervini renders these lives in vivid, plainspoken terms. Their individual dramas speak to those of the everyday African-American experience, and to that of the history of Black America in turn: of children instructed by their mother to be home before the violent veil of nightfall; of a persevering woman struggling to make a life for herself within a system designed to keep her down; and of protest in the face of pervasive injustice and indignity. Subtly accumulating discrete but galvanizing moments, the film places the personal and political side by side, finding dignity and strength amidst the rubble wrought by hundreds of years of systemic prejudice.

Largely foregoing traditional observation, Minervini instead favours rapport and reciprocity, crafting scenes and facilitating onscreen moments in collaboration with his subjects. It's difficult to imagine such intimacy and immediacy being achieved through other means, and indeed, what results is a selection of indelible characters, linked through an innate and tragic plight. Early in the film, Minervini draws a sharp line from innocence to activism, as the touching naïveté of the two boys—exemplified by an exchange where the younger Titus is taught the difference between race and skin colour by his brother—is juxtaposed with the activities of the Black Panthers, whose nonviolent demonstrations are eventually and invariably met by the police, in the film's climatic scene, with excessive force. But it's Hill, whose story evolves in heartrending fashion from her fight to save her bar and her relationship with her dying mother to an even more personal mission to support those fighting addiction, who by the end emerges as a de facto star: passionate and charismatic, her presence cuts through the narrative with gripping force. While in some ways just a small piece of a populace's struggle, Hill's story is nonetheless indicative of a broader and more widespread affliction, one spelled out in the middle of the film on a case of seasonally themed Budweiser, whose cursive logo sets the current condition in stark relief: America. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire? is the story of a community of black people in the American South during the summer 2017, when a string of brutal killings of young African American men sent shockwaves throughout the country. A meditation on the state of race in America, this film is an intimate portrait into the lives of those who struggle for justice, dignity, and survival in a country not on their side.

Part of "A More Perfect Union: The Films of Roberto Minervini," a complete retrospective of the Italian-born director's features running from June 13-23 at 2220 Arts + Archives and Brain Dead Studios. Copies of *Textur #7: Roberto Minervini*, a monograph published for the 2024 Viennale, will be available to purchase at each screening. Co-presented by MUBI.

TRT: 123 min

What You Gonna Do When the World's On Fire? by Mark Peranson

The following article was originally published at Cinema Scope online, September 2018

Judging from the early reviews of *What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire?*, which spurred me to write these fast and loose impressions, Roberto Minervini seems to have painted himself into multiple monochrome corners—a white Italian man (albeit one who lives in Texas) making a film named after a spiritual about socially oppressed black Louisiana and Mississippi; a so-called 120-minute “documentary” lyrically shot in gorgeous, high-contrast black and white; a political film that has as some of its subjects actual political activists (the New Black Panthers), but in itself isn’t activist, rather humanist—because he is a filmmaker, not an activist, or maybe it’s more appropriate to call him a magician.

Because what Minervini actually is doing, and I mean this in all honesty, is in fact magic: how he manages to create such relationships between filmmaker and what we’ll call, for the sake of argument, “documentary performer,” is well-known now, post so-called Texas Trilogy, to be a product of a long immersion in these communities, to the point of dissolving the border between the camera and the subject, between reality and construct. Though how it actually is done is magic, because you’re never going to see the tricks revealed unless you’re standing next to him on location, in these peoples’ houses and workplaces, for just as long as he does, which for a viewer or a critic is an utter impossibility.

That this is also urgent filmmaking pretty much goes without saying. *What You Gonna Do* is what the French still call engagé, which does not mean a call to arms but rather a desire for self-reflection that, eventually, might lead to the honing of the spirit of the political animal. The distinction may be too subtle for trade critics who have to wade knee-deep through disposable garbage of both commercial and “artistic” movies, but we should not demand from political documentaries the same easy, consumable form that we do from, say, a Damien Chazelle film. You want to see colourful Indians and music, watch *Treme*. (And I miss *Treme*; my one personal criticism is that there really could have been more music here, which is integral to the communities, but perhaps that’s because I know Minervini began with the idea of making a film in collaboration with musicians.) You want an anti-Trump film? I’m sure Michael Moore delivers a whopper, in a very entertaining package. But, hell, with what’s going on in the stupefying reality-show politics of today, isn’t “entertaining” the last thing that we need from a political documentary? Does it really matter that, say, some of the four strands of this film are more “elaborately realized” than others? These are people’s lives we’re talking about, and we have only been granted the privilege to be in their presence for a little more than two hours, which, we should remember, has been edited down from more than a hundred hours of footage, and editing means that

choices have been made. Don’t you think Minervini and his editor could have delivered something like, to cite the clear critical litmus test of recent New Orleans portraiture, Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*? Don’t you think maybe he’s after something different? It’s character that matters here, fleeting moments rather than overarching drama. Perhaps this is hybrid filmmaking as termite art—and who cares how long it is, it probably should be longer.

Minervini does not attempt to solve the problems of police brutality, inequality, poverty, social injustice, etc., because he’s a filmmaker, not a politician—not to say that filmmakers aren’t just as qualified as today’s politicians to solve the world’s problems, but that’s for another time. (Minervini 2020, why not.) And as a lowly filmmaker, we should also not expect him to solve the problems inherent in fictionalizing reality, but boy, does he give it a shot. He does a great job at making us angry at reality—and to speak personally, angry at how this depiction of reality is itself characterized—along the way. But ultimately, as someone else said, I guess there are some very fine people on both sides, right? ♦

The Land of the Unknown by Jordan Cronk

The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 77, Winter 2019

Writing for Cinema Scope in the winter of 2017, director Roberto Minervini reflected on a new wave of philistine cinema in America. For Minervini, this “covert-yet-not-so-subtle nationalistic, reactionary” brand of filmmaking—exemplified by the likes of Denis Villeneuve’s *Sicario* (2015)—is a prime example of how Hollywood, operating under the guise of liberal nonpartisanship, contributes to right-wing fear-mongering and the demonization of the Other. As an American and/or otherwise reasonably well-equipped moviegoer, it’s easy to identify with his frustration. But what seems doubly vexing for Minervini, one of contemporary cinema’s most dedicated and thoughtful chroniclers of the American South—where he’s lived and worked for over a decade since moving to the US in 2000—is the social and cultural misrepresentation that these films help proliferate. In modest but forceful opposition to this movement, Minervini has worked, over the course of four adventurous and increasingly troubling films about the South, to complicate such notions, presenting instead a sensitive yet problematic portrait of the downtrodden and the disenfranchised, their fears and desires, pleasures and pastimes, as well as their anger and discontent.

A singularly creative and fearless voice in the ongoing evolution of nonfiction filmmaking, the Italian-born Minervini has consistently pushed himself out of his comfort zone, challenging his own biases and beliefs from project to project. Rather than hinder his ambition, his status as a foreigner has managed to facilitate a productive symbiosis with his subjects, one based on a shared sense of empathy with the outsider. With his early “Texas Trilogy,” a trio of tender and beautifully crafted features that is comprised of *The Passage* (2011), *Low Tide* (2012), and *Stop the Pounding Heart* (2013), he captured the core years of the Obama administration and, with offhand prescience, the palpable undertow of disaffection coursing through the lives of his everyday subjects. Certain images from these films, variously poignant and unsettling, cast a long shadow over what was to come: a large-scale version of Obama’s iconic “Hope” poster in *The Passage*; the neglected youth of a blue-collar community in *Low Tide*; the night sky lit up by a burning cross in *Stop the Pounding Heart*. By the time of *The Other Side* (2015), a harrowing look at a white, working-class Louisiana community ravaged by drugs, blinded by racism, and emboldened by violence, subjects that in Minervini’s early films may have once seemed quaint, anomalous, or negligible were now familiar, urgent, and undeniable.

Minervini’s fifth feature, *What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire?*, is a furious missive from the front lines of a fractured America. Named after a 19th-century spiritual and assembled from nearly 150 hours of footage shot between Louisiana and Mississippi in the wake of Donald Trump’s election, the film thrums with the grace and righteousness of a soul-stirring sermon. Interspersing artful footage of the Mardi Gras Indians as they prepare to perform in the annual New Orleans parade, Minervini tells