

F I L M I N
R E V I E W



C H A R L E S T A Y L O R

As during the Civil Rights years, America has been given the great and terrible opportunity to either affirm that its promises of liberty and justice and equality include black Americans or to decide that the worst version of America is its truest self. Over the past few years, as the bodies of unarmed black citizens killed by police have piled up, as courts and juries have failed to hold the killers accountable, and as the national nervous breakdown over the election of a black president continues, the nightmare America has seemed to be winning. The historian Isabel Wilkerson has referred to this time as the new “nadir.”

Which may be why black artists are operating in something like the spirit of A. J. Liebling’s 1944 proclamation: “The only great nation with a completely uncensored press today is France.” In music like D’Angelo’s *Black Messiah*, Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*, the neo-soul outfit the Internet’s *Ego Death*, and Rihanna’s single “American Oxygen” and her album *Anti*; in films like *Dope*, *Straight Outta Compton*, *Chi-Raq*, and *Creed*; in novels like Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout* and the late Fran Ross’s recently reissued 1974 *Oreo* (imagine James Joyce as a black Jewish stand-up comic); in memoirs like the poet Tracy K. Smith’s *Ordinary*

Light; in volumes of history like Patricia Bell-Scott's *The Firebrand and the First Lady* and – though the work of a white journalist – Ethan Michaeli's *The Defender* (a history of the African American newspaper *The Chicago Defender*), there is a clarity and confidence and fearlessness that can make even the good work being done by other artists seem beside the point. Whether overt or sly, brash or insinuating, these albums and books and films carry the crackle of people shrugging off the conditions imposed on them, whether by society or by the industry they work in or by their own fear or caution. These artists treat each piece of music or film or book as a chance that will not come again.

I want to be very careful not to reduce this work to protest art, which, as James Baldwin once remarked, too often merely restates and strengthens the boundaries it means to abolish. Only occasionally do these artists directly address the current racial violence. D'Angelo in his song "The Charade" sings, "All we wanted was a chance to talk / 'stead we only got outlined in chalk." But the sound is suffused with regret more than anything else. The most bracing moment in any American movie of 2015 is set in the past: the scene in *Straight Outta Compton* in which the hip-hop group NWA defies a police edict and performs its signature number "Fuck Tha Police" before an electrified concert audience takes place nearly thirty years ago, but the police harassment detailed in that song has never stopped being true, nor has the emotional need for the fantasy the song presents – standing up to police violence and turning the tables to make the perpetrators feel the fear they have long instilled in their black victims.

Many of the strategies these artists employ are slyer. Even Paul Beatty's audacious novel *The Sellout*, which imagines a return to slavery and segregation as the path by which black people might once again be treated decently, seems to work by stealth. Beatty can make the outlandish sound so goddamn reasonable that the outrageousness slaps you upside the head on the rebound.

These artists know that for any black person who speaks out publicly about the violence done to all blacks, the word that is always lying in wait is *anger*. President Obama, possibly the most conciliatory president of any in recent memory (often to his detriment), suddenly became an Angry Black Man when he dared address the murder of Trayvon Martin or the arrest of the Harvard

professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., by Cambridge police in his own home. As Obama has finally recognized the futility of a hands-across-the-aisle approach when you are dealing with an essentially irrational opposition, he has become (to borrow a phrase from social media) a man with no more fucks left to give. And that directness is part of this moment in which contemporary black artists have claimed their own voices.

Mainstream media, though, have a way of recognizing only one black voice at a time, of assuming that a single black person speaks for all black people. In 2015, the one voice belonged to Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose *Between the World and Me* won him the National Book Award, a MacArthur grant, and rapturous critical attention. The book took its title and its form – a young black man being addressed by an older one – from James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin addressed his nephew on what awaited him as a young black man in America. Coates is addressing his teenage son after seeing his son’s incredulity that police officer Darren Wilson was not indicted in the murder of Michael Brown. Coates has, twenty years after it happened, still not gotten over the murder of a friend, a Howard University classmate named Prince Jones, also at the hands of police, and he writes to prepare his son for the outrages to come. “In America,” Coates writes, “it is traditional to destroy the black body.” Coates is insisting on what has too long been hidden in images and stories of American progress, industry, triumph: all the black bodies killed or worked to death in the making of America, or for no purpose besides the exercise of sheer hatred. What hobbles Coates is that he appears to believe that victimhood is the natural, perpetual, and irrevocable state of all black Americans, that any changes in law or social acceptance of black people can be no more than cosmetic, and that protest is, at best, an existential gesture. At thirty-nine, Baldwin’s age when *The Fire Next Time* appeared, Baldwin sounded as if he had witnessed weary generations. At forty, Coates sounds much younger. His rhetoric doesn’t gain in emotional force because everything is a foregone conclusion. It’s finally a tinny, constricted vision. That it wouldn’t be palatable to Ralph Ellison or Albert Murray is no surprise. But even a cursory read of *The Fire Next Time* makes it clear that Coates’s vision isn’t one that James Baldwin would embrace. “There is no reason,” Baldwin wrote to his nephew, “for you to try

to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For those innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.” Which is not to imply that racists are not responsible for their actions, but that they are caught up in a lie they have neither the will nor the vision to see beyond. Just as he knew that protest art was a validation of the image of black life as nothing but misery and poverty and suffering, Baldwin knew the trap of rage was that it validated the racist’s beliefs. That is the sense of contingency and irony of which Coates seems incapable. Again and again throughout 2015 and into this year, works which received nowhere near the serious consideration given his book outstripped it in vision, ambition, joy, and dread.

Contingency, irony, ambition, joy, dread — all these were on display in Rihanna’s May 2015 appearance on the season closer of *Saturday Night Live*. Rihanna was there to do her single “American Oxygen,” and for me her performance was the strongest work any artist did last year. Nothing captures the thrill of this moment in America, the chance to change history, or the horror of this moment, the possibility that history is changing back to what we believed we had left behind, the way this performance did.

A video had already appeared, relying on the tired device of a montage of newsreel footage to prop up a song’s relevancy, depicting everything from Civil Rights protests to the moonshots to the Occupy Wall Street sit-ins. Occasionally the pileup of images was interrupted by the insertion of a glamorous close-up of the singer in front of an American flag. The same footage played on *SNL*, projected on a triptych of screens behind Rihanna, who stood behind a lone microphone. The difference is that here she performed as a ghost.

No more than a shadowed outline in front of the three screens, Rihanna wore a bandana and leather buckskins with floor-length fringe. She might have been a Native American spirit rising from the earth, presiding over the history of the stolen land playing out behind her. When she stretched out her arms you couldn’t tell

whether she was embracing the nation the images showed us or presenting herself as one more person crucified by it.

But nothing here, neither the images nor the lyrics, held a fixed meaning. The refrain, “We sweat for a nickel and a dime / turn it into an empire,” might have been a restatement of the immigrant dream or an acknowledgment that empires are built on the work of others. Rumbling beneath the line “America, you can be anything at all,” sung in front of images of the Beatles arriving for their 1964 American tour and civil rights protesters being brutalized, you could sense the ambiguity that had always lurked inside Chuck Berry’s celebratory line “Anything you want we got it right here in the USA.”

Rihanna was dwarfed by the screens, kept in the shadows, and yet every second she was present, standing up to the history unspooling behind her, bringing the shade of our most horrible moments as a nation to our remembered shared joys. Watching the performance, decades seemed to collapse: Obama’s inauguration was separated by seconds from Bobby Kennedy on a campaign stop in Indianapolis announcing Martin Luther King’s assassination. This was a vision of America in which promise and fear were inextricable. By the time Rihanna reached the deceptively simple closing lines, “This is the new America / We are the new America,” you no longer knew which country you were in. Were we to take the bright, open faces of young immigrants as proof of that new America? Or are the shots of the Lorraine Motel and King’s body lying in its casket the new America the song refers to, which is to say, the one in which nothing changes?

Writing in *The New York Times*, Isabel Wilkerson, author of the great account of the Northern Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, took the term “nadir” from the historian Rayford Logan’s description of the decades of southern brutality that preceded the migration. “Today,” Wilkerson wrote, “in the era of the Charleston massacre, when, according to one analysis of F.B.I. statistics, an African-American is killed by a white police officer roughly every three and a half days, has the makings of a second Nadir.” What made Rihanna’s performance so startling was her refusal to deny either progress or regression. I have watched the performance dozens of times since it was first broadcast, and I don’t think I will ever get to the bottom of it. The America that

had progressed enough to elect Barack Obama was on-screen right beside the one driven to a frenzy of racism by his election. It was a portrait of a country that exemplified Dr. King's favorite quote (from the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker), "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice," and also one in which time isn't an arc but a circle, leading us back to the outrages we thought we had defeated.

You could catch glimpses of both of those Americas in two films from the closing months of 2015, Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq*, and Ryan Coogler's *Creed*. Both of them were utterly unexpected – by me at least. The news that Coogler would follow up his debut film, *Fruitvale Station*, an indie drama about the fatal shooting of Oscar Grant III by a BART police officer in 2008, with the seventh installment of the *Rocky* series sounded like a sad case of a young filmmaker trying to break into the mainstream via material that was worn out years ago. Except that Coogler had been nursing the idea of this *Rocky* sequel for years. And Spike Lee has been so scattershot, often at his worst when he tries to be most topical, that a modern-day version of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* set amid the gang violence of present-day Chicago, and in verse, sounded like a disaster in the making. But one of the great joys of being a critic is having your expectations pleasurably confounded, and *Chi-Raq* and *Creed* made most of the films in the awards season preening that surrounded them look irrelevant (the exceptions were *Spotlight* and *The Big Short*). *Chi-Raq* and *Creed* speak directly to their audiences about this American moment. Pictures like *Carol* and *Brooklyn* and *Room* speak to awards groups. They are less movies than expertly polished résumés presented to impress a search committee.

Formally, *Chi-Raq* is a mess, a vibrant one – and that messiness works to Lee's advantage. A director who approaches a classic with hat in hand, even in a conventional staging, is going to be paralyzed by respect and good taste. The title is taken from the nickname black Chicagoans have given their violence-plagued city. Lee's version of Aristophanes, which he co-wrote with Kevin Willmott, has a what-the-hell, let's-try-this quality, the feel of people working for the fun of it, unfussily, plugging the holes with chewing gum and moving forward. We sense that immediately

when we're introduced to the movie's Greek chorus, a slick-talking sharpster named Dolemedes. The reference is to Dolemite, the Blaxploitation movie hero played by Rudy Ray Moore, a pimp with an all-girl army given to off-the-cuff poetry like "Man, move over and let me pass 'fore they have to be pullin' these Hush Puppies out your motherfuckin' ass!" As played by Samuel L. Jackson, Dolemedes is aware of all his predecessors, not just Rudy Ray but the ancient Greek playwright about whom he says admiringly, "'Stophanes made dat shit rhyme." Telling us he was "weaned on Thunderbird from my mama's tit," Dolemedes is the Greek chorus as signifying monkey and, dressed in a selection of eye-popping suits, our guide through the South Side.

The opening credits – a map of the United States made out of guns, accompanied by statistics informing us that while there have been 2,349 deaths in the Afghan-U.S. war, from 2001 to 2015 there have been 7,356 murders in Chicago, many committed by young black males against young black males – lead you to expect Lee at his most polemic. But the anger here has a mournful quality, because the violence that inspires that anger intrudes on the beauty of people and community to which the movie is so clearly in thrall. After this opening, there's a shot of an El train coming into the station as Matthew Libatique's camera moves over and down to take in the neon reflected in the wet pavement and the line of young people waiting to get into a club. The sheer gorgeousness of the shot can wipe away the memory of other images like this that the movies have shown us. But Lee allows us no time to sink into that beauty before he complicates things by heading inside the club as Nick Cannon's Chi-raq, the rapper and gang leader, takes the stage. He's the epitome of arrogance – shirtless, walking on with blunt smoke pouring from his mouth, spouting lyrics that run to the likes of "If I need a job done / nigga kill a nigga for me." The audience responds lustily, while down front a contingent of young women led by Chi-raq's girl Lysistrata (Teyonah Parris) performs a synchronized routine – and you can feel that the sight divides Spike Lee against himself.

Lee looks at these young people and is simultaneously struck by their beauty and energy and appalled at what they're responding to. I think you'd have to go back to *La Chinoise* and Jean-Luc Godard beholding the simultaneous dedication and nihilism of his

Parisian student revolutionaries to find a filmmaker so divided by his own subject. Barely a minute into Chi-raq's performance, gunshots break out, and before the bodies are cold, Tweets celebrating and damning the bloodshed, and vowing vengeance, pop up on the screen. Shortly after that, Chi-raq and Lysistrata's love-making is interrupted when Cyclops (Wesley Snipes), the leader of the rival gang, and his men show up and spray her place with bullets. It's this incident and the later murder of a little girl, a bystander to gang violence, that lead Lysistrata to enlist her female friends, and their counterparts in the rival gang, to go on a sex strike until their men call a truce. "No peace, no pussy," becomes their rallying cry. And in one of the whimsical, ticklishly entertaining touches that dot the movie, it becomes a rallying cry for women all over the planet, who clamp their legs together and demand that things change.

Considering the recent police violence against black Chicagoans, and the pathetic response of Mayor Rahm Emmanuel's administration, it may seem like a retreat for Lee to focus on gang murders, as if he were giving in to that shibboleth of right-wing apologists for police killings, black-on-black violence. The difference is that Lee, unlike most people who invoke this violence, acknowledges the systemic and economic racism at the foundation of the killings – explicitly in the movie's most sensational scene, a sustained fire-and-brimstone eulogy for the murdered child by the white activist priest (John Cusack) of the local parish. As variable as Spike Lee's filmmaking has been, and as sketchy as the thinking behind many of his pronouncements, he's no stooge for the periodic calls that the black community clean its house. It's hardly excusing the persecution of black Americans to acknowledge that despised people can turn against themselves. Lee, bothered by a young black man singing "If I need a job done / nigga kill a nigga for me," is coming from the same place as Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* when he wrote that racism could only triumph if those it targeted saw themselves through a racist's eyes. Black-on-black violence means many subtle things in this movie, not just the killings and betrayals. There's violence in the aftermath of shootings: the mother (Jennifer Hudson) of the murdered little girl on her knees at the spot where her child was slain trying to wash away the blood, which just seems to spread (an agonizing scene

that goes on and on and, in doing so, seems to be telling us that this is just a sliver of the ongoing agony this young woman will have to endure). The most chilling moment of violence in the movie is the one that contains not a drop of blood: Miss Helen (Angela Bassett), a neighbor who stands for the possibility of a life outside the gangs and the bloodshed, is working in her garden when she's approached by a friendly, well-dressed man (Roger Guenveur Smith) who turns out to be an insurance agent trying to sell her a policy on her young nephew. For this huckster, the killing of young black men has become a growth industry.

Given that such violence is the undercurrent of *Chi-Raq*, it's remarkable that the movie is, more than anything else, so joyous. As I write this, barely four months into 2016, *The New York Times* is reporting that murders and shootings have risen 84 percent in Chicago this year. Who could have predicted that the violence being done to black people with such brazen ubiquity would produce Spike Lee's most welcoming movie? There's no animosity here even toward the white authority figures, a general played by David Patrick Kelly (in the movie's klutziest sequence) and a milquetoast mayor (D. B. Sweeney), the kind of oafs who, in farce, exist to be punctured. As Lysistrata and her female legion take over a city armory, and as their movement spreads across the world, Lee delights not just in the farcical complications but in the spectacle of people realizing they actually possess the power to effect change.

You can feel that in the movie's most striking and exhilarating image: Lysistrata, after storming the armory and invading the general's private lair, rips the Confederate flag from his wall and stomps on it in her high-heeled boots. Of course there are still people for whom that act remains a desecration. But one of the most unexpected moments of American life in the past year or so was how quickly, after the South Carolina murders, the Confederate flag came to seem not a historical relic but a symbol of a living virulence. When Teyonah Parris brings her boots down on that flag it's no longer a moment of rebellion but an act of patriotism, a symbolic victory over an occupying army.

Of course Lysistrata and her warriors triumph. In the final scene, the former gang members, having traded their colors for snow white duds, sign a peace treaty and are joined by the mem-

bers of Fortune 500 companies pledging jobs and resources to the community, by the mayor promising a new hospital and trauma center. It's wish fulfillment, a bit like the poor flying off to heaven at the end of Vittorio De Sica's fantasy *Miracle in Milan*. But it doesn't feel naive. *Chi-Raq*'s truth lies as much in its joy as in its sorrow. The movie's most gorgeous moment comes when the troops gathered outside the armory attempt to break down the defenses of the celibate female warriors inside by blasting the Chi-Lites' exquisite "Oh Girl" over loudspeakers. Lee cuts between the women in their fatigues and underwear, each near her neatly made army cot, and the male soldiers outside in the same outfit, all dancing in formation, under the spell of that song, the physical and spiritual longing it inspires seemingly drifting out of their collective bodies in search of each other. It's a mass version of the scene in Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* where the separated lovers, both of them asleep, reach toward each other in their dreams.

Does *Chi-Raq* preach? Yes. Never more so than in the electrifying scene where John Cusack's activist priest hits the perfect white-hot tempo of call-and-response preaching, the type that decimates listeners with the truth before lifting their spirits above the rubble. There are dozens of ways the scene could be more polished, which is true of the movie around it, but neither would be nearly as affecting if they were. Sometimes the passion of direct speech matters more than perfection. Which is not to say that *Chi-Raq* gets a pass because of its intentions. Faced with the horror Spike Lee is addressing here, many directors would feel they had a license to bulldoze the audience, a route Lee has often taken. It's the easiest thing in the world to give an audience nothing. The achievement of *Chi-Raq* is that faced with the black bodies drenched in blood and tears Spike Lee has chosen to give the audience pleasure. "To be sensual," Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*, "is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread." *Chi-Raq* is Spike Lee at his most present.

Chi-Raq was ignored during the year-end awards handed out by both critics and the industry. Its commercial run in New York City, Lee's hometown, is a perfect example of what the protests over the exclusion of black filmmakers and actors from the industry have been about. The movie opened in the first week of De-

center on two Manhattan screens: the Magic Johnson multiplex in Harlem and downtown at the arthouse complex the Angelika. When I saw it there during opening week, it had been relegated to one of the theater's smallest screens, a room capable of holding – maybe – a hundred people. Each of the other five screening rooms was entirely given over to two movies, *Carol* and *Room*. By Christmas, *Chi-Raq* was gone from New York and available for viewing only on Amazon Prime.

Creed, which opened during Thanksgiving week, was a hit, and let's hope that's a good sign. Emotionally satisfying in a way that mainstream movies almost never are anymore – and beautifully made to boot – *Creed* suggests there may be a popular audience which wants more than inflated comic books or special effects demonstrations. The picture, which Coogler wrote as well as directed, is a melodrama, a boxing movie with triumph and sudden tragedy and a crowd-pleasing undercurrent that tells the audience dreams can come true if you work hard enough and believe. But Coogler mutes the melodramatic conventions without ever cutting down on the emotion. There's nothing softheaded about the picture. It's connected to the details of contemporary lives lived below the strata of wealth and fame in a way American commercial movies have abandoned. Coogler is working squarely in the lineage of American movie realism we associate with the muckraking Warner Bros melodramas of the 1930s and the socially conscious liberal dramas that popped up following World War II.

This may come as a surprise to those who remember that in 1976 even the critics who liked the first *Rocky* saw it as a naive throwback to a sentimental movie past, a feel-good underdog movie. But there was nothing sentimental about the grit the director John G. Avildsen got into the working-class Philadelphia setting, the crumminess of Rocky's apartment or the boxing club where he picked up a few bucks. And Sylvester Stallone's script included some details that were anything but a ploy for the audience's sympathy. Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* may have been an inadvertent finger man for the mob but Rocky was an actual leg breaker. The movie got audiences cheering all right, but it went about doing that honorably. Rocky, given an unlikely shot at the heavyweight championship, doesn't win, but he gains his dignity by realizing the goal he sets for himself: going the distance

against the champ, Apollo Creed. As the movie's sequels would not, *Rocky* refused the winner-take-all mentality of the Reagan years that was waiting in the wings, years that, in terms of Hollywood, would feature a return to the kind of hoary old clichés that seemed to have been banished from the screen.

In recent years there has been a tendency to see *Rocky* as a vehicle for white working-class resentment, given that Rocky Balboa is a white working stiff and his opponent, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers), is the bragging black champ who, in the guise of giving Rocky a shot at the title, is using him for a publicity stunt. It's easy to see that some moviegoers who disliked Muhammad Ali, whether because of his public showboating, because of his refusal to be drafted into the army during the Vietnam War, or because they were racist, would see their dislike justified in this parody of him. But I think it's wrongheaded to say that Avildsen or Stallone consciously played to that resentment – especially given the way Apollo becomes Rocky's mentor and ally as the series progresses.

Rocky himself is a supporting character in *Creed*. The title refers not to his rival-turned-friend (who died in *Rocky IV*) but to Apollo's son Adonis, the product of an affair with a woman who is now dead. With no parents, the young Adonis is in the care of the state and, angry and feeling abandoned, he's been getting into fights. The movie starts with Apollo's widow, Mary Anne (Phylicia Rashad, who immediately conveys, and sustains, the impression of a tough, no-nonsense woman), showing up at the juvenile home where Adonis is living and asking him if he'd like to come live with her. After that brief opening the movie jumps ahead around ten years and we see the grown Adonis (Michael B. Jordan) slugging it out in some cheap Mexican venue, leaving us free to assume we're seeing a troubled boy who has become a troubled young man trying to channel the violence that has never left him. The cut that follows is Coogler's way of upending all our assumptions, of gently reminding us that, especially when it comes to young black men, we are ever eager to make assumptions. What we see is Adonis in shirt and tie, working at his desk in a successful financial management house. And then we see him driving up to the Beverly Hills mansion in which he has grown up and over dinner telling Mary Anne that he's quit his job to pursue boxing.

She, remembering the beatings she saw her late husband take, tells her adopted son she will not watch him live out the same fate.

What follows is a rewriting of the original *Rocky* with Adonis moving to Philadelphia, taking a studio apartment, and seeking out Rocky, now retired and managing a small Italian restaurant (named Adrian's, after his dead wife), to be his trainer. Having lost all the most important people in his life, Rocky isn't willing to stir up those memories by becoming the mentor of this kid. He changes his mind, of course, and Adonis, who wants to make his own name, is eventually discovered to be Apollo's son and because of that given a shot at the title.

This brief outline doesn't convey the sureness of feeling Coogler brings to the story. The film proceeds not by sudden revelations but by the process of every character at each point assessing the hand that's been dealt him or her, taking the next step, and awaiting the consequences. Coogler wants to inspire his audiences as surely as Stallone and Avildsen did, but he's not an exhorter. As a director, he speaks in a measured voice, drawn to characters who are confident enough not to have to boast, attracted to those characters as they are attracted to each other by the talent they feel deeply but wear lightly, the invisible cloak of casual professionalism. *Creed* suggests what a multiracial Howard Hawks movie might have looked like. As in Hawks's best films, *Creed* takes place in a world where competence is respected, where singular talents combine to produce a stronger whole, where people are not defined by or limited by their defects, whether those defects are of their own making or not. Bianca, the young singer Adonis falls for (played by the wonderful Tessa Thompson, whose face is both wary and heartbreakingly open), is slowly going deaf. Eventually she won't be able to play her music at all. In almost any movie, that would make her an object of pity. Here it's simply a fact of her life, not fair, not good, and, for her, not worth being destroyed by. Similarly, when Rocky becomes ill, Coogler refuses the almost inevitable melodrama. Coogler and his cinematographer, Maryse Alberti, shoot the scenes of Adonis and Rocky in the hospital in medium shots that trust us to feel the sadness without pushing it at us. What we see, as elsewhere, are two people dealing with the circumstances life has given them. Crucially, Coogler honors their right to make their own decisions. In what's perhaps the best scene

of a lovely performance, Stallone's Rocky refuses treatment, explaining to the young doctor that he saw the agony his wife went through and would prefer not to end his time like that. That he later changes course doesn't alter the respect the movie accords him in the earlier scene.

I don't wish to give the impression that Coogler has made a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps movie, a film that echoes the right wing's constant, arrogant answer to the people their programs have deliberately impoverished. What Coogler has done is in its way an act of defiance, a refusal to say that derision or hard circumstance determine a person's worth. (The most consistent belief of the free-market vampirism that has defined America since Reagan is that it's the fault of the poor that they're poor.) "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*," Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*, and that's the spirit of *Creed*.

Culturally, racially, and in terms of class, *Creed* mixes things up in a way that suggests we're seeing the latest stage of America's long and glorious existence as a land of mutts. Apollo's rival, Pretty Ricky Conlan (Tony Bellew), is a Liverpudlian toughie who wants to score one last victory before he has to serve time on a weapons charge. When at a pre-bout press conference he claims the mantle of the real working-class fighter in the ring, he's right. He points out that Adonis is a kid who grew up in a Beverly Hills mansion. What he misses, what the movie leaves unsaid but implicit, is that for a young black man in America right now, class isn't the privilege it is for a young white man. And yet there's irony in the way each of them enters the ring to hip-hop, the music that continues to cross racial boundaries. They are from different places, but each is moving to the same music.

The statistical certainty that America is passing away from being a majority-white country has been the underpinning of much of the fear the right wing has played on since the election of Barack Obama. *Creed* suggests the commonalities that will endure. The working-class neighborhoods, the scruffy gyms, the diners, and the old apartment houses of *Creed* are the same locales we saw forty years ago in *Rocky*, though now the people are mostly people of color. Coogler documents that change and sees what Stallone and Avildsen did, the simple fact that people live here —

not statistics, not sociological or economic case studies to be noted or pitied or written off, but people. What Coogler adds is a resilience and seasoning that were not always there in the grit of the first *Rocky*. The nighttime streets of this Philly are awash in the colors of club lights and posters advertising gigs and eateries. The streets, full of young people, are more alive than the deserted corner in the first *Rocky* where a group of guys stand around a trashcan fire singing harmony and passing a bottle of wine.

In *Creed*, Rocky, no longer the hero but a supporting player, is part of the America that's passing away, and as Coogler envisions him and in Stallone's tender and gentle performance, it is a part worth honoring. The strutting and action-movie braggadocio are gone here. Stallone rediscovers the most oddball and endearing parts of Rocky Balboa, the puzzled comic asides, the way he talks to himself almost as a way to keep himself company. The past is still alive to this Rocky, and because of that he feels his losses keenly. Rocky seems most at peace when he visits the graves of Adrian and his old friend Paulie (bringing one rose for her and Four Roses for him) and sits quietly talking to them as he reads the morning paper. He is, for the moment, content in the presence of the ghosts he carries around with him.

The racial and sociological subtext doesn't get in the way of *Creed's* being an immensely entertaining boxing melodrama. More than any other picture of 2015, watching it feels like going to the movies. As shot by Alberti and edited by Claudia Castello and Michael P. Shawver, the boxing scenes are as good as any I have ever seen. Adonis's first bout is shot in one continuous take that conveys the peaks of adrenaline and troughs of exhaustion a boxer endures in a fight. The title bout at the film's climax is breathtaking, a marvel of tension that captures both the physical toll and the beauty of boxers at work. Like the movie itself, Michael B. Jordan takes what could seem merely showy, the role of the hungry young man looking to make his place in the world, and renders it subtly. Jordan and Tessa Thompson are so natural together that their scenes have the special glow the movies attain when we see two attractive young people falling in love. Adonis and Rocky form a relationship that crosses barriers of race and class, and with Bianca they form an ad hoc family that adds gender to the mix.

Disparate people discovering what they have in common has always been at the root of any major change in America. That's how *Creed* manages to suggest that the changing face of America is not an occasion for fear, as the American right has been saying for some time, but a reason for hope. The precariousness of this moment in American political life is not just that we are seeing, for the first time, a national, politically viable fascist movement but that so many of the people who are opposed to Trumpism do not seem to believe in politics as a vehicle for change. We keep hearing that Black Lives Matter marks a resurgence of the Civil Rights movement, but the organization has shown no inclination to emulate the tactical discipline of that movement, the use of activism as a spur to political change. As long as young activists, like the ones drawn to Bernie Sanders (who seem to believe that his election will magically sweep away the political compromises they can only see as corruption), refuse to harness their visions of change to the reality of politics, they will dribble away their potential in the same way that Occupy Wall Street did, and because of the same failure of imagination. The changing streets of Philadelphia as charted in *Rocky* and *Creed* are a way of reminding us that with the exception of 1776, America has always been changed by evolution and not revolution. You could show the faces of Rocky and Adonis and Bianca at the movie's end and over it lay a snatch of Rihanna singing "This is the new America." The change looks good.