

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

The representation of marginalised narratives is the central concern in all of Roberto Minervini's documentary-based cinema, which is almost exclusively focused on the working classes of the American South, mainly in Texas, where the Italian-born filmmaker has lived for two decades. But in the high-contrast monochrome *What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire?*, this theme comes into even starker relief as the director focuses on race in Louisiana, piercing deep into the roots of social inequality. The title of the film comes from a 19th century spiritual, and draws a connection between the past and the present, indicating that we are dealing with continuation – that there has been no break from past racial and social divisions. Minervini might be one of the most political of contemporary filmmakers, but he is also a great humanist; or, maybe it's more appropriate to call him a magician.

How Minervini manages to create such relationships between filmmaker and what we'll call, for the sake of argument, 'documentary performer', is the product of the director's immersion in these communities, to the point of dissolving the border between camera and subject, between reality and construct. Minervini cares for his actors, which is evident at film festival screenings, which are attended not only by the director but also his actors (whether it's Judy Hill or members of the New Black Panther Party).

That Minervini's filmmaking is urgent goes without saying. *What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire?* is what the French 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. Hybrid filmmaking as termite art, *What You Gonna Do...* is an at-times very beautiful, always emotional, and extremely talky film which shows an idealistic form of democracy in action (a strange cross between Pedro Costa and Frederick Wiseman), and as such, stands in direct counterpoint to the sensation-driven Trumpian reality of contemporary politics.

Minervini wants to illustrate how a disenfranchised population needs to create their own public spaces in which they can debate, argue and express their frustrations with their lots in life, as their voices still aren't being heard in America's so-called democracy.

The film depicts the explicit political action of the New Black Panther Party, as well as Judy Hill's Ooh Poo Pah Doo bar in New Orleans, which functions as a local agora. By the end of the film, Judy's bar has closed down, but that doesn't mean its denizens won't find another watering hole around the block. One of the impacts of presenting multiple, multigenerational narrative strands in a film like this is to imply that – to evoke another American metropolis – there are eight million stories in the naked city.

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