

Isabel Stevens on **Riotsville, USA**

On the corner of Franklin and Abbot, you can take in all the sights of this quotidian American town: a cut-rate supermarket advertising cottage cheese and potatoes; the city hall with a sign recruiting for the US Army, even local watering hole Joe's Place. The town has everything you could need: a liquor store, a pawn shop, a clothes shop, an appliance center... but, strangely, no people. The streets are empty. And then as you look closer along the main drag, above the liquor store you see someone: a sniper on the roof.

Welcome to Riotsville, USA: not, in fact, a real town after all, but a construction – and one of many – dreamed up by the US military in the late 1960s to practice its response to civil disorder after the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965, and uprisings in Detroit, Newark and other cities two years later, turned many American cities into war zones.

Consisting entirely of archival footage shot by the military or for TV broadcast, Sierra Pettengill's curious essay film surveys the town – its roots tracing back to slavery (Riotsville is housed on Fort Belvoir, named after a plantation) – and details how a simulated riot works. The actors are soldiers dressed in civilian clothing, yet their anger as they shout at the police (their soldier colleagues) or resist arrest is palpable. How much are these young men – many of whom, the film's narrator reminds us, will have served in Vietnam – really acting? Watching the fictional riots, you often forget this is all taking place in what looks like a crudely made Western set. And then there is the chilling sound of laughter and applause as the camera pans round to row upon row of army bigwigs sitting in a stand and watching as a man, held back by two policemen, cries that they are breaking his arm.

Riotsville, USA is a conceptual adventure with much in common with *All Light, Everywhere*, Theo Anthony's recent exploration of camera technologies, in that rather than focusing on the more obvious subject (the communities affected), it turns its gaze on law enforcement and shows how film has had a part to play in the history of suppression. But Pettengill's film is also more than just a shocking study of these fake towns – it is a portrait of a nation at a crucial turning point. Surveying the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders – widely known as the Kerner Commission, set up by President Lyndon Johnson in 1968 to investigate the 'time of violence and tragedy' – the film shows both the establishment and ordinary people questioning the causes of the riots and how to respond. Two years after the murder of George Floyd and the largest racial justice protests in the United States since the Civil Rights movement, Pettengill's film acts as a timely reminder that the militarisation of the police force was a deliberate choice – and not the one recommended by the Commission, which resolutely concluded: 'Our nation is moving towards two separate societies. One black, one white, separate and unequal.'

Isabel Stevens is Managing Editor of Sight & Sound magazine