

Same old story

What would a US audience make of a British film about deaths in police custody?

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The setting is perhaps not a traditional one for a Los Angeles film premiere. There are no television news crews, no red carpets and no breathless crowds waiting for a glimpse of the stars. Instead, the venue is the bare assembly hall of a school in south LA and the audience consists mainly of black and Latino relatives and friends of people who have died in police custody in the city, political activists attached to campaigns connected to those deaths, as well as some curious locals.

The film being shown is *Injustice*, the British documentary about deaths in police custody, including those of Joy Gardner, Shiji Lapite, Brian Douglas and Ibrahima Sey. It was slapped with injunctions by the Police Federation when attempts were made to show it in Britain. The screening has been organised by the New Panther Vanguard Movement and the October 22nd Coalition, a group that campaigns on the issue of deaths in custody in the US. It has brought the director, Ken Fero, and relatives of those featured in the film to LA.

"Attitude is everything", says a slogan on the wall of the school auditorium, and the film is duly preceded by a blessing delivered in Yoruba and an introduction by Neelam Sharma, who moved to LA from Southall six years ago and now works for the Panthers. So what did Angelenos, perhaps more accustomed to such deaths than people in Britain, think of the film?

Miguel Mouchess, a young accountant whose friend Gonzalo Martinez was shot dead by LA police in February following a car chase, explains. "In some weird, cathartic way, guns get you away pretty quick, but in England the deaths seem a lot worse, a lot more painful. They take a lot longer. But the bottom line is, the police handle things the same way in both countries. I saw a lot of similarities in the film. It's more physical in England - here they have the freedom to use guns." Norma Martinez, who watched her son's death live on television - police chases are a staple of local news coverage - said she was also struck by some of the similarities. "They say in England that the police don't use guns and they don't have problems, but it's the same all over the world ... But I don't think it's as bad as here."

Brian Smith, whose brother died in custody in the Twin Towers jail in downtown LA, said of the film afterwards, as the audience of around 100 dispersed: "I had to walk out a couple of times. I was overcome by tears. I didn't know that was happening in Britain - all you hear about is Princess Di, you don't hear about all that other stuff. I think about my brother every day, so I identified big time with the people in the film who have gone through the same thing."

One of the members of the audience had made his own film about the police and the black community in Britain. David Koff, now a union researcher in LA, was the director of the 1978 film *Blacks Britannica*, an award-winning documentary about race in Britain that created a storm in the UK on release: it was condemned as inflammatory in parliament and the media. Koff said that what he liked about *Injustice* was that it encouraged people to be active rather than passive. "These days films are for mobilising money and awards rather than for mobilising people," he said. "The fact that a social movement has been generated by the film is evidence of the power of cinema, I would say - a capacity of film-making that is virtually ignored nowadays. I'm very impressed with what they have done with their film and it seems to be taking off. We also found that as soon as there is a whiff of censorship or suppression it brings in a whole new audience who might not otherwise have heard of the film - opponents always add fuel to the fire."

Another member of the audience, Gary Phillips - a writer working on a book about the history of black servicemen in the second world war - said he did not think that the police in LA would have sought an injunction to prevent such a film. "I don't think they would use the law so much in the States. The LAPD is different - they would just take you out and beat you." He added that he was not surprised that many of the same things happened in both countries. "It does have parallels in the States, but I suppose one question I would have is: why hasn't there been a bigger civil rights movement in the UK?"

After the screening, the British relatives of those who had died were presented with a red rose and a pledge from Brian Smith, who told them: "We want you guys to know that your loved ones will never be forgotten." Brenda Weinberg - the sister of Brian Douglas, featured in the film - was struck by the fact that the Americans who had seen the film should feel that the situation was worse in Britain because deaths in custody seemed to take longer there. "Over here [in LA], violence is much more part of society, so people are surprised that that sort of brutality goes on in the UK," she said. "They still have this image of the British bobby."

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