# *[Detroit, the movie](http://stansburyforum.com/detroit-the-movie/).* BY [MIKE MILLER](http://stansburyforum.com/author/mikemiller/). *Stansbury forum.* 9/17/17.

Talking about **Detroit** the movie, Kathryn Bigelow’s devastating and deeply moving film on the city’s violent summer of 1967, begins with the difficulty in naming the story it tells about the city. In an interview about the film, Bigelow calls it an “uprising”. Among many of my friends and acquaintances it is politically incorrect to call it a “riot”; their preferred terms are “revolt”, “rebellion” “insurrection” or “uprising”. Neither “riot” nor the latter four options work for me, so I’ve invented a few alternatives: “riovolt”, “reviolution” or “uprioting” – take your pick. If Detroit was an uprising/revolt/insurrection/rebellion, then we need different terms for what Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Jemmy, Gabriel and hundreds of other slave leaders did. At a minimum, there is a dimension of planning and targeting in the latter that is absent in the former.

**Detroit** begins at a party, at an unlicensed after-hours club, celebrating the return of two African-American Vietnam war veterans. In the wee small hours of the morning, the cops raid the place and begin arresting the party-goers. Probably most of the people had more than a few drinks by that time. In any case, initially they were in good humor, trying to tell the cops they weren’t doing anything wrong. Things get out of hand. The cops rough-up some of the arrestees. A crowd gathers around the paddy wagons. A bottle is thrown at the cops. Glass is broken. The cops leave, looking for reinforcement, but the crowd remains. Pent up hostility toward the 95% white and widely known-to-be racist police force is expressed. Windows are broken, looting begins, alarms go off, fires break out, sirens are heard in the distance.

From there things quickly escalate. To reveal them will take nothing from the drama of the movie, so, briefly, here are some: Congressman John Conyers appears and addresses a crowd, acknowledging the legitimacy of their anger but urging them to cease their activities. Windows continue to be broken. In one case, a man runs from a store with stolen property; he is shot in the back. He manages to get away, and crawl under a car. There, blood running from his body, he dies. At police headquarters, a supervising cop calls what happened “murder”. That is the only time we see a specific cop on the side of law enforcement. (While the National Guard, State troopers, U.S. Army paratroopers and Detroit Police are backgrounded as bringing the uprioting under control, the main character cops are engaged in lawlessness.)

Another harrowing scene: a young black girl opens the window curtains in her living room. Scared cops see a gun rather than rustling curtains, and open fire. She is killed.

There is an interlude: The Dramatics, an up-and-coming male gospel turned R & B quartet, is about to perform in a Detroit auditorium when the cops arrive and shut the concert down. The four young men make their way to The Algiers Motel where they join with other young blacks and two young white women. The why of the women’s presence isn’t totally clear: the cops later call them prostitutes (they weren’t); they describe themselves as visiting from western Michigan. One of them says her father is a judge. But how they ended up at a mostly-black motel should be made clearer. One of them helped in the making of the film, and says they were following “a band, an R & B group” they met in Columbus.

An African-American security officer, Melvin Dismukes, is an enigmatic figure in the film. What makes him tick is never made clear. It should have been. On the one hand, he at times appears to go along with the cops at their worst. At other times he’s a careful calculator of the possible in an impossible situation and does what he can to diminish the evil, including saving the life of one young black man. He is so disgusted by the not-guilty verdict in the criminal case against the cops that followed the events at the motel that he vomits.

But, according to the post-incident Citizens’ Action Committee, formed by a group of Detroit black leaders, Dismukes played a role in the murders. In an interview 25 years later, he said, “I had nothing to do with what they [the cops] had done. And to this day I still say the only reason my name was linked with them was to get them off. It would put less pressure on them if they could tie a black person in with it. Now you can’t make it a racial issue.”

“The Algiers Motel Incident,” as the events there came to be known, is a horror story of police intimidation, brutality and murder. I won’t go into the details here. Suffice to say that the Dramatics make their way there from their cancelled concert. Initially, the motel is somewhat removed from the unfolding riovolution. That soon changes. A toy or starter gun (no bullets) is used by one of the men there in a pretended shooting of another man in the room. He falls to the floor in a pretend-to-be-wounded moment. When everyone realizes what’s taken place they laugh. Edgy cops across the street don’t. They assume they’re being shot at. The Algiers Motel Incident follows. It is a grueling, unrelenting, example of law enforcement at its worst. It also captures the power of the worst racist in the group of law enforcement people (state and local police, national guard and a security guard) who invade The Algiers to impose his will on those (except for one) who might otherwise have been unlikely to do what they did to totally innocent people. Three young black men end up murdered by cops.

Bigelow puts human faces on the huge scale of the events that are here summed up statistically: 43 civilians killed, 33 of them African-American; more than 1,000 people injured; over 7,000 arrested; thousands of buildings destroyed, many never rebuilt; millions of dollars in damage.

***“It was as if God was saying, ‘I’m going to give you this test, Ike, and let you see how bad people can be, but I’m going to let you live through that,’ ” said McKinnon, who returned to work the next day. “I was never so afraid as those days in July during the riots.”***

The mid-to-late 1960s was a season of riovolts. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 prompted dozens of them across the country. I was working in the Kansas City, MO African-American community when one erupted there—clearly provoked by local cops who tear-gassed non-violent marchers. They are scary!

Predictably, none of the cops is convicted in the criminal trial that follows. A civil court case produces compensation for two of the families of murdered young men.

As might be imagined, **Detroit** provoked strong reactions. Many were positive, and appeared in mainstream media. One white critic is incapable of seeing that an explosion like Detroit’s could happen today. Writing in The New Yorker, Richard Brody is offended that the film “suggest[s] that, in the intervening half-century since the events depicted in the film took place, little has changed.” Sad to say, there are still cities where police brutality is a continuing problem, and where similar riovolts might well take place. Bigelow sums it up: “These events seem to recur — this is a situation that was 50 years ago, yet it feels very much like it’s today.”

Another, Angeleica Jade Bastien, is angered by what she saw and deserves to be quoted at some length:

**“Detroit” is ultimately a confused film that has an ugliness reflected in its visual craft and narrative. Bigelow is adept at making the sharp crack of an officer’s gun against a black man’s face feel impactful but doesn’t understand the meaning of the emotional scars left behind or how they echo through American history. “Detroit” is a hollow spectacle, displaying rank racism and countless deaths that has nothing to say about race, the justice system, police brutality, or the city that gives it its title.”**

Here are some facts about the “rioters” from a study done shortly after the events by the Detroit Urban League and the Detroit Free Press: “Rioters are different,” begins a survey-based article, “What Sets Him Apart?” Most striking, “Fifty-nine percent of the rioters were between 15 and 24 years old,” and, “60% were male.” They were twice as likely to have experienced long-term unemployment, though there “was no pattern to directly link rioting and low income.” The report finds deep alienation: “rioters profess to shun the American dream.” “Their attitudes “represent a bitter reservoir of resentment…” but there are contradictions: about three-quarters of the respondents “accept the traditional American belief that people with ability and drive get ahead and that people who are unsuccessful in the conventional sense should blame their own mistakes.” The grievances “that were associated most strongly with rioting were of a notably short term nature: Gripes against the local businessmen, mistreatment by police, lack of jobs, dirty neighborhoods, lack of recreation facilities.”

The survey sums up its findings: “These, then, are the rioters: Young people, raised in the North, with little concern for their fellowmen and a frustration in meeting near-term goals—people susceptible to the black nationalist philosophy that the law and order of a white-built society is not worth preserving.”

Editorially, the Free Press concluded, “…if the attitudes of alienated young Negroes are to change, the attitudes of the rest of society must change.” (The entire document is worth careful reading, and can be found [here](https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/2070181/detroit1967.pdf)).

These findings fill in blanks missing from the film. It does not provide context for what it so dramatically portrays. Perhaps it is too much to ask from a gripping moment-by-moment account of a brutal series of events. But the viewer who is not already convinced is unlikely to fully appreciate why these riovolutions take place. They are more likely to be viewed as riots, an insufficient concept to understand the events.

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**An Eyewitness Story:**

Ike McKinnon, a Detroit policeman at the time, reminisced about those 1967 events in a Detroit News account of an incident he experienced. He was in full uniform, completing a 16-hour shift, when he was stopped by a pair of white cops. This is what ensued:

**“I said ‘police officer. I’m a police officer,’ “They had their guns out. I remember one officer so vividly. He was probably in his late 40s. He had brush-cut, silver hair. He said ‘today, you gonna die (racial slur).’**”

It was as if things were unfolding in slow motion, McKinnon said, as he watched his fellow officer pull the trigger. He dove back into his car.

“With my right hand, I pushed the accelerator, my left hand I steered my Mustang, and they were shooting at me as I drove off,” he said.

McKinnon escaped uninjured, drove home and reported the shooting to a sergeant. It was never investigated.

That was McKinnon’s first brush with death during those tense July days, but he said it wasn’t his last.

“It was as if God was saying, ‘I’m going to give you this test, Ike, and let you see how bad people can be, but I’m going to let you live through that,’ ” said McKinnon, who returned to work the next day. “I was never so afraid as those days in July during the riots.”

McKinnon would later become Detroit’s chief of police in the 1990s as well as more recently deputy mayor under Mayor Mike Duggan.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#### Mike Miller

Mike Miller’s organizing background includes the early student movement at UC Berkeley, field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1962-end of 1966), directorship of a Saul Alinsky community organizing project (1967-68), and a number of subsequent organizing projects. His articles on organizing have appeared in Social Policy, CounterPunch, Dissent, Socialist Review, International Journal of Urban Planning and Reseearch, Organizing, and The Organizer. He is author of Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction, A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco, co-author of The People Fight Back, and co-editor of the recently published People Power: The Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky. He directs ORGANIZE Training Center, www.organizetrainingcenter.org