

Riotsville U.S.A. Comes to Bright Lights on Feb. 16

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"Riotsville, U.S.A." Film Poster (Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.)

Sierra Pettengill's documentary, "Riotsville, U.S.A." comes to Bright Lights Cinema Series this Thursday, Feb. 16, followed by a talk with producer Sara Archambault. The film was created entirely from 1960s archival footage and begins with a bird's eye view of what, at first, appears to be a city. At closer glance, we realize it is only the shell of one. While the camera zooms in and out, we notice a discrete and alien presence among the city's rubble and empty building facades—fully armored officers, rifle-ready. This tape is a product of the United States military and, paired with images of real civil unrest and broadcast TV journalism, uncovers the origin story of police militarization. Riotsville was erected after the uprisings of 1967 as a place for law enforcement to train and act out their fantasies of repressive state violence. The footage rolls on, and we realize we are living in the fog of that fantasy, dealing with the repercussions of make-believe as the list of civilian fatalities by U.S. law enforcement grows ever longer.

On Jan. 18, Manuel Esteban Paez Terán was gunned down by Atlanta police while defending the South River Forest in Dekalb County. Forest defenders set up camp there in late 2021 to protest the Atlanta Police Association's 90-million-dollar plan to build a public safety training center. The plan was devised in response to low police morale after the protests of 2020 and would include a shooting range and a mock town that protesters have ominously dubbed Cop City. In the three weeks since the shooting death, APD has successfully cleared out the site where Terán was murdered and moved forward with construction. The resonance of "Riotsville, U.S.A." is in how much it echoes these present circumstances.

Actress Charlene Modeste and writer Tobi Haslett were nominated for Critics' Choice Documentary Award in the category of Best Narration for the film. Her weary cadence and his revolutionary words strike a chord with the sitar-like sounds of Jace Clayton's score. The combined effect on the audience is a sense of déjà vu. "Riotsville, U.S.A." is a timeless and tender riot against the repercussions of state violence being lived out right now. It asks: If and how we might move beyond it.

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Taylor Lena McTootle is a writer, storyteller, educator, and avid movie-lover. She's the features editor for the Independent Magazine and MFA candidate in Creative Non-Fiction at Emerson College.

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