

I was given an amazing opportunity to interview Elegance Bratton, the director of *Pier Kids* (2019) on Sunday the 21st September 2020. *Pier Kids* is about the lives of young, queer people of colour living on the streets of New York. The film shows the struggles they face, which include rejection from family and racial discrimination, and how they find support in one another as they gather at Christopher Street Pier. I ended up watching the film twice, as it is very powerful and gives you a clear insight into the lives of these young marginalised individuals.

I asked Bratton what he thought was the hardest artistic choice when making the film, and his response was that he had over 400 hours of footage to use but the film is only 84 minutes long., which must have been an incredibly difficult task to edit down. He said that *Pier Kids* is a vérité film— a type of documentary film that combines improvisation with the use of the camera to unveil truth or highlight subjects hidden behind raw reality. Bratton then explained it's a non-linear kind of storytelling approach and having to cut out footage was hard. I mentioned the importance of giving the participants in his documentary a voice, and his response was thoughtful. "To me, it's like— giving a voice. I look at it more as listening to the voice, you know," Bratton said.

One of my favourite parts of our discussion was Bratton's passion for art and how he enjoys how paintings are made, because you can see all the detail in every brushstroke. "Like a Caravaggio painting. When you add up all the brush strokes, it's kind of overwhelmingly amazing," he said. "Like— wow, like— this all started with one stroke. And look at what that one stroke turned into." As an artist myself, that was something that I can relate to as I enjoy seeing the process of art being made.

While I watched the film I felt angry at what the Pier Kids faced everyday from such a young age. Upon learning that Bratton himself had been a Pier Kid and homeless for ten years, the film felt even more personal and hard-hitting. "I alternate between— at times, you know sadness and rage, you know?" he said. "It's quite... it's quite sad to think that... you know, just the fact that, like, how much is really up against these kids. And that— you know, America has this idea of, like, the aspirational American dream. that injustice is a part of my... kind of spiritual composition, my intellectual composition, my creative composition."

Bratton also explained his painful and conflicting feelings towards the gay rights movement and the civil rights movement, which was interesting to hear. He talked about growing up without an awareness of queer history, since he came from a working class, Black family. I could relate to this in a way, because I wasn't shown much LGBTQ history growing up as my parents don't really agree with the "gay lifestyle". However, Bratton does feel pride in his community too. "Because even with these insurmountable odds, we are irrepressibly creative," he said. "We are totally reinventing what family means, which in and out of itself is a revolutionary act. And we have survived and endured even with all of this against us. And that makes me very proud. So, sadness, rage and pride. That's what I feel."

The creative choice of a first-person point of view that Bratton used in *Pier Kids* was really effective was taken from one of his inspirations, the director Gillo Pontecorvo and his film *The Battle Of Algiers* (1966). Bratton wanted to have a similar impact with *Pier Kids*, "so for 84 minutes, the viewer is put into the skin of this particular oppression, this intersection of oppression," he explained. As a viewer, I think this choice created a strong impact. "When I was watching *Pier Kids*, you felt like you're there," I told Bratton. "You feel like you're in the room with Krystal and everything, and that's powerful. I really enjoyed that creative choice, it gets to your heart. Their story gets to me that way. It did make you want to go out and demand for change and more equality."

As a gay man of colour, Bratton faced trials while filming. He told me about one of his experiences filming *Pier Kids*. "This white man just sees me and runs over to me and, like, literally sticks his hands down my crotch," he said. "He didn't see a camera, he didn't see any of the— everything that should have told him that I was a filmmaker and that I was not necessarily in the same market that he was looking for... he didn't see any of that. All he saw was the colour of my skin, and— and the assumption of my sexuality because I was there." I was shocked to learn he had experienced this.

Another part of this documentary that made me feel particularly let down was how the American government does not seem to be helping these children and young adults. One young man in the film, DeSean, even says he's thought about getting HIV in order to gain benefits from the government, which is really sad. "They have failed him," Bratton

explained, “because he’s willing to disable himself in this way just so that he can have something to hold onto in a very aggressive, gentrifying economy.” Bratton also told me that it is very difficult to sell a movie like *Pier Kids* in the major motion picture business, as a Black film is not deemed sellable in what is predominantly a white industry. He then went on to speak about white audiences watching films about Black people. “The idea is to provide escapism,” he explained. “White audiences are supposed to be able to watch movies about poor Black people and feel as though that by watching that film, they’re doing something good. *Pier Kids* is not that kind of movie. *Pier Kids* is saying you’re still not enough.” Casper’s story in the documentary really hit home for me, as he was cast out from his home for being bisexual and some of his family members are Jehovah’s Witnesses. As someone who’s queer and was brought up as a Jehovah’s Witness, seeing a man outcast and put on the streets because of his sexuality was emotional for me.

“Casper in our film really represents the idea of— first of all, this is a film that is radically interested in asserting the importance and the entitlement of public space for queer kids to become themselves,” Bratton said, “Because, you know, at home, things can get very, very, dicey. They can get very— feel cold and awkward. At work, you’re not allowed— you’re not supposed to be a full self, you’re supposed to be a self that exists to expedite the creation of profit. Public space becomes— and for young people, you don’t have a job, you can’t go home. Those hours you spend running the streets with your friends are the most important hours of your childhood.” I asked Bratton if it has gotten any better for the *Pier Kids* since he made his film. “I don’t really think so,” he said, “because there are still two million homeless youth, two million homeless people in America. Half of them are LGBTQ youth, half of them are LGBTQ youth of colour. So this is an issue that crosses all of the racial, all of the class boundaries of our— of our society. And it’s persisting at the same level today as it was when the movie was made.”

Bratton said every time that he has conversations about his film, “there are people in the crowd who see themselves in it and who walk out ready to make change,” which he thinks “will add up and make things better eventually.” I definitely agree, because it makes me want to be a better ally and help educate other people as well. Bratton told me that Krystal is still married and they have stable housing now, which was great to hear. He also said that what he hopes people take away from the film is “the power of people’s self,” which he explained. “What makes it different from most documentaries in the normal mainstream documentary community, the idea is to say to look at people as if they’re held under glass,” he said. “Like they’re, like, frozen in amber. And to examine— right? And then that’s where the power lies. The power lies in the people who are speaking.”

It’s so important for a film like *Pier Kids* to be shown to wider audiences, so people can see themselves in this film, especially those in the queer community who may be going through similar experiences. “So I’m hoping that for queer kids that are going to go through this one day— ‘cause it’s still gonna happen— that— that they see themselves in this movie and they say, “You know what? I’m gonna be okay!” I definitely understand what Bratton is saying about not being accepted. You feel like your world is collapsing all around you, when your biological family doesn’t accept you, and you don’t know where to go.

Bratton then went on to talk about how queer youth being rejected isn’t just an American problem. “This problem, this issue of homelessness and abandonment of queer kids, is a global issue, across all of our races and classes. Truly, the issue is the system that demands heterosexuality and procreation as our guiding principle for maintaining and building civilization. That system— for Black Lives Matter, it’s problematic. For Occupy Wall Street, it’s problematic. I’m starting to realize my own growth in this is that the issue is not just like, it’s so easy to kinda look through your own lane. But, look up for a second and you realize, oh, my god, it’s like the Wizard of Oz. You know? It’s like, Oz is the problem. It’s not the dog, or the Tin Man, or the Lion, or the Scarecrow. It’s this man behind the curtain.”

In the film there are two incidents where the police are involved sort of halfway through, with a play fight and a child in a pram. Near the end, a young boy and Bratton get pushed a bit by the police. “I never feel safe with police around. Even when I need a police officer, I don’t feel safe,” Bratton told me. “Because you never know how that officer is, especially in America, the police force and white supremacy are the same thing. No matter what the situation is. However, this film chronicles the first time I’ve really revelled in the idea that filmmaking can be my way to, like, speak truth to power. So whenever I saw a police officer on the pier, the first thing I would do is go run to them with my camera because I want to show everybody! I’m like “Look at what they’re doing! Look! See, I’m not making this up!”

Bratton went on to describe the impact of his incident with the police officer. “When he pushed me in that moment, it kind of underscored and unfortunately, that young person he pushed and manhandled as well— it just kind of underscored, like, how perverse this all is,” he explained. “In reality, just be— us being Black, being queer, being in this space, and being together is the problem. It’s not about how trans you are, like, how effeminate you are, how not how masc you are, how loud you are. None of that. It is just because of the colour of your skin and your sexuality. You’re out here. That is the issue.” Bratton passionately told me about the experience of filming the officers. “I felt so empowered to have the camera in my hand, to be able to turn it around on them and say, ‘Okay... now do it.’ I was not safe, but I felt empowered,” he said.

Hearing how he was treated made me angry, because why do people need to push someone just for walking down the street? People when given authority go power hungry, they’ve got this power and they exploit it, which is wrong. “Where fear meets power is corruption, right?” Bratton said. “Police are terrified because on a normal night, they have to deal with maybe like 40 of these brown and Black queer bodies, right? During Pride, there’s like 40,000 of them. I kept expecting a riot to happen. I guess earlier this summer with Black Lives Matter. I kept waiting for that to happen on the pier every year. I would go down every summer. I thought this would be the summer where they destroy everything. Sure, the cops are there to maintain a certain type of— I call it temporal segregation, like time-based segregation. Like, between certain hours of the day, it’s certain times, Black queer people are not allowed to be here.”

This was really upsetting to hear, as nobody in this day and age should be segregated or discriminated against because of their skin colour, sexuality, gender, or status, and given restrictions for walking into shops or restaurants! Bratton went on to explain his feelings about Black culture being used by white people, “So that kind of, like, a dissonance, that cognitive dissonance— like, being desired by a culture, but reviled within your own space, you know?” he said. “And like that it was really, really it was just really it was fascinating as much as it was infuriating, right? It was just an unending dance between the system of Christopher Street that is trying to project a version of itself to the world, and then the reality of Christopher Street for those who need it to come into their own.”

I asked Bratton if any of the Pier Kids have any strong opinions on Marsha P. Johnson, because of the history surrounding the Stonewall riots. I knew that a statue was possibly going up to commemorate Johnson and Sylvia Rivera in New York City, to be installed in 2021. He told me that Krystal worked with an organisation to have the statue in the city while *Pier Kids* was being filmed, but it never made it to camera. “I kind of look at Sylvia and Marsha as— so, that to say, Sylvia and Marsha for me were a guiding light in this project. They were the main thing I thought about every single time I went out to film. They are the spirits and ancestors that I prayed to when I was editing the film clarity, right?”

Bratton wanted *Pier Kids* to have such an impact that he even envisioned what Johnson and Riviera would want to see if they were to watch it. “What would make them scream, and stand on their chairs and clap for this movie? What would make them point and curse at the screen?” he asked. I enjoyed his response, as it would be really interesting to see their reactions to Bratton’s film. He went on to explain that because “the Pier Kids have got so much going on immediately around them, that I don’t know if they really were super attached to that history in the way that I was attached to that history.”

I asked Bratton what advice would he give to a young queer person who’s thinking of coming out. He said it’s important to know how safe your home environment is before deciding to do so. “So that’s my first bit of advice, is measure it, and if your life is not in danger, and you feel like you have a better chance of the future staying in that house and while not being out, it’s okay to do that,” he explained. “You’ll be okay. It’s going to be alright. It’s not the end of the world. You’ll meet people who will love you. People who will support you. You are really, truly loved. You are valuable. We need you in the world. You don’t don’t allow the ignorance of the people, of your biological family... to determine what you think of yourself. Try to see yourself in the eyes of those who love you.”

Bratton also told me his hopes for the future of representation of queer POC in film. “I want more of us to be able to tell our own stories,” he said. “I am grateful for those who are inspired by Black queer life, and who have made fortunes selling their whitewashed versions of what Black queer life is. I pray that as this medium develops, as society develops, that people who have the power to greenlight things are actively looking for people who are from the experiences depicted.” Bratton suggested specific things he wants queer people of colour to be able to do and see.

“Tell our own stories. Queer-owned production companies, channels and more control over how we are depicted,” he said.

Bratton is such a warm and interesting person. Interviewing him was a delight, and we chatted for nearly one hour!. I really hope I get to meet the Pier Kids in the future and listen to them talk about their stories in person. I also hope more positive change happens soon for the Black community when it comes to equal rights and positive representation. Speaking to Bratton was a great experience that I will never forget, and I am really grateful to Take One Action for giving me the opportunity to interview him and watch *Pier Kids*!

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