

Full Biography Fred Kudjo Kuwornu

Fred Kudjo Kuwornu is an Italian-Ghanaian documentary filmmaker, producer, civil rights activist and educator. His documentaries deal with political and social themes, such as racism, interracial relations, diversity, Afro-Italians and Black diasporic identity in Italy and the African diaspora in the world. His production company is called “Do the Right Films,” in honor of Spike Lee, who has influenced Kuwornu’s work since his early years.

Early Life

Fred Kudjo Kuwornu was born in Bologna on September 6, 1971. His father, Perviss, is a cardio-surgeon who came to Italy from Ghana as a student in 1965. His mother Alessandra Giacomelli is an Italian Sephardic Jew. “Kudjo,” means “born on a Monday” in Ewe, his father’s tribal language.

After living in Ghana for a few months (1976) Fred’s family goes back to Bologna for 13 years. Here Fred attends elementary and middle school. Then the family moves to Ferrara, where Fred attends the Liceo Scientifico Roiti, and then studies Political Science at the University of Bologna (thesis in Communication Sociology with a project on the Bolognese singer-songwriters).

During his formative years, *The Autobiography of Malcom X* (1965 by Malcolm X and Alex Haley) has a deep influence on him, along with Spike Lee’s film *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and the rise of hip hop culture.

These works inspired reflections on his identity and on his African descent, which up until then he had not explored much, having been raised in the racially and religiously homogeneous context of Italy in the 70s and 80s.

DJ Career

At 16, Fred begins his experience as speaker for Radio Estense, a local radio in Ferrara, hence refining his creative skills along with his passion for music, during the years of the success of Rap and House in Italian culture. His career as DJ will continue for the next 15 years for various radios, such as the historical “Radio Bologna International,” and “Radio Jam FM.” Under the pseudonym “Freddy Goes To House” he works as producer for the label Mantra Vibes, realizing the dance single tracks “The Whistle” (1998) and “Sun Train” (1999). He will then interrupt his radio career when he will move to Rome to work in cinema and TV.

Cinema and TV

In 2001 and 2002 he is the TV host for the game show *Zengi* (produced by Endemol, directed by Sergio Colabona) for the La7 channel. During this time he also acts in Maurizio dell’Orso’s *Un papà quasi perfetto* (2003, 6 episodes) alongside Michele Placido and in *Quo Vadis, Baby?* (2005) directed by Guido Chiesa. After those experiences, he understands he wants to keep working in the field, but behind the scenes (and soon, the camera). In 2004 he is the author of *Italia che Vai*, a weekly show on travel and culture. He also directs his first short film, *Natale in Autogrill* (2003), which becomes finalist at the Festival dei Due Mondi of Spoleto. His work for

Italian TV ends in 2008, when he will meet Spike Lee, the most inspiring figure of his teenage years.

Director and Producer

In 2008, Fred works as Michael Ealy's stand in and as production assistant for Spike Lee's *Miracle at Sant'Anna* [2008], produced by Roberto Cicutto, Touchstone Pictures, Rai Cinema and based on the novel by James McBride. On the set of this films, Fred is inspired to create his first documentary, *Inside Buffalo* [2010] as a way to honor the Black soldiers who helped liberate Italy from Nazi-Fascism, but who were subjected to segregation and racism at home.

Documentary “Inside Buffalo”

Inside Buffalo includes interviews with WW2 African-American veterans, Italian Partisans who survived the massacre of Stazzema. Among the participants, there are Derek Luke, Laz Alonso, Omar Benson Miller and James McBride. The documentary also narrates the previously little-known story of the friendship between the African-American troops deployed in Tuscany and the local partisans.

Inside Buffalo received various recognitions, including by President Barack Obama, President Bill Clinton, the Italian President Napolitano, and from the Pentagon. It has been shown in hundreds of venues, colleges, and at the Library of Congress.

In 2011, during a ceremony at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, honored Fred Kuwornu with a certificate from the Congress in recognition of the work done to preserve the memory and the contributions of African-American soldiers during WW2.

Other prizes were granted from the US Department of Veteran Affairs, the Governor of Oklahoma Brad Henry, Frank Jackson the mayor of Cleveland and Michael Nutter mayor of Philadelphia, and it won Best Documentary at the Black International Cinema Berlin festival [2010].

Inside Buffalo was also presented, among others, at the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles, Texas Black Film Festival in Dallas, African Diaspora Film Festival in New York, Atlanta Black DocuFest, Mid-Atlantic Black Film Festival, Black Harvest Chicago Film and Series, Sidewalk Moving Pictures Film Festival.

Documentary “18 Ius Soli”

In 2011, Fred becomes a civil right activist for the so-called "Second Generation Italians," children of immigrants born in Italy but who, because of the Italian Ius Sanguinis, are not allowed to become citizens. He first starts the social campaign "Sono nato qui" ("I was born here"), and then starts working on the documentary *18 Ius Soli* (2011), in collaboration with Premio Mutti, Cineteca Bologna, Anolf, and Rete Together, which will become one of the first documentaries for social change produced and distributed in Italy. Winner of the the 2012 Ilaria Alpi prize, *Ius Soli* presents interview with children of immigrants, in many cases born in Italy,

but deprived of the right to Italian citizenship. It sheds light on a reality that had remained unknown to most, both in Italy and abroad, while explaining the paradoxes of being fully culturally Italian but without a passport.

The Italian Citizenship Law follows bloodlines, and grants citizenship only when at least one of the parents is Italian by bloodlines. Hence, children of immigrants born on Italian soil, have to apply for citizenship and may obtain it after turning 18. Because the process is very complex, hundreds of thousands of children of immigrants have not been granted citizenship yet and hence live in uncertainty.

With the help of an independent and self-created platform, between 2012 and 2016 *Ius Soli* was shown in Italy more than 800 times, at events hosted by cultural associations, schools, universities, and towns, hence fostering the debate on citizenship for children of immigrants, which also involved Roberto Saviano (who praised *Ius Soli* as a unique testimony). It was also shown abroad, especially in the US, inserting itself in the heated discussions about Dreamers and Immigration.

Documentary “Blaxploitalian 100 Years of Blackness in Italian Cinema”

In 2013, Fred Kuwornu moves himself and his production company, Do the Right Films, to Brooklyn. Here, in 2016, he produces *Blaxploitalian*, another documentary for social change this time focused on media representation. In this work, Fred uncovers the hidden story of African, African-American and Caribbean actors in Italian cinema. It starts with the 1915 silent film *Salambò*, continues with Neorealism and the 1970s cinema, to reach the contemporary age. Also inspired by his own experiences as a cinema viewer, Fred's intention with this work is to give voice to actors who had historically been reduced to silence and to stereotypes (according to which ethnic actors are only given roles as illegal immigrant, drug dealer, prostitute, cleaning lady, etc). Among the interviews, there are former Miss Italia Denny Mendes, the Dominican female actor Iris Peynado, and the African-American Harold Bradley and Fred Williamson, an icon of "Blaxploitation."

The documentary became part of the campaign #DiversityMediaMatters, initiated by Fred and aimed at promoting diversity in the global film and TV industries, which three years later Idris Elba, Will Smith and Spike Lee raised again at the Oscars.

Commenting on *Blaxploitalian*, Sheril D. Antonio, Dean of the NYU Tisch School of the Arts said: "'Blaxploitalian is such an important work. It continues the conversation about Blacks in the west. It joins forces with W.E.B. DuBois (*Double Consciousness*); Paul Gilroy (*Black Atlantic*); Stuart Hall and many other scholars and filmmaker who speak about “Black being both inside and outside the West.”

In 2016, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, president of the Academy Awards, invites Fred Kuwornu and the actor-activist Danny Glover to host an event on diversity in the film industry.

That same year, at the Festa del Cinema di Roma, Fred launches the initiative "United Artists for Italy," which supports Black Italian actors and their struggle for more visibility.

Between 2016 and 2017, Fred attends various international events on the film industry, such as in Brasil, al Encontro de Cinema Negro Zózimo Bulbul, in Ghana at The National Film and Television Institute, in Spain at the festival Cine Africano, as well as in South Africa, Tanzania, Netherland, Uk, France, hence becoming an internationally renowned figure on diversity and inclusion.

Blaxploitalian was presented at the following film festivals:

San Francisco Black Film Festival, Pan African Film Festival Los Angeles, Festa del Cinema di Roma, Baltimore International Film Festival, Eko International Film Festival Lagos, Atlanta Docufest, Martinique Film Festival, Canada World International Film Festival, Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, New Voices in Black Cinema BAM, Zanzibar International Film Festival .

Also in 2016-17, Fred discovers the young author Antonio Dikele Distefano (who will later become writer and producer of the Netflix series *Zero*). Fred helps him promoting his first book *Fuori Piove Dentro Pure Passo a Prenderti*. (2015)

Concept “BLAQ • IT (The Black Italians Timeline)

With the web series *Blaq•IT*, started in 2020, Fred Kuwornu experiments with the hybridization of documentary and the esthetic storytelling of social media. The series appears on various platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and others.

The series details the historical presence of African descent in Italy, hence presenting not only the recent history of refugees and migrants of the 1990s, but also the broad and incredibly rich universe of Italians of African descent who have been influencing Italian mass culture (through music, social media, Tv, sport, arts, publications, activism).

Blaq • IT is conceived as part of the new philosophy "Blaq Stars," dedicated to the Black Diaspora in the world, and to the structural social changes and fast growing that have been affecting the African continent.

The documentary approach is rigorously political and sociological, but at the same time aesthetically inspired by the language of the new media, of commercials, and of hybrid audiovisual forms.

Netflix

In September 2020 Netflix chose Fred to do the Italian voiceover for Karamo Brown in an episode of *Bookmarks- Celebrating Black Voices* called *I am perfectly designed*. This series raises issues around empathy, equality, justice, self-love, and antiracism.

Conferences and Educational Works

Since 2014, Fred Kuwornu has given about 250 lectures and presentations on Diversity in Contemporary Italian Culture and on Black Diaspora at numerous international universities, among which Oxford, Yale, NYU, Columbia, University of California, Berkeley University,

University of Chicago, Princeton University, Brown University, Cornell University, Stanford University, Colorado College, and many more.

He was an invited guest speaker at conferences, such as:

Black Portraiture[s] II: Imaging the Black Body and Re-staging Histories New York University - 2015 Conference in Florence, Italy

2016 ALA African Literature Association Annual Conference in Atlanta, USA

2017 American Association for Italian Studies and the Canadian Society for Italian Studies Annual Conference at Ohio State University, USA

2017 Annual API (Association of Professional Italianists in South Africa) Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa

2018 Afro/Black Paris – Future/Past- Dartmouth College

His work has been cited in many academic papers.

He also teaches courses on production and digital filmmaking, on Black Diaspora in Contemporary Italy and Europe. He has taught for University of Toronto, University of Minnesota, James Madison University, Middlebury College and Colorado College. At Colorado College, Fred Kuwornu and professor Amanda Minervini taught the first course entirely dedicated to Black Italian Cinema and Digital Performance.