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Optical Allusions

ATTICA

by Robert A. Wilson, Jr.

The drawing power of a documentary film (usually limited, unless there's a heavy PR campaign in operation) is its offer of insight, felt by the theatregoer as curiosity concerning another land, a different way of life, a fresh look at the famil-

iar. *Attica*—a movie produced, directed and most trenchantly edited by Cinda Firestone—tries to chart the experiences of dwellers in that subcontinent called the American penal system.

The particular locale is Attica Prison in New York State, the time September of 1971, when two hundred people were wounded and 38 (including 9 hostages) killed by state marshalls as they “retook” D Yard from inmates protesting conditions in the prison. The final death toll reached 43 as a result of (according to the film's distributors) the “greatest concentration of firepower ever brought against American citizens by an arm of the Government.”

Attica—which utilizes film, videotape and still-photography footage made during the assault and more recently (there are interviews with former prisoners)—is being circulated for the benefit of the Attica Legal Defense Fund, so the question of bias is pertinent. Well, the state has had its inconclusive say, to media representatives and investigatory commissioners, about conditions which produced the rebellion and bloody deaths; now the convicts get 80 minutes of movie to present *their* side of the story of D Yard. Yes, it's biased...and with an interesting intelligence.

At no point in the film is there the least *hint* that the inmates should not have been in prison to begin with. This careful omission of any “open the jails” rhetoric struck me as unusual—as did Firestone's deliberately soft-pedaling certain facts of our judicial process, such as the predominantly Black and Hispanic population in prisons and the existence of “country club” institutions (like Stormville Penitentiary, also in New York) for the rich or well-connected convict. For the purposes of this film, the process by which people are sent to prison is beside the point (capital offenses are also left out of the presentation). *Attica* is instead constructed as a forceful reminder that most of the people we put in prison will, in time, be back in our midst...and what they experience “inside the walls” ought to be of great concern to all of who will one day be, so to speak, rubbing elbows with them again.

“We are human beings” is the repeated cry from the men seen in this film. It is simple and, one would think, unarguable; the key question raised is how many other generally acknowledged rights of a human being may be abrogated after a court decision has taken liberty away. *Attica* does not even touch at any length on the hopelessness of “rehabilitation” under the present system (a few figures on recidivism speak for themselves); it hammers, rather, at the preventable “radicalizing” effect of penitentiaries generally and that attack upon D Yard specifically.



D Yard during the Attica rebellion

It is the position of the filmmakers, as well as the inmates they interviewed, that the taking of hostages that September was a protective act, not a threatening one: the convicts believed (it is said) that the state would never kill its own employees. They were, as we know, very wrong. The state's response to the impasse over amnesty—a response enacted with the approval of then Governor Nelson Rockefeller—can be termed a slaughter without much fear of rebuttal. Was there another way out of the impasse, were the inmates' grievances legitimate, and had the state ample opportunity in months preceding to prevent the bloodshed? Yes, say the prisoners, and Firestone agrees.

The film is professionally assembled, with extremely good sound editing, fine processing of some photographically tricky footage, and sharp intercutting of interviews and action. It will, of course, be "preaching to the converted" with little chance of attracting members of the hard-line institutional establishment. And it does not rise to that perhaps unattainable level of universality which would be a goal of a fictionalized work based on the facts. But then, *Attica* is not aiming to be art (although its use of film technique is certainly artistic); it wants to move people into immediate action for reform of the way prisoners are treated while they are serving their sentences. It deals with such matters as extreme psychological deprivation, socially harmful attitude reinforcement, and the unnecessarily demeaning wage scale paid prisoners for work on which the "outside" community depends.

Especially in its conversation with ex-prisoners, *Attica* hits the mark; "The same things that are happening to me are happening to you," says one of them. Firestone, finding "incredible callousness, cruelty and insensitivity" to be "terrifying," hopes that the film might make people "wonder about a society that can create things like Attica." If you do see a connection between the manner in which prisons are run and the society to which prisoners return, a couple of dollars spent on tickets to this movie is one form of positive action. ■