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***Attica* (1973), Cinda Firestone**

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Cinda Firestone's celebrated documentary film *Attica* is about a recent American revolution, one which took place during September, 1971, in Attica State Prison in upstate New York. The event began as the inmates' peaceful demonstration both against the prison's subhuman living conditions and for basic democratic rights such as decent medical care, accommodations, education and food; it ended in the slaughter of 43 prisoners and hostages by state troopers acting under Governor Nelson Rockefeller's orders. Never before or since did any branch of the American government use as great a concentration of weapons against the people. There were more deaths in the Attica massacre than in any other solely domestic American conflict since the Civil War. Although these facts are public knowledge now and the ensuing McKay Commission hearings concluded that the government was guilty of malfeasance and duplicity, not one indictment was brought against troopers or other authorities. As for the prisoners, 61 have been indicted.

Attica was released in the United States in March, 1974. Its premiere took place in October, 1973 at the Mannheim (Germany) Film Festival, where it was the only unanimous choice for a Golden Ducat. In November, 1973 *Attica* was invited to the Nyon (Switzerland) International Film Festival, where it received the Grand Prize for documentary films from the Jury des Jeunes. *Attica* was invited to exhibit at the Festival Dei Popoli (Italy), a non-competitive international film festival, in December, 1973.

That *Attica* received these honors isn't surprising. Firestone brilliantly directed and edited a wide variety of footage for use in *Attica*, including filmed interviews (with guards, official observers, survivors and ex-inmates), stills, newsreel films. With the prisoners' permission two Black camera-people, Roland Barnes and Jay Lamarch, filmed the activities in yard "D," which the rebels claimed and established as a liberated zone. Narrated in the film by surviving inmates, the state troopers' assault on the inmates

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was filmed by troopers themselves through the scopes of their rifles. Because of Firestone's artistry even the stills seem dramatic: *The interview (with inmate Frank Smith) takes place in Erie County jail where the indicted (Attica) brothers are currently being held. Motion picture cameras are not allowed, but Firestone so adroitly weaves her stills with the voice of the brother, that his careful words take on even more classic proportions. We can study the poetry of his face and his expressive hands as we ponder his words. The same technique is used in an interview with Jerry Rosenberg, the jailhouse lawyer, and this section is the artistic high-point of the film* (Sharon Krebs, "Attica: Images of a Dream Deferred," *University Review*).

Director, producer and editor of *Attica*, Cinda Firestone has been a member of the Liberation News Service collective, has taught filmmaking to students in East Harlem and Newark, and has worked for Emile de Antonio Films in New York City. Currently she is traveling around the country filming all aspects of American life in preparation for a long documentary about the U.S.A.

Firestone's comments about her personal response to the events at Attica Prison convey the compassion and sense of justice which inform her film: *I would like this film to make people wonder about the whole institution of prisons and, taking that a step further, wonder about a society that can create things like Attica.*

When I interviewed (inmate) Chris Reed, he told me how first they shot his leg off, and then this State Trooper came and kicked him in the leg that was just shot off. That some people can be this horrible is just terrifying to me. The sadism that the prisoners went through after the takeover (of the prison by the troopers)—it's just really depressing that people can be like that. . . . But then I talked to these men who had just gone thru all of this and instead of just becoming really bitter, they resolved to do something about it—change themselves and try and change things when they got out. These men had been shut up in cells for months and months on end under intolerable conditions, and then had to go through all that, and they still came out of it philosophical and determined to do something instead of being beaten down by it—it was very important to me to

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know there were people like this. I just don't think people realize how brutal State Troopers and police can be to someone who's in a completely helpless position. I don't just mean cracking people's heads open, but, like in Attica, shooting people that were lying on the ground, and taking everything they had—wristwatches, eye glasses, even their false teeth—and smashing them and throwing them into ditches. Just this incredible brutality that I don't think the press and TV really brought out, so that people didn't realize what really happened there. Something like Attica could never have happened had there not been incredible callousness, cruelty and insensitivity from the bottom all the way to the top. From the bottom where men were willing to carry twelve-gauge shotguns with dum-dum bullets (which expand in the victims' bodies and were outlawed by the Geneva Convention) and shoot them at people with no weapons, to the Governor's office where they allowed this all to happen (as quoted in the press book).

Attica is not only an intelligent film but also an impassioned one. Its devotion to the prisoners' cause gives the film its vitality and its justice: *Attica* unflinchingly places the blame exactly where it belongs, on the authorities and the system they violently enforce, rather than posing as "objective" and really condoning the officials' crimes by evading or obscuring the crucial events and issues. *Attica*, which Vincent Canby called "a superior example of committed filmmaking" (*New York Times*) and Penelope Gilliatt called "a trumpet call of a film" (*New Yorker*), is an excellent example of the cinema's power to present a historic event to those of us who didn't witness it in such a vivid and moving way that we come to feel a sense of kinship with the people who did participate in the event and thus begin to develop a

sense of responsibility to them and their struggle. Our experience with Firestone's film can be a large first step toward our own political involvement in that struggle.

Seeing *Attica* is a stirring and in some ways shattering experience. Ellen Cantarow commented about fiction—but the remark holds for film as well—that "bourgeois literature . . . celebrates individual exploits, individual sensibilities" ("Why Teach Literature?", *The Politics of Literature*). Firestone's *Attica* is the rare film (or story, novel or play, for that matter) which, by sensitively recording the resistance and inevitable repression of that liberation struggle in Attica State Prison, celebrates collective action, collective sensibility.

In a way, the honest, explicit footage of life in yard "D" after it was liberated to become a tiny, short-lived, truly democratic community is the source of the film's impact. *Attica* deserves recognition for its faithful presentation of life in yard "D" if for nothing else: most films (of all kinds) virtually deny the possibility of a truly democratic society by failing ever to depict one and so failing to allow their audiences to imagine one. In our society the range of behavior and emotional expression among people, especially among men, is severely limited, but in yard "D" we see Black, white and Puerto Rican men sharing the work and the decision-making equally and living together with mutual respect and affection. It's a shock to realize that "the best of humanity rest(s) with the 'rebels' and that all this is repellent to any pretense of decency and justice (is) on the side of 'law and order'" (Irwin Silber, *Guardian*), for our culture tells us that the rebels are "criminals," supposedly the most dangerous people in society and those least capable of living peacefully and productively among the rest of us.

The men who created the

community in yard "D" for those four days in '71 actually experienced what too few Americans ever experience—the joy and exhilaration of being engaged with other people in an effort toward collective self-determination and in a collective revolutionary movement. It is the destruction of this community which is so painful to see in the film. I found it nearly unbearable to watch the state troopers gun down the men whom, through the eloquence of Firestone's film, I had grown to love and admire as members of the total community.

Some of the shock and horror of the assault comes through, I think, in a juxtaposition of some inmates' reminiscences of the incident with a remark by Vincent Mancusi, warden of the Prison. Ex-inmate Harold Walker says:

And then they had a P.A. system saying, "Place your hands on your heads" and "surrender to the nearest officer and you won't be harmed" and they kept shooting people when they said that. They said it and then they shot people. And inmate Chris Reed: I heard a guy holler out, "Please don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me"; and the (other) guy told him to shut up and the guy just kept repeating it and the other guy said, "I said shut up" and the guy kept saying it and a shot rang out and I didn't hear this guy no more.

Later in '71 the Pepper Commission, which investigated prison conditions in general, asked the warden, "Could you tell us if you have adopted any new program as a result of all this, or intensified any old program designed to reduce the possibility of reoccurrence?" Mancusi's answer was, "We have instituted two gun posts."

People usually go to the movies to be entertained and pacified, not to be awakened to the plight of other people in their own time. Besides, we're accustomed to seeing violence and cruelty

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presented coldly in newsreels, TV shows and commercial films and to remaining untouched ourselves. It's rare to feel as deeply moved by a film of any kind as we are by *Attica*. That her film can arouse our numbed capacity for compassion and keep alive in our minds the events of Attica and the social conditions which created them is proof of Firestone's excellence as a filmmaker. As a documentary film with a great emotional force, *Attica* is a phenomenon not of entertainment but of survival. *Attica* and films like it mark the beginning of the time when we will turn to art not to contemplate it or lose ourselves in it but to stimulate and unify our imaginations, our actions, our lives.

All proceeds from the first year of American screenings of *Attica* (through March, 1975) are being given to the Attica Legal Defense Fund to help defray the legal expenses of the ongoing trials.

Linda Greene

ATTICA—80 min., color. U.S.A.
Directed, produced and edited by Cinda Firestone. Assistant director, editor: Tucker Ashworth. Cinematography: Roland Barnes, Jay Lamarch, Mary Lampson, Jesse Goodman, Carol Stein, Kevin Keating.

A doctoral candidate in English at the University of Chicago, Linda Greene is writing a dissertation on George Eliot and artistic problems in the representation of women in fiction. She has been interested in the women's movement for a long time, and her work on the film festival is her most recent major feminist activity since she co-convened a course in fiction by and about women at the Liberation School for Women in Chicago in 1971.