

Film Journal

Baraka – 10/21/2005

Most of the excerpts we watched from the movie *Baraka* showed various forms of human misery. Before going into the Marxist analysis of those excerpts I would like to acknowledge two facts. The full movie contains wonderful segments depicting the human spirit's and community's ingenuity. As such it provides an even stronger contrast between the full human potential, as proven by countless generations before the advent of capitalism as a world dominating system and the degradation of quality of life it caused to workers all over the world. I would consider the main focus of the movie less of a critique of the existing system and more of a tribute to the diversity of human religious and spiritual practices. The bulk of the movie is made up from images and sounds related to religious orientation. Even the title refers to the Sufi concept of humans being the channels of the divine blessing ("baraka"). I found the classroom showing of only the most horrific portions of the film somewhat unfair. While it was suitable to make the points related to the course, but it did not do justice to the whole of the movie.

The other factoid worthy to mention is that the movie is a spinoff of *Koyanisqatsi*, a similar tome. The literal translation of the title (from Hopi language) is "life out of balance" and shows how humanity has begun destroying its physical and social environment in the 20th century. *Baraka* copies some of the same concept, using a non-fictional and non-verbal style. Furthermore there is a significant overlap in the crews of the two productions. While *Baraka* in itself is a beautiful, spiritual, and inspirational piece of art, its relative lack of originality slightly decreases its value in my eyes.

The excerpts shown in class portrayed people from different parts of the world in despair. Marx would see the diamond miners--going up and down on a muddy mountainside, barely recognizable humans, covered with dust and mud—as a prime example of what's wrong with capitalism. For him ideal work is an activity through which human beings can realize themselves in the world. What we've seen was the opposite of ideal. Humans were reduced to carriers of sacks of dirt. Instead of using their full potential, they have a single and limited function. That function is defined by the company, precisely acting as owners of the workers.

I presume these miners were not slaves; they signed a contract to work out of their own "free will." I also assume however that their options to find more fulfilling work were rather limited. If these assumptions are correct it would prove another of Marx's maxims, namely that humans are free to act, but are not free to choose the conditions under which they make their choices. According to Marx's labor theory of value, all value comes from human labor. In *Baraka* we saw acts of labor. What we did not see was the value they created for the corporation they worked for. But here, in

the US we are all familiar with the price of diamonds and the value they represent. (Through clever advertising the consumer's emotional attachment to the stones as fostered.) To find a genuine piece of diamond thousands of miners have to climb up and down those slopes. That is the energy from which the real value of the single "rock" really comes from.

Marx would also add that the workers are alienated from the work, its value and its product. They certainly don't receive comparable compensation for their toil. They are reduced to the level of commodity, while accumulate wealth for their employees. This process exemplifies the first step of the logic of capital; "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces." We saw with our own eyes as the workers' life energy got transferred into the product, another fundamental piece of Marx's theory.

But I could use other examples from the movie. For example a factory setting appears cleaner, but that is the only difference between it and the mine. The workers are reduced the same way to the level of machine where they have to repeat the same movements over and over. The segment included a computer keyboard factory where women in blue dress worked repetitively, another electronic gadget-making factory in Asia, and steel workers shoveling coal into a huge machine. There are two more pieces connected to the same concept in different ways. There was a car constructing factory, without humans being present. This showed that humans became obsolete for production. Due to the constant pressure of free competition the factories have to come up with ways to lower the cost of productions. Where the major cost is the people's salary it is obvious what needed to be cut. Finally this whole system got extended to the animal kingdom. We saw day old chickens dropped, stirred pushed through a conveyor belt in a factory with the purpose of getting a vaccination and getting their beaks dulled by burning. This cruelty is done in the name of efficiency. A few minutes later we saw adult chickens packed tightly in endless rows of cages. That image corresponded nicely to the human habitations of huge urban houses reaching to the sky, dozens of stories high. We, just like the chickens are nothing more than necessary pieces in the machinery of modernity. A social system that produces this kind of reality is not human centered, nor for that matter not animal or nature centered. It is profit centered and everything else is secondary

Advertising and the End of the World – 10/26/2005

The auteur of this documentary, Sut Jhally has an article online by the title "Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse" (<http://www.sutjhally.com/onlinepubs/apocalypse.html>) In it, he formulates his position this way "Simply stated, our survival as a species is dependent upon minimizing the threat from advertising and the commercial culture that has spawned it." I believe he hoped that this documentary could be a tool in instigating process.

In his analysis of the impact of advertising on culture, a major undercurrent of this thought is his implicit agreement with Marx's exposition of how capitalism works in terms economics. Fairly early on in the movie he says verbatim, "The problem is consumption, not production." Thus he agrees with one of the interim conclusions of Marx's line of thought on the nature of declining prices. Marx understood 150 years before the movie was made (in a later, more developed form of capitalism) that competition amongst capitalist producers exerts downward pressure on prices. This is just one of three types of competition according to Marx. The other two (the workers selling their own labor at lower and lower costs in an increasingly scarce job market; and the buyers/capitalists and sellers/workers as classes pitted against each other) are just as essential to capitalism but seems to be less present in the problem of advertising. The third kind of competition, the one that pushes the commodities' prices down is about the capitalists as buyers. Commodities include the work of the laborers. Marx emphasized that they compete each other for the best worker. They also compete to produce the products as cheaply as possible. It is an axiom familiar to us by now, that the demand on the market defines the products' prices; most buyers prefer to buy the cheaper products. This tendency is also forcing the prices down. These factors combined add up to continuously declining prices and devalued workers.

According to classical Marxism capitalists could do three things to lower prices: increase the division of labor, substitute machinery for labor, or increase the scale of production. By the end of the 20th century all of these techniques have been employed to such an extent that we are back to the opening issue of consumption being the problem and not the production. The question is how to convince people to be active consumers, to buy things. This became the major concern and preoccupation of the post-industrial society. This has fueled the creation and boom of the advertising agency. According to Jhally \$175 billion is spent on it just in the US every year.

Jhally reworded Marx's concept—that more and more is produced cheaper and cheaper—to 20th century conditions, "productivity can be seen everywhere." He extended it by saying "it is a revolutionary society, changing it faster." He believed that former led to the latter. As productivity increased, the pressure on selling accompanies with it and through advertising it started to interfere with every aspect of our life.

Jhally's main concern was that the advertising expanded to such an extent that it reached every aspect of culture. He even used the word "colonize" to define the relationship between advertising and culture His most shocking proof for this process was that in 1970 on average we got 1500 commercial impressions a day, and by 1998 (when the movie was made) this number climbed up to 3600. Ads took—or are in the process of taking—over every potential surface, not regulated by the government. Jhally summarized the results of the process in two points, "ads are everywhere and huge amount of money is spent on it."

He attempted to rise above the question, "does ad campaign make people buy products" and replaced it with "what impact does advertising have on culture?" This

line of questioning directly relates to the linguistic metaphor as discussed on class. At the bases of our diagram we can put the ad system. It is part of the economy, the infrastructure; it is one in a system of institutions. As such it influences us, which we can represent with an arrow on the left side pointing upwards. His logic on this role is very straightforward: “Culture is where morality is defined. In our culture advertising is the main storyteller. To not be influenced is to live outside culture; it is not possible.” With these simple sentences (and some visual images) he showed how advertising exerts its influence on us. This line up on our imaginary diagram deprives us from our agency, individuality, choices. It situates us solely as consumers, instead of fully-realized human beings. Just as Marx focused on the definition of humans in terms of his economic activity, advertising is reducing us to consuming units. We are what we buy (today).

We can be represented with a box on the top of the diagram, to which the arrow from the institution of advertising at the bottom pointed. If Jhally would use our model he would like to close the diagram with a stronger arrow pointing downwards on the right side from us to the system. We need to do something not just to protect ourselves, but also to change the system that reshapes us in its own image. He made his analytical film so we would have a deeper understanding of our choices. Even if we are not exactly free to choose the conditions in which we live, we can reduce our exposure to advertising by our conscious choices. We have to realize that we do have the choice to create alternative visions.

Another formulation of the same idea from Jhally was that culture became adjacent to, a subsystem of advertising. Culture’s role got reduced to sell something. Commercial culture got inside our heads, relationships and homes, fully internalized. It tries to define how we may become happy. The problem with the answers the advertising industry gives is that they are very limited. Jhally characterized it with a lack of thinking about the future. Towards the end of his movie his goals became more explicit. He switched from analytical mode to activist. He showed the conflict of interest between the market, including the advertising industry, that thinks only in short term profits; and the individuals making up the collective human society that needs to ensure the possibility of a liveable future not just enjoy a liveable present.

The Store – 11/18/2005

The short segment we saw from Frederick Wiseman’s movie depicted all characteristics of Weber’s definition of the ideal type of bureaucracy.

The first of six characteristics is that in a bureaucratic institution activities are ordered by rule. One such rule according to the sales manager is to keep smiling. The sales force, and everybody who is in contact with the customers has to abide by it, thus demonstrating that different areas are ordered by different, yet specific rules. These

apply to fixed, official jurisdictions; e.g. different rules apply to managers than to janitors.

As part of the training the sales clerks were supposed to exercise regularly. This became one of their regular duties and as such got fixed in the bureaucratic structure. It was clear from the sales manager's presentation that he agreed with the sub-principle that individuals must be qualified to hold a position. His confident speech told us that he fully felt qualified for the position he held and he expected the sales people to be able to sell; the requirement for their job.

Weber's second point relates to hierarchy. In the store, just like in any modern corporation there is a very set hierarchy of positions. It is clear who is a manager and who ranks lower on the organizational chart. In the movie the most telling sign of the hierarchy was the way people related to each other. The manager got more screen time and more importantly talk time than anybody else. Others approached him from a submissive position. In this segment we saw one manager in action, which suggested that Weber's point about the organization being monocratically organized applied to this one too. This manager clearly had authority over everybody else in the film. However just by looking at the physical characteristics of the person one would not be able to tell that he was the manager. This supports Weber's thesis that the authority is anchored in the position and not the role.

I recall no clear evidence for Weber's third point about the role of written and archived documents in the life of the bureaucracy, but I recall from working in retail I have to assume though that the material for the training, employee handbooks, minutes of meetings and the like all existed for this corporation. Also, sales are recorded in the books, these numbers being used for years to compare current sales. The term "boosting sales" primarily means besting past sales record.

Weber's fourth point was the focus of the movie: expert training. We observed an actual training session. We learned what everybody needs to focus on in a department store: sale. According to the expert that this is or should be the sole purpose of the employees during their work hours, from the lowest rank to the highest. The training extended not just to the actions of the employees (of what and when they should do), but also to their full body (see smiling exercise) and mindset (obsessive focus on sale.) Every employee should be an expert in her or is role within the structure.

I covered already in the previous paragraph how the movie applies to Weber's fifth characteristics of bureaucracy, how the position demand full work capacity of the officials. This was the most shocking sentence for me in the movie, "the one grand purpose of meaning for our institution is to make sales." We are all ordinarily aware of this, but when spelled out in such extreme terms it made me shiver. It gave a clear and somewhat terrifying sense of how fully the workplace is taking over the person.

Finally the fact that there was training suggested that this was a typical organization from the point of view that general stable rules can be learned. They are

exhaustive, covering every aspect of behavior, clothing, speech, timing: in short everything that happens in the store is determined by the bureaucracy.

For Weber discipline is closely related to rational uniform obedience. That is exactly what the manager expects from the employees. He is willing to enforce it, just as Weber would have predicted it. And he does it in an impersonal manner, independently of the employee's gender, status, age or other characteristics, certain rules apply to everybody. There is no space for real charisma or individuality; they, with their incalculability could potentially disrupt the system. Those features are all substituted with objective discipline. The extent a person is capable and willing to follow the discipline consistently determines to what extent s/he will be successful in the bureaucracy.

High School – 11/23/2005

I have seen a few description of American high schools from the 1960's but none was like this. The fictionalized versions like in *American Graffiti*, *Grease*, *Cry-Baby*, or *Peggy Sue Got Married* seemed all less violent more romanticized in terms of teenager-adult relationships. My own high school experience in the 1980's in Hungary was also very different.

The major difference between this movie and my own high-school years or the fictionalized movies is the extent of authority, represented by the school administration, and its involvement in the personal lives of the students. It's one thing to read about enforcing dress code, humiliating young minds, breaking in undisciplined students, or indoctrinating young women into gender roles and another to see them played out on screen with the knowledge that what we see is the real thing.

We learned that in institutions, expectations are internalized through repetition, habitualization and coercion. This school is a prime example for that. It was rather paradoxical how, in one of the opening scenes, we hear a Spanish teacher and an entire class studying existentialism by repeating the word "existentialista" over and over. All forms of individual expression is taken away, which is precisely the opposite of existentialists' ideas. I recognize that the students in that class are supposed to learn Spanish, but I also have to acknowledge that the constant repetition must kill something inside them. I accept that a few repetitions helps to memorize concepts, new ideas, after all a good professor first tells what s/he will talk about, then tells it and finally summarizes it. Here however we heard a single word at least a dozen times. That made it clear that the focus is more than education in the sense of cultivating the mind. It is also indoctrination through dumbing down the people forced into it. Forced, because schooling is required by the state and also forced de facto, because it is rather difficult to get ahead in life, the job options are limited in contemporary America, if one does not have at least high school education. The young people present did not rebel against the repetition. By then after 10-12 years of

institutional schooling they accepted and internalized the fact that they have to hear out their teachers repeating things many times, whether they want it or not. The goal of this repetition there is to prepare them, so that once they step out into “real life” they would accept their role to listen mindlessly to other authority figures. This Spanish class taught more to them how not to be an existentialist, than to be.

Durkheim wrote that “education is simply the means by which society prepares, in its children, the essential conditions of its own existence.” The tragically poignant ending of the film proved to be the best example that this particular school cherished this role. There a teacher or administrator read aloud the letter of a former student who died in Vietnam. He was introduced as an average student. The tone in which it was read and the fact that this was the most characteristic of this individual worthy to mention emphasized that this is the goal they set in front of their students. The highest you can and should strive for is to be average. While today the army’s recruiting slogan is “be all you can be” the underlying message has not changed. The “all” part is limited by the institution, or even worse envisioned that the totality of a human being can be summed up in his or her activities in a regulated environment. I do not wish to belittle the heroic nature of the acts of soldiers. What I object to is the need for them and the state’s subtle and not so subtle ways of installing the idea into young impressionable minds that their highest goal should be dying for their country. That is exactly what happened to the student in question and he was celebrated for it by the entire school. I find it ironic and alarming that it was his death and not his life that was exalted. A society that places the highest value on its citizens’ death seems suicidal to me.

Adults influenced the students in numerous ways through the movie. Influence varied from friendly banter on how to dress, by sending a kid to detention for something he probably did not do. The former, a teacher making suggestions on what to wear for the senior prom, seemed harmless. However it was not just aesthetic opinion that was passed. First of all it came from an authority figure even if she acted as if she would be the girls’ best friend. She was sure that she is right in her decisions of what looks good and what doesn’t what is proper what is less so. Thus she was instructing the young women, giving orders even if in an informal way. But I found the real problems in her remarks about body image. She clearly was of the opinion that full figured women are not as beautiful as slim ones; they should cover their extra pounds. By today’s explicit standards this kind of speech would be unacceptable. However by today’s implicit messages, coming from the media, including the music, movie and fashion industry, slim is still projected as more desirable. Thus the only thing that has changed in the last 30 years is that the message went underground. It is no longer politically correct to tell women that they have to be slim to be socially acceptable, but social attitudes have been formed by the media that it is still very much an internalized norm by the majority of society.

There are two additional problems with the above body image issue. One of them is the patriarchal vantage point. Women’s body and their images are important

because they are supposed to appeal/entertain to the male gaze. This concept should be juxtaposed to the idea that their happiness primarily should depend on themselves, on their own choices and circumstances and not rely on an outsider's satisfaction.

The other problem is how the sphere of social institutions get mixed in the context of high school. Gender, religion, economy, age, state, race ... – these are all separate social constructs, institutions. However in high school they are not separate at all. The school acts as a focal point for most of them. Gender roles are learned as shown in the above example. Religion in this particular school played a minimal role. Durkheim explained how Christian conversion works in a sudden way. He also deconstructed the long years of education as a slower, but similar process of conversion, where the goal is to instill the child not with “greater or lesser degree of knowledge, but to create within him a deep-lying disposition, a kind of perspective of the soul... for life.” As the example of the dead student soldier showed civil religion is deeply set in the youth's minds. Age in itself is treated as respectable, independently whether the older person showed other reasons to be respected. Obedience is required from the students whether by the physical education teacher, the principle, or the parents. This rule was strongly enforced. The most blatant example was when the young man was broken into submission and forced to go to detention. He had to accept the punishment and “be a man” and attempt to prove his truth only after he spent the necessary time in detention. The older person's authority was the only thing considered, justice, respect, or self-esteem of the younger was dismissed as irrelevant. All of this was done not just by the state's approval, but explicit support. This is what the state expects from its high school to produce good citizens who follow rules, behave according to expected norms, and share the socially installed, acceptable values with the rest of society.