



Ghosts of Attica. First Run/Icarus Films.

Reviewed by David Kidd

Published on H-Amstdy (June, 2002)

Who then will guard the guards?

In *Satires VI*, Juvenal queries, “Quis custodiet ipsos custodies?” or “Who is to guard the guards themselves?” His question resonates today, and it implies that our guards will need someone to keep them in check, to be sure, but it also could be about protecting the guards. Juvenal’s insightful dexterity works much like the film *Ghosts of Attica*, a film that questions a criminal justice system clearly out of control and its victims, both prisoners and guards. Brad Lichtenstein’s film *Ghosts of Attica*, featuring a voice-over from Susan Sarandon, is a welcome addition to the documentaries about crime and punishment in the United States. Boasting a “definitive account of America’s most violent prison rebellion” and suppression, *Ghosts of Attica* offers a surprisingly objective view of an extraordinarily complex and horrific tragedy. Now, a full three decades after the awful events, this film takes close to the full measure of the story. *Ghosts of Attica* tells the chilling story of the prison uprising in 1971 that culminated with New York state troopers storming the prison and the resulting deaths of twenty-nine inmates and ten guards. Inmates had uprisen four days before and taken control of the prison when their demands for reform had not been met. During the four days, some negotiation took place, but it did not prevent the 500 troopers from their violent reprisals. While the 1,291-prisoner uprising was carried out by several races, most of them were black, and most of the guards were white. New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller organized a massive cover-up, attempting to keep the Attica riots from becoming a scandal that would have eliminated his Presidential ambitions. The inmates requested that Rocke-

feller visit the prison to negotiate better education, more black and Spanish-speaking guards, and better overall conditions. Following the riots and the re-taking of the prison, the state charged and indicted more than sixty inmates with crimes during the takeover, ranging from sodomy to murder. None of the guards or state officials were charged or indicted, even though, years later, the state would admit fault in the form of a \$12-million dollar settlement. Lichtenstein’s 89-minute film shuttles back and forth from the present-day quest for justice to the events as they unfolded in 1971. The film focuses on three main participants: Frank “Big Black” Smith, a leader in the uprising, and subsequently a leader in the quest for justice; Mike Smith, a prison guard injured during the troopers raid, and now the leader of “Forgotten Victims of Attica;” and Liz Fink, an attorney who led the twenty-six year civil action lawsuit on behalf of Attica inmates. The film puts a human face on these events, showing how various groups reacted to events at the time, and how they have struggled to find peace after all these years. The film could easily have engaged in some facile conspiracy theories, and it does veer dangerously close to doing so with some of its images of Nelson Rockefeller lurching away from cameras and microphones into a briskly departing limousine. Despite these images from investigative journalism and the conspiracy theories they might inspire in a casual viewer, the film does not lay all the blame with Rockefeller, but it does not let him escape blame completely. The film balances itself nicely by providing the guards’ perspectives, their deaths and injuries, and how they also have had trouble finding justice. Viewers will long remember after watching *Ghosts of Attica* the ghostly

images of naked prisoners being marched around. It is not surprising that much of the footage the film uses was long suppressed, but it is some measure of justice that this film now presents it. Narrative details during interviews include horrifying stories of guards playing Russian roulette with prisoners, threats of castration (both of which were done to Frank "Big Black" Smith), and photographs of fleeing prisoners who were shot in the back. The torturing of prisoners apparently continued for months after the troopers had taken back the prison. <p> Likewise, <cite>Ghosts of Attica</cite> shows some memorable footage of prisoners "free" in the yard while they negotiated for four days with authorities. The atmosphere was of an energized and transformed crowd,

shouting, excited, and delighted that they had an audience for their concerns. Their protest and their demands do not seem unreasonable in this footage, and the film invites sympathy with their demands. At the same time, <cite>Ghosts of Attica</cite> also presents the worried families of guards being held prisoner (in an ironic reversal the film does not neglect) narrating their hopes and fears. <p> The film recounts the details of the lawsuit, a fifteen-year court battle, and its \$12 million settlement (the largest of its kind in U.S. history), and would offer an interesting study in the legal system and issues of reparation. The inmates and the guards both agree that justice has not been served, and that no settlement will repay those who suffered in Attica.

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Citation: David Kidd. Review of , *Ghosts of Attica*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. June, 2002.

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