An exchange on Bulworth and race and class in America

24 July 1998

From VM

Dear Editor:

I think it is rather sad that *Bulworth* is considered by some to be an exposition of socialism. I understand the intent of the film is such, but in my opinion it has missed the mark in quite a vulgar way.

Is it acceptable that a (nearly 60-year-old) powerful white male end up with a glamorous young Black woman whom he BARKED at upon first seeing? Why not find an average Black middle-aged woman, perhaps a former Black Panther, to settle down with? The treatment of women in this film was deplorable by any standard. The representations of Black people were equally so.

Castigating with words the power elite, but then presenting Black individuals as poorly mannered and ignorant in contrast to whites (for example, the refined Jewish individuals at the Beverly Hills Hotel, the dignified whites in the Protestant church that Bulworth visited, the polite white media people and guests at various fund-raisers and events where Bulworth speaks) did more harm to the image of Blacks than it did good. Why not have equally refined, though oppressed Black characters? This would communicate to viewers that the position these Blacks occupy is unjustifiable and must be dealt with.

The film also puts forth the idea that the power elite is a Jewish power elite. In depicting extremes the film becomes itself racist. I went to the see *Bulworth* with high expectations and left feeling quite disturbed. In the hands of another director, capable of portraying subtle distinctions in an artistic instead of crude comical manner, something could have been achieved.

I took my 10-year-old daughter to see *Deep Impact* because she wanted to see it. I expected to find nothing socially valuable in this film. The President of the United States in this film was a Black man. It was done in such a wonderful taken-for-granted way. There was no discussion or mention of it. It was just the way it was. He was presented as an intelligent, capable individual, respected by all. This film went a long way in promoting a positive image of Blacks without especially trying to. I was happy that my daughter saw this and accepted it as a very normal situation.

Had she seen *Bulworth* it would have done a great deal of harm. I'm not sure I could have adequately explained that Blacks and women were shown in such a degrading way so as to make people understand that they were wrongly put in this position by capitalists who benefit from their misery. I don't know if the average American filmgoer is capable of inverting logic in this way. I certainly see myself as able to do so, but sadly it was too much of a stretch in *Bulworth*.

Thanks for listening.

Sincerely,

VM

New York City

From David Walsh

Dear VM,

I think there were many weaknesses in *Bulworth*. The vulgarity you refer to stems, I think, from Beatty's somewhat misguided notion that the rap culture is a direct emanation of popular feelings, something more "authentic," or whatever. I think Beatty is wrong in that. He is accommodating himself too much to what is a terribly oppressed, distorted situation. Nonetheless, I recognize what he was aiming at in this regard, and I think he was sincere in his effort.

Overall, I really don't agree with you. I think you are seeing *Bulworth* a little narrowly. And I don't agree with your view of aesthetics. You ask, "Is it acceptable that...?" and "Why not find..."? Stories are not written, or should not be written, according to this sort of prescription. This produces the worst sort of "political" art, where everything is pat and produced according to what "should" be. Given Beatty's history and reputation, his relationship with Nina seemed entirely reasonable to me. What I think of his choices in life and art is a different matter, but I believe it was a "realistic" choice to make her young and glamorous, all things considered.

I don't think the film suggested that the power elite is a Jewish power. It suggested that many of powerful figures in Hollywood are Jewish—which they are. So what? The Paul Sorvino character, and those at the businessman's luncheon, were not characterized as Jewish. I just don't agree with your approach. Beatty's film was refreshing because it chose to call things by their rightful names.

To compare *Deep Impact* favorably to *Bulworth* because it had a black president ... well, I'm not sure what to say. This leaves out of account, it seems to me, the general trajectory of the two films, their essential content and impact. *Bulworth* asserted that big business owns and controls the media and shapes the news in its interest, that politicians are subject to big business, that the great question in this country is social inequality, and that race and ethnicity are insignificant. Despite all the nonsense in the film, it made those points. *Deep Impact* is a thoroughly conformist view of American society, which presents the president as a great, honorable father of the people. Which film will have a more progressive impact? I leave it to you.

Sincerely,

D.Walsh

From VM

Dear Mr. Walsh:

Thanks for writing to me. I agree that Beatty's aim was commendable, to unmask what is really behind political rhetoric. However, in my

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estimation, sadly, the victims came out looking worse than their oppressors. I don't advocate any particular formula of political propaganda but at the same time there are certain points which should be conveyed by someone committed to a socialist perspective. It's O.K. that Nina was young and glamorous, what I'm trying to say, however, is that Beatty didn't go far enough to be commended the way he was commended. He starts off in one direction and then trips up and cancels out his own message. That's why I compared his film to the very mainstream *Deep Impact*. At least it achieves something by showing a Black man in quite a positive, although totally conformist, position as the President of the United States.

That is where we are right now so it is not detrimental for large numbers of people to see a Black man in a situation they've learned to hold in high esteem. For someone to challenge the social order they must first be able to master it. Things must happen step by step. Beatty's black characters were hardly capable of this. They were merely hoping to be included in the repressive capitalist system/American dream, an inclusion which will offer them little indeed. If Beatty set out to expose media and corporate control, and racism in America, he would have done so better by omitting the offensive comedy and substituting it with something more thought provoking and subtle. Don't you think that in the hands of another director this could have been achieved?

I don't understand what you meant when you said one of his points was to show that race and ethnicity were insignificant? From where does this social inequality stem if it is not based on race and ethnicity? He was successful in showing how marginalized blacks, because of their race, had become in this society. Rap music is an expression of this isolation by the mainstream and is ultimately a rejection of its bourgeois values. Perhaps you mean to say that in the capitalist system all individuals are divided into two classes according to their access to resources, race not being a determining factor. There are many subdivisions as well, along the lines of race, gender, etc. Wouldn't you agree?

I enjoyed your letter and am looking forward to reading your work and that of your organization on the Internet. Thanks so much for responding.

VM

Dear VM,

Thank you for responding.

I continue to feel that you missed the strength of the film somewhat. As I indicated in the original piece, the film had enormous artistic and political gaps. But what was its central thrust? Beatty's genuine, and in my view, legitimate, anger and disgust. He said things about the control of the media and the political parties by the wealthy that simply aren't said in America today. Isn't that significant? It was those liberating sentiments that I felt very strongly, over and above all the unclear and even wrongheaded notions present in the film.

Why has political life in this country been so stifling and stagnant in recent decades? The absence of any broad-based resistance to the dictates of big business, the worthlessness of the trade unions from the point of view of leading a struggle, the emergence of a profoundly conservative black petty-bourgeois layer committed to the profit system. Here was a film that cut through a great deal of that and hit at the essential question: social inequality.

You say: "From where does this social inequality stem if it is not based on race and ethnicity?" This is precisely the point. We do believe these are social issues, class issues and that race is, at heart, an insignificant matter. I don't believe the poor in South Central LA are poor primarily because they are black, but because they belong to the working class. How would you explain that one of the fastest growing social layers in American society is the black middle class? (Race is not *politically* insignificant, of course, in the present situation, it can't be ignored; but it cannot be the basis for any struggle that aims at radical social change.) It is of course forbidden to say this in the US today; everything is reduced to race, even in so-called radical circles. A revival of a *genuine socialist political culture* is, in our view, the key to finding a way out of the current political impasse.

Bulworth is far from being a perfect film, but it has an intensity and an urgency that is lacking from many contemporary works. I don't know what Beatty's political conceptions might be, but I think there are essential grains of truth in that film which one will ignore at one's peril.

I hope to hear from you again.

Sincerely,

D.Walsh

From VM

Dear Mr. Walsh:

I agree with you now about *Bulworth*... and I suppose it is time to move on to other things.

It is true that race causes people to evade what is really crucial: class issues. On all sides one finds that it is often impossible to move beyond it. An Algerian woman told me that often when she speaks to women's groups about the situation in Algeria, past or present, it always gets back to her being a woman of color and stops there. Sometimes in the beginning she states that she does not consider herself a woman of color, united with diverse peoples of the world on that basis, because such an idea reduces everything else. That usually causes an uproar and it is hard to get to say what she really intended to, she explained.

It seems that the media and public officials have a vested interest in diverting the public's attention to the issue of race. I am a Ph.D. student in sociology and can tell you that the focus of many students and faculty is just this.

VM

See Also:

Bulworth, directed by Warren Beatty, written by Warren Beatty and Jeremy Pikser:

A little of John Reed, after all

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