SOCRATES LOOKS LIKE ME!

BY CASEY WEI

In approaching writing a film review of Astra Taylor's What is Democracy? (2018), there are many opportunities to attempt answering her veritable prompt. It is a rhetorical framing device upon which her documentary, an expertly weaved essay of interviews, is constructed. Taylor travels around the globe to ask a cross-section of the world's population her titular question, and edits together 107-minutes of responses to present contrasting views of the word, nay, the concept, that most of us watching in a black-box theatre take for granted. It is a challenge to write about the film without engaging in the multi-faceted conversation she has constructed. Instead of jotting down notes during the screening of the film at VIFF, I voice-memoed the audio and transcribed what I could for reference.

The film begins outdoors under the Athenian sunshine, where Taylor and a small group of scholarly types engage in a hands-in-air-gesticulating discussion on democracy. Efimia Karakantza deduces it to a simple inquiry: "in the whole world of ancient philosophy, [is] the question of happiness." [1] She distills Plato's *Republic* into conversational shorthand, and through this logic of the origins of Western civilization, arrives at what we all already know in 2018, that "we live in a shattered, dismembered society….because of extreme economic inequality. And what we're faced with is the need to re-member this dismembered society." [2] The scene ends on this thesis, and the film travels directly to a Trump rally in Raleigh, North Carolina. In between location changes, Taylor occasionally presents blocks of texts from Plato to bridge what is being said, experienced, and lived in the present with an ancient text from 380 BC. From Athens to Raleigh, the quote reads: The greatest penalty for declining to rule is to be ruled by someone worse than oneself. [3] And in Raleigh, we are presented two young, sandy-blonde, tanned Trump supporters. In response to Karakantza's 'shattered, dismembered society,' the next phrase uttered in the film is: "Trump was probably the legal hand grenade that we could've thrown into the system." [4] Throughout the film, Taylor cleverly places these contrasting points of tension, these opposing voices, next to each other. It is an easy and ham-fisted means to present the skewed beliefs in America to show what democracy is not. An audience favorite is a scene where three Floridan teenagers are interviewed sitting outside on a bench (they look privileged, to say the least), and one complains about how, "if your parents make a certain amount of money, you're not going to get help from the government," [5] as her friend looks at her in disbelief, but unfortunately-reality overriding my appreciation of any satirical humour-democracy is shattered almost everywhere else in the world too, and the film isn't as US-centric as one would expect from a North American filmmaker (Taylor was born in Winnipeg, but works out of the US). Compared to her last film, Examined Life (2008), in which she interviews scholar and theorists on the subject of modernity via leisurely walks (probably appealing only to those with a Masters degree or higher), What is Democracy? thankfully presents the views and opinions of those who experience the word not as an idea to be discussed, but as a system that has excluded them. That gulf between theory and practice is a constant struggle in the ethics of representation, and in the medium of documentary filmmaking, Taylor succeeds in adopting a methodology that is in itself as democratic as one can get in 107-minutes. Aside from deep philosophical discussions with scholars like Karakantza, Cornel West, Wendy Brown, and Silvia Federici, Taylor also spends time with doctors at a hospital in Miami, a Greek community forced into administering their own pharmaceuticals, Hispanic textile-factory workers, refugees in Piraeus, an eloquent ex-con-cum-barber, and many others who speak on democracy from their subject position without.

This impressively inclusive collection of voices poses the great and overriding challenge that democracy faces. For instance, when the three doctors in Miami are asked by Taylor, "If you could cure the social body, what would you do?" they pause, and in unison, all agree, "Hands

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down, education. Public education." [6] This directly takes us to the next scene of African-American elementary school children who give us a reality check:

> Student 1: Teachers and the principal don't care about us and what we have to say because at the end of the day they're still gonna get their cheque. That's their favorite line, 'At the end of the day we still get paid, so it don't matter if you get an F or an A.'"
> Taylor: Do they say that to you?
> Students (in unison): Yes!
> Student 1: What they say to us all the time is, 'Go to college so you can do what you love', but you don't love what u do! [7]

What is Democracy? is a question of deep reflection for me, someone who's taken it upon herself to write about film, independently, for no reason other than the satisfaction of occupying a discursive space that does not exist, for exercising a muscle that has been activated somewhere sometime ago, but not enough practiced in her everyday. In an interview with *Vice*, Taylor says with laughter, "I love the canon. I love Marx. I love Plato. The 'old dead white men' are awesome. But let's bring them into this moment. So, Socrates. Socrates wouldn't look like "Socrates" today, you know. Maybe he'd look like me!" [8]

What is Democracy? prompts me to ask, what is STILLS? Because it is not asking me to review it in a traditional sense, and STILLS is not a typical film publication, I'm not compelled to point out the gently guiding cinematography, the poetics of certain moments or the humor in others, the use of archival and news footage, the sound design, etc. I'm not interested in comparing this film to others in the genre, and I'm not interested in championing it outside of its utilitarian and educational potentials. I didn't feel like it was too long or too short, but I didn't feel like it was a resolved length either, because it is a useful text to be revisited, because in it are reminders of what democracy is, has been, and could be. The film ends with Taylor and Federici in an Italian church, analyzing a ceiling mural which depicts the origins of merchant capitalism. This scene of the two women is cut up and placed strategically three times throughout the film, once near the start, once at about an hour in, and once more at the very end. Each time, more of the mural is revealed: everything from the phallic height of the buildings, to the hovering angels of charity, to the prisoners beneath the oligarchs, to the woman with a head in her lap, which Federici calls just plain "weird". What Taylor chooses to end with, through her conversation with Federici, is the introduction of a new idea-that the feminist revolution of the 70s which brought on the slogan, "The personal is political"', is where we can go to find democracy. "The sphere in which everyday life is reproduced is a political sphere...passes through our home, through our kitchen, and our bedroom, passes through the community." [9] It is a comforting thought to end on, it reminds me of why I do any of the things I do. Because at the end of the day, a bit exhausted, a bit caged, a bit deflated, I feel the potential of what sitting at home in front of a computer screen can manifest.

[1] What is Democracy? (2018), 1:45.
[2] Ibid, 4:20.
[3] Ibid, 4:30.
[4] Ibid, 5:24.
[5] Ibid, 52:40.
[6] Ibid, 1:02:48.
[7] Ibid, 1:06:54 (edited for brevity).
[8] https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/vbngyb/an-epic-conversation-on-astra-taylors-what-is-democracy
[9] What is Democracy? (2018), 1:41:16.

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With Silvia Federici in What is Democracy (2018) Dir. Astra Taylor

STILLS 7

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