Stories from the ‘war’ on drugs

FILM: Cocaine Unwrapped
Directed by Rachel Seifert
Dartmouth Films (2011)

Cocaine Unwrapped looks at one drug and its impact in two different worlds, the relatively wealthy west and the poorer southern hemisphere. In the process it tells several stories. The film travels from London to Baltimore and from Colombia to Bolivia. Ecuador and Mexico are also visited along the way. It examines the simple coca leaf and its production and transformation into cocaine. The film looks at drug mules, prisons, poverty, death squads, gang crime and its political impact. It is an eye-opening and riveting account of the devastating repercussions of the war on drugs. Above all it is a human story.

The film opens in London as we hear individual users talk about how they enjoy the drug and how it helps them on a night out. In Baltimore, Seifert casts her camera on the industrial devastation of the city; the rise in unemployment and the violence in Mexico. In so doing it takes us from capitalist countries in the North to developing countries in the South, from production to consumption, highlighting that the human suffering is at its most acute closest to where the production occurs. Director Rachel Seifert accounts for the environmental and human costs of the drug in Latin America and also the seemingly illogical way in which the ‘war on drugs’ is conducted. The film director Alejandro González Iñárritu specialises in films that tell multiple stories in one film. Amores Perros and 21 Grams are two of his best works. The seeming unrelated stories he depicts inevitably crash and collide. Cocaine Unwrapped takes a similar format, showing the stories of the casual user, the drug mule, the dealers, the displaced farmers in Colombia and the violence in Mexico. In so doing it takes us from capitalist countries in the North to developing countries in the South, from production to consumption, highlighting that the human suffering is at its most acute closest to where the production starts. Director Rachel Seifert accounts for the environmental and human costs of the drug in Latin America and also the seemingly illogical way in which the ‘war on drugs’ is conducted.

The film then tackles the ‘war on drugs’ and takes us to South America.

In Colombia 140,000 members of the police are fighting the ‘war on drugs.’ This is backed up with a para-military force and billions of dollars of ‘aid’ from the USA. The effects for small farmers in the Tumaco region are that their crops of chocolate, bananas and yucca plants are destroyed as indiscriminate aerial spraying occurs regularly. As local community leaders explain, the spraying results in ill health, economic stagnation and mass migration. An interview with the former president of Colombia, César Gaviria, succinctly outlines the social damage this ‘war on drugs’ causes: ‘...it destroys the lives of people who are not criminals and who are just trying to survive.’

Bolivia is taking a different approach. For 20 years the previous Bolivian Government, backed by the USA, waged a war against coca growers. This all changed in 2003 with the election of Evo Morales and the Movement for Socialism. The Government now allows the limited growth of the coca leaf. This is monitored by the growers themselves through the trade unions. It supports the farmers to diversify into other crops. As Morales himself explains, the coca leaf in its natural form is not cocaine, it is just a leaf. Indeed as a leaf it can be made into among other things herbal tea and creams for skin disorders, something Bolivia itself is keen to exploit.

However, as we see Bolivia abandoning the ‘war on drugs’ the film focuses on Mexico, in particular the town of Ciudad Juarez. A local journalist describes how the violence has escalated in recent years. 50 freshly dug graves are shown, ready for more casualties as the conflict between the army and local gangs as well as inter-gang rivalry escalates further.

There are suggestions that the ‘war’ in Mexico against drugs has been used as a smokescreen to hide the abuse of the democratic process. The current President of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, was elected following a suspect election at which the final ballot was hotly disputed. The Mexican Government has sent in the army to deal with the problem. Given that soldiers are not trained in the subtleties of civilian policing, this militarised intervention has led to an escalation of the conflict. A situation of mounting human rights abuses pervades as ruthless drug cartels resort to increasing and horrifying levels of violence.

The film director Alejandro González Iñárritu specialises in films that tell multiple stories in one film. Amores Perros and 21 Grams are two of his best works. The seeming unrelated stories he depicts inevitably crash and collide. Cocaine Unwrapped does not have answers but it holds up a clear mirror to the effects of the ‘war on drugs’.

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