

Profit and Nothing But

A review by Paul T. Miller

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Profit and Nothing But, 2001

Director: Raoul Peck

Argent Marchandise Argent

Duration: 52 minutes

Available in VHS only

Distributor: First Run Icarus Films

\$390.00 – Sale, \$75.00 – Rental

Profit and Nothing But is a critical documentary about the emerging global economy and how the capitalist system is responsible for the misery of the world's "wretched of the earth". Director Raoul Peck, known best for his award winning film *Lumumba*, shot much the film in his country of birth, Haiti, where for a short time he was Minister of Culture (1996-97). Beginning with a home-video quality scene, a heavy handed voice-over insists, "They come from a country that technically doesn't exist" and that "capital has won. Capital has swept the board". Interspersed throughout the film are archived news clips of riotous crowds and violent acts, the speeches of foreign leaders, commentaries by various intellectuals (most notably Emanuel Wallerstein) and interviews with everyday Haitians in Port au Prince, all in an attempt to describe and explain just how capitalism functions and how corrupt the system is.

Regrettably, Peck succeeds only in engaging in arguments that fail to really uncover any facts of substance with regard to global capitalism's darker side. Unlike Stephanie Black's 2003 documentary *Life and Debt* that also opens on the beach of a Caribbean country, Peck's film takes hold of its subject matter like a sledge hammer and bashes the viewer with opinion, metaphor and sloganeering in hopes that it will turn us into conscientious objectors to globalization. For example, the film asserts that the world is run by a bunch of disturbed people who are terrified at the thought of losing their fortunes. Whether or not this is true, the film gives absolutely no information, statistical or anecdotal, to back this claim up.

Furthermore, whereas Black's film spends significant time interviewing banana growers, dairy farmers and agricultural producers, it also devotes a great deal of in-depth coverage to policy making in order to give the viewer a sense of how globalization is sinking developing countries like Jamaica where the film is shot.

In contrast, *Profit and Nothing But* only scratches the surface of global policy making in its interviews. In particular, although agronomist Gerald Mathurin makes the observation that "triumphant capitalism" has succeeded in enriching the West while leaving much of the Third World in abject poverty, Peck fails to follow up on his statement with concrete facts that would show viewers how this was done. After watching Peck's film, one will not necessarily know anything new about the global capitalist system.

The strength of Peck's film comes from the interviews he incorporates. Especially vexing is Bellomy's assessment that "I see no future in the life I'm living in this country." He continues, "If you are born into a noble family, you'll stay noble. But if you're not rich, you'll always have to take a back seat." This is, in essence, the point Peck is trying to make. The problem is, he couches the narrative voice in hyperbolic lofty language that fails to spear the crux of the problem. For example, Peck notes that the idea for commissioning the film is "reconstructing reality in all its complexities so that the greatest number of people may understand the world we live in." Unfortunately, *Profit and Nothing But* contains too few examples and lacks enough specificity to enable viewers to understand exactly how globalization impacts Haiti much less the complexity of the global capitalist system.

Two specific examples serve to show how *Profit and Nothing But* could have been a much stronger, more edifying film. At one point it asks who will make the connection between diamonds sold in Antwerp and weapons sold at the arms faire in Haiti. Although a good question, the answer should have been, Raoul Peck will and he should have gone on to show the connection in specific detail. Next, throughout the film references are made to class struggle, capitalism and the global economy. However, never once does the film mention specific institutions or policies governing this system. Had Peck explained the workings of or details behind the Washington Consensus, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization or, specifically for Haiti, the Caribbean Basin Initiative, one may have had at least a chance to understand the role of these different institutions and how policies function within the system of globalization.

The primary message that one comes away with after viewing *Profit and Nothing But* is that capitalism is the cause for grinding poverty in Haiti specifically and in the developing world in general. Unfortunately, one is left with very few concrete reasons why or what to do about it.

Black, Stephanie. (2003). *Life and Debt*. New Yorker Video.
<http://www.mac.doc.gov/CBI/webmain/intro.htm> (the Caribbean Basin Initiative)