

Documentary film analysis: dark days (2000)



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The documentary film *Dark Days*, conceived and filmed by Marc Singer, is one of the modern classics of the genre. The film presents little known darker realities of the most prosperous city in the world New York. The usage of rudimentary cinematic devices and techniques is consistent with the central theme of the film. The film captures the lives of half a dozen homeless Americans taking shelter in the abandoned sections of a railway tunnel. Adding irony to the situation is the fact that this underground dungeon is within the vicinity of Manhattan, which is home to the most powerful and prosperous business institutions in the world. This essay will delve into various aspects of the film *Dark Days* by way of relating them to the broader social, cultural and political contexts.

Firstly, homelessness in the United States can be traced back a long way. The direct and circumstantial evidence for this is available in literary and performing arts of the last one and half centuries. Prominent among the artists who dealt with this subject are Walt Whitman, Jack London, Charlie Chaplin, Woody Guthrie, John Dos Passos, Bill Mauldin, Jack Kerouac and John Steinbeck. In the early twentieth century slang, homeless people were casually referred to as 'hoboes', which is a term of denigration. These so-called hoboes had a reputation for being barbaric, wild, lazy and unscrupulous. The first detailed representation of these people living on the fringes of society started appearing after the end of the Civil War. We further learn that

" following the Civil War, a legion of men traveled the country with no visible means of support. Some earned the sobriquet " hobo," which they embraced it as a nickname for a migrant laborer, that is, a " hoe boy." Whatever the

origin, sociologists of the 1920s used the phrase “ hoboemia” to describe a subaltern lifestyle embraced by white working-class males. When congregating in places such as Chicago’s “ main stem,” they forged a swaggering counterculture that defied domesticity. They embraced the labor radicalism of the Wobblies, even while they were parodied by vaudeville and motion picture comics.” (Lookingbill, 2005, p. 314)

During these early days, homelessness in the United States was largely an issue of social class and was caused by the huge disparities in wealth distribution between the top ten percent of the population and the rest. But in the last century, the issue has grown to encompass factors of racial discrimination, drug abuse and homosexuality. Of the half a dozen characters featured in the film, four of them are black (one woman and three men), the other two are white Americans. Despite comprising only 13 percent of the total U. S. Population, blacks outnumber whites among the homeless people, as Dark Days implicitly demonstrates. This disproportionality is a result of historical injustices committed against the African American community, who are subject to discrimination of various forms even today. The following passage gives a sociological perspective on different types of factors that cause homelessness:

“ Factors include larger societal trends and changes that affect broad segments of a population. These include changes in housing markets and land use, employment opportunities, the quality and relevance of public education, institutional supports for people with disabilities, and discriminatory policies of several varieties. Other conditions and circumstances that make particular people particularly vulnerable to

homelessness include various disabilities (for example, mental illness, developmental disabilities, and physical disabilities), illnesses, illiteracy, and addictions. They may also include personal circumstances such as domestic violence, too many to support on one income, having no family to rely on (for example, because one has been in foster care, or because of familial abuse), apartment condemnation, or fire, flood, hurricane, or war." (Burt, 2003, p. 1267)

The other striking aspect of the documentary is the indomitable fighting spirit shown by the homeless people. They may scrape through a living by scouring garbage dumps, but they do share a sense of comraderie with their fellow tunnel dwellers. This is evident from the way Ralph offers to help out Dee when the latter's house gets burnt down in an act of retaliation. It is also touching to see that these people, who don't know when they will see their next meal, still manage to keep pet dogs and feed them too. Such qualities exhibited by them serves to remind the audience that they are very much part of the wider humanity. Futhermore, some of them are repentant about the mistakes they committed in life, which had even led to prolonged jail terms. The audience can relate to their life stories; if not in its severity and detail, at least in its outline.

As for the technical aspects of the film, while this subject does not lend itself to conventional cinema, it is rather well-suited to the documentary genre. The entire length of the film is shot in black-and-white 16mm film, giving it the film-noir look and feel that was seen in the 1930s and 1940s. The darkness pervading the railway tunnel and the poverty and squalor of living conditions there further adds to the noir effect. The fact that some of the

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characters in the film did occasionally handle the camera adds authenticity without making it amateurish.

And finally, the film ends on a positive note when the featured characters get temporary government subsidized accommodation. Statistics pertaining to the last few years have also shown a reduction in the number of homeless people in the United States. For example, close to 1.6 million people were forced to make use of emergency shelters and temporary housing at certain times in the last couple of years. But the good news is that during the same period the number of chronically homeless fell 28 percent. Furthermore,

“ Looking first at a snapshot, the report found that the number of people on the street or in a shelter on a single night in January 2007 was 671, 888, a drop from 759, 101 in January 2006 and 763, 010 in January 2005. Most were temporarily homeless. The report found there were 123, 833 chronically homeless people in shelters and on the street on that single night in January 2007, compared with 155, 623 in 2006 and 175, 914 in 2005 - a decrease of about 52, 000 between 2005 and 2007.” (Fagan, July 30, 2008, p. 3)

These are positive developments indeed and the Department of Housing and Urban Development has to be commended for bringing about this improvement. But still, seen in absolute terms, the number of temporary and chronically homeless continues to be worrisome. With the onset of economic recession last year, people in the low socio-economic demographic group have become more vulnerable than before. Considering that many families lost their homes in the recent mortgage crisis, a better regulated financial market system is also the need of the hour. A concerted effort on part of

related government agencies, elected representatives and not-for-profit organizations is essential to bring a lasting solution to the issue of homelessness.

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