

# Cultural Review

## HRIC GOES TO THE MOVIES

This summer, HRIC staff reviewed a number of documentaries that address the issues of trade, globalization, capitalism and the WTO's impact on the developing world. Some recently released films depict the impact of globalization on the lives of China's people, but because of the limited distribution of these films, HRIC focused instead on films more widely available to the general public on video and DVD. A brief list of recommended films relating to China is appended, in the event that these films should become more readily accessible.

### Life and Debt

**Directed by Stephanie Black. 2001;  
New Yorker Films, 2003.**



REVIEWED BY JENNIFER WALLING

Whether depicting the beauty of Jamaica and the effects of the tourist industry; the impact of colonization and the subsequent reign of the IMF and World Bank over the country's economy; the desire of Jamaicans for economic and political self-determination; or the potential of the country's agricultural and manufacturing sectors, *Life and Debt* explores the structural effects of globalization on the haves and the have-nots of the world's economy. Interviews with Jamaican academics, politicians, business owners, factory workers, former Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley and IMF Deputy Director Stanley Fischer draw a direct line from the country's need for funds at independence in 1962 to its rising debt (\$7 billion in 2001), the increasing control of the nation's economy by a few powerful nations, and Jamaica's inability to increase its exports and develop a sustainable economy.

A disturbing and thought-provoking pic-

ture, *Life and Debt* is filled with examples of Jamaica's success being blocked by stronger economic forces. The country's thriving dairy industry was ruined starting in 1992 when trade barriers were lowered to meet the conditions of an Inter-American Development Bank, causing the importation of cheaper powdered milk from Europe. Jamaican banana farmers' access to a tariff-free European market was prevented by a 1999 WTO ruling prompted by a U.S. complaint at the behest of the powerful Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte companies. Similar examples are given in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors.

The film ends with long riot sequences, as well as shots of a community at work in its garden. An anonymous Jamaican woman states that "we are trying to make ourselves self-reliant and self-sufficient [by growing our own food]." *Life and Debt* successfully explains why globalization is not benefiting us all. The next step is to understand what can be done to address this issue.

### The Corporation

**Directed by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbot. 2003; Zeitgeist Video, 2005.**



REVIEWED BY STEPHANIE WANG

The documentary film *The Corporation* makes its point of view known at the opening visual wordplay: corporations, the "dominant institution of our time," are simply bad apples.

Perhaps because it is based on the book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* by Joel Bakan, a law professor, the film focuses on the legal architecture of the corporation as the enabling vehicle for predatory and unethical practices rather than its role as a cipher for global capitalism. The filmmakers frame deplorable acts of environmental degradation, public health endangerment and labor abuses around a mock psychological profile, so that the corporation, which enjoys

the status of legal persons, is presented as a sociopathic monster.

One of the more intriguing characters to emerge in the film is Ray Anderson, the CEO of Interface, the world's largest commercial carpet manufacturer. Anderson was formerly as evasive and purposefully oblivious as other CEOs about the grave human rights and ecological abuses perpetrated by their companies in the name of quick profits for shareholders. When he was compelled to draft a response to internal company concerns about Interface's environmental and social policies, Anderson began reading the book *The Ecology of Commerce* by Paul Hawken and was jolted by a self-described epiphany. Anderson indicts himself and other corporate leaders as plunderers, and embarks on a unique path of sustainability for his company. However, even Anderson's seemingly sincere turnaround hits a hollow note—in the film, corporate social responsibility and other policies that aim to rebuild public trust are viewed as little more than sly public relations spin-doctoring.

Those expecting this film to review corporate structure and influence with a cool eye may consider it to have a leftward bias. The film uses carefully chosen examples to demonstrate some of the most appalling instances of corporate excess, both negligent and criminal. The catastrophic Union Carbide disaster at Bhopal, India, the creepy psychological manipulation of child consumers by Disney and other corporations with saccharine images, and the collusion of IBM with the Nazis in organizing the Holocaust, all have their place along the spectrum of corporate malfeasance.

Yet the filmmakers are able to present a more nuanced picture through neat transitions that seem to anticipate logical (and complex) questions. If corporations and their appendages (traders, marketing strategists, etc.) are truly "vultures" trading in devastation, Noam Chomsky steps in to assist those who may be wondering how to look at their corporate partners, relatives and friends by recognizing the distinction between the institution and individual. As the son of working-class auto workers, documentary filmmaker Michael Moore discusses how his community never considered individually assessing its collective impact on the environment or society. And the film closes cleverly by offering hope in the form of a tentative social compact: if

the corporation is all-pervasive, accordingly all of us ought to take responsibility for our impact on the world.

## The Yes Men

**Directed by Chris Smith, Dan Ollman, and Sarah Price. 2003; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2005.**



REVIEWED BY CHARLIE MCATEER

Human rights advocates are constantly searching for effective methods of holding global organizations and corporations accountable. How to reveal, for example, that China's accession to the World Trade Organization may have brought increased investment, but that human rights improvements have not followed? A couple of activists who call themselves the Yes Men suggest a new strategy for holding the WTO's feet to the fire and highlighting globalization's downsides—pranksterism. *The Yes Men* documentary explores their hilarious adventures and outrageous cons that have brought grief to many boardrooms and PR departments.

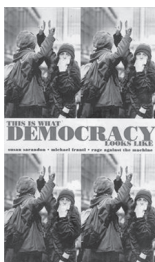
The high jinks began in 1999 with a spoof website—GATT.org—that many people took for the real thing. Soon the Yes Men, Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, were receiving inquiries about trade agreements and invitations to speak at conferences around the globe. The film follows them as they shop for thrift store suits and plan preposterous power point presentations that they give at meetings from Salzburg to Sydney as WTO representatives. Their lampoons of the global trade system are intended to shock, but audiences show little surprise, often nodding in agreement with their outlandish suggestions. At one stop, they propose a system where citizens can sell their votes to the highest bidder. At another, they announce that the WTO has been too favorable to corporations, to the detriment of poor people, and will voluntarily disband. Several

newswires and politicians subsequently report this as fact.

What some critics denounce as lying, the Yes Men call “identity correction,” an entertaining way of exposing the real consequences of unrestrained corporate power. Either way, their stunts are an ingenious way of provoking corporations and spotlighting important and complex trade issues that the mainstream press often ignores. The Yes Men stress on their website (<http://www.theyesmen.org>) that pranks are no substitute for other forms of advocacy, such as direct action, lawsuits and letter-writing. But this film proves that pranks can be creative and effective weapons in the advocates' arsenal.

## This Is What Democracy Looks Like

**Directed by Jill Freidberg and Rick Rowley. 2000; Allegro Corporation, 2005.**



REVIEWED BY CAI JIQUAN

*This is What Democracy Looks Like* captures the demonstrations against the 1999 World Trade Organization summit in Seattle. This compelling 72-minute documentary, cut from more than 350 hours of video footage shot by more than 100 activists who were present at the demonstrations, reveals the “other side” of the protests. The news media, for the most part, ignored the activists' peaceful stance and represented them as aggressors. From violent encounters with the Seattle police to moving interviews with peaceful protestors, this film portrays the range of concerns and perspectives of the 50,000 demonstrators from all over the world who gathered together in Seattle to voice their discontent with WTO policies. This documentary truly embodies the spirit of activism and the strength of solidarity while delivering an intensely political and emotional account of a week that changed the world.

OTHER FILMS WORTH NOTING:

## Antonio Negri—A Revolt That Never Ends

**Directed by Alexandra Wetz and Andreas Pichler. 2004.**

This film traces one man's experiences with Italy's radical left-wing movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

## A Decent Factory

**Directed by Thomas Balmés. First Run/Icarus Films. 2004.**

Two advisors on business ethics and corporate social responsibility investigate working conditions at a Nokia factory in China.

## The Long March

**Directed by John D. Liu. 2002.**

A group of concerned citizens in Chengdu, China organizes the community to clean up the polluted Min River.

## Mardi Gras: Made in China

**Directed by David Redmond. 2004.**

This documentary examines globalization by tracing the manufacturing of beads by young female workers in Fuzhou, China, interviewing the factory manager and owner, and finally showing images of the workers to bead-wearing partiers in the U.S.

## The Men Who Would Conquer China

**Directed by Nicken Torrens and Jane St. Vincent Welch. 2004.**

A New York investment banker and his Hong Kong business partner attempt to take advantage of an exceptional business opportunity in China.

## The World

**Directed by Jia Zhangke. 2005.**

This film follows the lives of young workers at a Beijing theme park that features replicas of world landmarks.