

Attica, Moving Documentary of Riot: Comment on Stills

By VINCENT CANBY, LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

The place is the Attica, N.Y., prison on a September day in 1971. The prisoners mill around the yard, improvising tents, sleeping, looking uneasily at cameras, which, equipped with telescopic lenses, can see them far more clearly than they can see the cameras.

The prisoners at Attica are in the middle of rebellion. They've issued a manifesto demanding reforms dealing with treatment of blacks and Puerto Ricans, with food, medical care, education. Says one prisoner: "They [the prison authorities] think we're just shucking and jiving." Says another: "We're not advocating violence. We're advocating communication and understanding."

Four days after the rebellion began, troopers armed with shotguns and rifles, some using dum-dum bullets, stormed the walk to secure what is genteelly called the correctional facility, leaving 32 inmates and 11 of their hostages dead, most from shots fired by the state police.

"Attica," produced and directed by Cinda Firestone, who also edited the film with Tucker Ashworth, is an exceptionally moving, outraged recollection of that terrible event. It's a documentary record of the event itself, the conditions that helped prompt it, and some of the things that have (and haven't) happened since. Though it asks questions that go unanswered, it is surprisingly temperate in tone.

"Attica" opened yesterday at the First Avenue Screening Room and it is, like "I. F. Stone's Weekly," a superior example of committed film making.

The thing that made Attica such a consciousness-raising event is preserved on film in the voices of the prisoners, both during and after the event, in interviews with the hostages, and in coverage of the official inquiries that followed it. We see it in the unity of the prisoners, in the

discipline they maintained during the fruitless negotiations with correctional officials, in the faces of civilians who served on the unofficial "observers' committee," as well as in the faces of the men who made the decision to retake the prison by force.

Does a commitment to a desperate cause make a man lean and strong? Does representing an established system make another man look sort of swollen, overfed, the way the sheriff of Nottingham is always portrayed? I was beginning to think so while watching "Attica" until we are presented an interview with one especially articulate, passionately angry black prisoner who is in fact, almost plump. Stereotypes do not hold in "Attica."

Nor is its anger self-defeating. One of the most moving sequences in the film is composed of interviews with the members of the family of one black prisoner who, post-rebellion, has apparently embarked on a self-improvement binge. "You wouldn't be able to walk into my cell, for all the books I got," he has written his sister.

Eloquence keeps turning up in the midst of jargon, and there is nothing so eloquent as the last line of the film, spoken on the soundtrack by an ex-inmate who would shake the public out of its historic disinterest in penal reform. "Wake up," he says, "because nothing comes to a sleeper but a dream."

ATTICA, directed and produced by Cinda Firestone; edited by Cinda Firestone and Tucker Ashworth; cameramen, Roland Barnes, Jay Lamarch, Mary Lampson, Jesse Goodman, Carol Stoin and Kevin Keating; distributed by Attica Films, Inc. Running time: 80 minutes. At the First Avenue Screening Room, First Avenue at 61st Street. This film has not been rated.