Journal of American Studies of Turkey
8 (1998) : 73-80.

Bulworth: The Hip-Hop Nation Confronts Corporate Capitalism A Review Essay

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Co-written, directed by, and starring Warren Beatty, *Bulworth* (1998) is a scathing political satire that ranks with Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963). While Kubrick skewered assumptions about nuclear strategy at the height of the Cold War, Beatty indicts the current corporate manipulation of American politics. *Bulworth* challenges the reigning capitalist mystique through a tragi-comedy that blends manifesto with farce and the serious with slapstick, in a format that is as enlightening as it is entertaining. The film is a mix of genres and stereotypes, common to mass-marketed movies, that Beatty nonetheless recasts into a radical message. He calls for democratic socialism and heralds the black urban underclass as its vanguard in a manner reminiscent of Herbert Marcuse's formulation of a generation ago.

The opening scene of *Bulworth* establishes what Beatty sees as the fundamental malaise of American politics today—that the rich rule the republic. The eponymous protagonist, Senator Jay Billington Bulworth, played by Beatty himself, is the case in point. The incumbent Democratic senator from California has cynically abandoned his former liberal principals in the wake of the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s that marked the demise of the New Deal legacy. Even his pompous three-part name suggests not only a prominent pedigree but also a pandering politician, one full of "bull."

During the last days of the 1996 primary campaign, Bulworth suffers a crisis of faith in his bid for renomination. As the camera pans the wall of his elegantly appointed office at the Capitol, photographs of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X shaking hands, Rosa Parks, Huey Newton, Robert Kennedy, and a younger, idealistic Bulworth appear. The radical promise of the 1960s is contrasted with the vacuous words of his generic campaign speech—"We stand at the doorstep of a new millennium . . ." Bulworth's hollow rhetoric rings reminiscent of President Bill Clinton's own over-used cliché of "building a bridge to the twenty-first century."

Indeed, the film attacks the Democratic Party's recent rightward drift. Like Clinton, Bulworth's knee-jerk criticism of affirmative action, welfare, and the national government play on the platitude that what is needed is "a hand up, not a hand out." The empty rhetoric is that of pollsters, publicists, and pundits that caters to the new conservative majority. The "triangulation" of policy—the midpoint between Democrats and Republicans—that consultant Dick Morris shrewdly plotted for Clinton is the geometry of power.

Agonized by moral hypocrisy, a tearful Bulworth remains rooted to his desk chair, unable to eat or sleep for days. In a McLuhanesque moment, the medium becomes the message. The

senator is reduced to channel surfing between hypnotic images of his superficial speech, naked women, professional wrestling, and other Pavlovian diversions. What Newton Minon, the former Federal Communications Commissioner, called the "wasteland of television" is a modern day bread and circus, an opiate of bourgeois culture. "I consume, therefore I am." Image is reality.

The suave, handsome Beatty plays on his own persona in portraying the linkage between politician and actor, Washington and Hollywood, that Ronald Reagan so effectively blurred. Beatty at once warns and beckons. What the voter sees is not what he gets; politics is artifice. For example, Bulworth and his ironically named wife, Constance, appear for the inevitable "family values" photo-opportunity. The depiction of the handsome, loving couple is, however, fraudulent, not unlike the troubled marriages of John and Jackie Kennedy, and Bill and Hillary Clinton. Their teen-age daughter refuses to participate; Bulworth is oblivious to his spouse; and she is sleeping with his opponent.

In despair and desperate, Bulworth hires a mobster to arrange his assassination, which is code named "the weekend research project." He also makes a contract with a corrupt lobbyist to block insurance reform in return for a $10,000,000 policy on his life payable to his daughter. The mobster, a hitman with feelings, is confused; the lobbyist, the truly nefarious character, is gleeful. A gangster genre is added to the theme of spiritual *angst* with invigorating effect on the story. The didacticism of the movie is leavened by the conventional spectacle of a mystery replete with mistaken identity, car chases, femme fatale, and suprise ending.

Through the last weekend of the California primary, Bulworth not only is dogged by his own disgust with sham politics but fearful of being killed. The macabre humor works well as his aides, Murphy and Feldman, the quintessential Irish and Jewish politicos, try to give Bulworth's outrageous behavior the correct "spin." Oliver Platt's riveting performance of the cocaine-snorting Murphy is a model of modern Machiavellianism.

At Grace A.M.E. Church in South Central Los Angeles, a distraught Bulworth abruptly cuts short his prepared address and tells the parishioners the truth. African Americans don't vote enough or contribute much money to the parties, and that's why Democrats don't care about blacks any more than Republicans do. Besides, whites don't like the way blacks supported O.J. Simpson in the trial in which he was acquitted of murdering his white wife. Pleased with his blunt honesty, Bulworth remarks to himself, "That was good, really good." Appropriately his repentance and regeneration begin in the black church, a center of social activism since slave times.

Despite the recognition of the severe problems of the ghetto, the movie celebrates the vitality of black urban culture. Much to the consternation of Bulworth's handlers, three young women from the inner-city, including the alluring Nina (played by Halle Berry), join his entourage. After the newly honest Bulworth outrages Jewish moguls in Beverly Hills and affluent Protestants in Pasadena, Nina guides Bulworth's odyssey through the netherworld of Los Angeles.

At Jackie's, an after-hours club, Bulworth is misidentified as first Clint Eastwood and then George Hamilton. The confusion is not only a wry comment on celebrity culture, but on the racial generalization that members of the other group look alike—"can't tell them apart." The scene further reflects the large disconnection between the inner-city club-goers and the politicians in power. Bulworth's time and energy have always been spent with the rich in

Beverly Hills. As a result, he is alienated from the plight of the ghetto. In turn, inner-city residents are divorced from their senator, because they lack money and therefore a political voice.

Unfazed, the liberated Bulworth enthusiastically joins in the Dionysian ecstasy of song, dance, and intoxication. Amidst the company of virile men and sensual women, he is miraculously transformed from a duplicitous politician into a rapping home boy. As Murphy remarks in consternation, "The Senator is rhyming!" Bulworth has become the hipster, what Norman Mailer hailed during the 1950s as the "white Negro." The viewer feels that, removed from his political world of wealth, power, and obsession with image, Bulworth the club-goer is finally able to act as he pleases, rather than as the puppet of the moneyed elite. His shift reflects not only the rebirth of his social conscience, but his own personal rebirth.

Much of the hilarity and iconoclasm of the movie comes from standing the normal order of things on its head, the world turned upside down. Bulworth's fascination with the pulsating hip-hop scene, embodied by the seductive Nina, plays with the stereotypes of excessive black sexuality. The movie suggests, however, that African-Americans have long served as the cultural repository of whites' repressed fears and projected fantasies, including Bulworth's and the viewers'. Indeed Beatty makes fun of his own public reputation as a lover (including partners ranging from Julie Christie during the 1960s to Madonna in the 1990s, among numerous others). When the opportunity to consummate his relationship with Nina finally arrives, the exhausted Bulworth instead falls asleep, snoring loudly.

Bulworth's tense encounter with Nina's protective brother Darnell is punctuated with a Derrida-like deconstruction of the epithet "nigger." What had been the word that encapsulated white supremacy and black subordination—the intended dehumanization and objectification of slavery and Jim Crow—has been reappropriated by the victim as a symbol of defiance and resistance, particularly in rap music. The encounter is brief but instructive: the word is still fraught with explosive meaning; the context in which it is used and by whom is all important. When Nina bolsters Bulworth's confidence with the words, "You're my nigger," she expresses romantic endearment as well as racial solidarity.

Bulworth's adventures in the 'hood further expose *de facto* racial segregation, especially the distance of the white middle class from the black underclass as well as that of politicians from the people. The Kerner Commission's jeremiad in 1968 that the United States was two separate societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal, remains, as it has for centuries, the country's central contradiction. In a mock professorial tone, the twenty-six-year-old Nina, whose parents were Black Panthers, lectures the sixty-year-old Bulworth on how the erosion of the manufacturing sector and the export of jobs through free trade policy has devastated the black worker and weakened black leadership.

L.D., the South Central gangster, explains the drug epidemic and violence in his community, which he exploits as a "cutting-edge entrepreneur," in terms of economic erosion and family breakdown. The concept of entrepreneurship highlights a major American contradiction. In a capitalist economy, the ruling class equates wealth with success yet the construct itself is elitist and exclusive. The ghetto is so far removed from mainstream money-making, lacking the resources of capital and education, that it has produced few conventional entrepreneurs of significant stature. The capitalist version of "entrepreneur" is a creation of a white-dominated corporate elite; L.D.'s definition of "entrepreneur" is a product of his disfranchisement from the world of capital. Free market advocates consequently condemn the niche business of drug-

dealing as illegitimate while simultaneously fostering an underground criminal economy that has resulted in high rates of black incarceration. The theme of the racial isolation of the ghetto may well be a page taken from the books of sociologist William Julius Wilson.

Beatty's advocacy of racial justice is sanctioned in the movie by no less a radical than Amiri Baraka, poet and playwright. Baraka plays an aged homeless man, the flotsam of urban America, who is Bulworth's guardian spirit. This muse exhorts the senator, "You gotta be a spirit . . . the spirit needs to sing . . . don't be a ghost." Transfigured by his re-education, Bulworth emerges as a swaggering rapper in sunglasses, wool cap, baggy shorts, and high-top sneakers.

The theme of identity flows throughout the film. As a white politician who has embraced a certain black identity since his renaissance, Bulworth provides a transition between the white world of power and the black disfranchised world. The French historian Jacques LeGoff argues that language and memory are key components of national identity. Thus, in embracing a rap-artist style of dress and language through musical lyrics, Bulworth creates a new identity as an honorary member of the black cultural nation portrayed in the film. The black nation appears separate and unequal from the official American nation, whose members are rich, powerful, and white. Because multiple cultures exist in the United States, in generalized terms the white, wealthy nation does not represent the interests of the black, poorer nation.

Beatty uses language to provide the nexus between the two. Because formal, traditional English is the language of the elite oppressor, the ghetto has deconstructed this language in order to recreate in its place a new language, manifested in dress, speech, and lyrics, that expresses its identity. When he spoke official English, Bulworth spoke the language of the oppressor (corporate capitalism) and was therefore disconnected from his black constituents. However, in embracing the reconstructed English of the ghetto, Bulworth is able finally to communicate with the underclass in a number of ways. Clothing and jiving represent signals of communication, and, when combined with rap music, enable him to reach out to those left behind. Breaking free from corporate interests, he acts on behalf of the ghetto; previously his political promises rang hollow because of the role of campaign contributions.

In choosing a new form of communication, Bulworth's words and actions become foreign to the white ruling elite, thereby alienating him from them. Thus, it appears at first that Bulworth is incapable of uniting the two nations; he must choose one or the other. Nevertheless, his relationship with Nina provides one means for Bulworth to live in, and speak for, both nations. He also extends the theme to a larger scale. While sitting in the living room of Nina's family, Bulworth takes a Marxist approach and focuses on class divisions. He proclaims that poor whites and blacks share a similar plight, but are divided along constructed racial lines by the white moneyed elite.

Beatty shows good-humored verve in his silliness, but his cross-racial role serves a serious purpose. He wins over a threatening gang of armed boys with ice cream and uses his political power to fend off police harassment of the "lil' gangstas." The beating of black motorist Rodney King in May 1991 that sparked a racial conflagration in Los Angeles is a reminder of how volatile relations between the police and African-Americans are. Again Beatty emphasizes the distance between the ruling class and black people. The movie may romanticize the ghetto, but it also warns of its problems.

At the vanguard, as it were, of the rising hip-hop nation, Bulworth reappears in the last days of the California campaign and "tells it like it is." Rapping all the time, he explains that in politics "money talks, people walk." He indicts the legal "soft campaign" money that allows banking, insurance and oil interests to make unlimited political contributions. ("One man, one vote, now is that really real? The name of our game is let's make a deal.") As a case in point, during the fall of 1999, Republicans in Congress defeated the McCain-Feingold bill, a bipartisan effort at campaign finance reform. As Bulworth puts it, "Congress doesn't have a clue."

Instead, Bulworth calls for "socialism—that dirty word" and redistribution of the wealth. Indeed, if American political dialogue were truly open, discourse about socialism would be possible. Because money rules the republic, the word "socialism" has taken on a forbidden quality within the political establishment. To use the word (let alone "liberalism") is to commit political suicide, says conventional wisdom. Here, Bulworth exhibits courage in denouncing concentrated wealth, and the polls skyrocket in his favor.

Pundits and consultants Murphy and Feldman are proven wrong. Lacking principle and lusting for power, these operatives adjust according to the polls, jump on the Bulworth bandwagon, and take credit for the Senator's transformation. The film condemns more than special interest campaign contributions; it critiques the political culture personified by Murphy and Feldman: the opportunism and expediency, corruption and pandering, and dishonesty and deceit.

A sterile politics alienates Bulworth, so he embraces the vitality of hip-hop. Later asked on national television why he used so much profanity in his rap, he retorts that the true profanity is "the rich getting richer, richer." He denounces the media monopoly—"free speech is not free"—and laments those left out of the current economic boom, including the 45 million Americans without health insurance and 25 percent of the African American population living in poverty. As technicians attempt to cut him off the public airways, Bulworth explains that the white elite has purposely driven a wedge between the races in order to frustrate an equitable society.

One notorious example of race baiting with its long and infamous history, which the movie might have cited, was in the 1988 presidential race. Lee Atwater, a top Republican stategist, concocted the "Willy Horton ad" that charged Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis with leniency toward a black rapist and murderer who assaulted a white couple.

Bulworth calls not only for the economic levelling of society, but for the abolition of racial categorization. Carrying the current academic interest in the social construction of race to a hilarious extreme, Bulworth proposes the elimination of "whiteness." "Whoa!" remarks one of Nina's amazed relatives in South Central. A general copulation, Bulworth raps, will leave everyone the same color. A reporter, reflecting the media's obsession with sexual scandal since the Gary Hart-Donna Rice exposé during the 1980s, asks, "Have you committed adultery?" With the use of humor, Beatty again raises the emotional connection between race and sex that has been central to the ideology of white supremacy. Indeed, opponents of the antebellum abolitionists and Civil Rights Movement a century later direly warned of the evil of "amalgamation" and "miscegenation."

Not unexpectedly the film ends tragically despite the ground swell of electoral support for Bulworth's populism. A happy ending to a tale of democratic socialism and racial justice in

modern America is, of course, quite premature. Bulworth is shot as he and Nina reaffirm their romantic relationship, which further suggests the common bonds of race, gender, and the different generations in forging the good society.

The final tableau is a recreation of the indelible scene at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968 as his entourage points in the direction of the unseen killer. This assassin is not part of "the weekend research project," a complicated plot in which Nina was initially involved and that has come bizarrely unravelled. In a comic commentary on money and bribery, everyone appears to be "on the take." Bulworth is bribed by the insurance industry to kill business reform, while Nina is paid to kill the Senator. Nor is the culprit the ominous figure who pursued the nervous Bulworth throughout much of the film, allowing Beatty to exercise his comic talents. That character was a relentless papparazzi intent on photographing Bulworth and Nina in a compromising situation, another comment on the voyeuristic diversions of mass media.

Instead the murderer is the outraged lobbyist who is paying the Senator back for not blocking insurance reform. In this case, art does not imitate life. Moneyed interests do not have to resort to homicide; they can kill unwanted measures through their agents in Congress. Witness the parliamentary maneuver in the case of the bipartisan Norwood-Dingell bill, which passed the House of Representatives in October 1999 by a lopsided vote of 275-151 and seeks to ensure patients' rights against powerful health maintenance organizations. In a technical ruse, Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (a Republican from Indiana) appointed representatives hostile to Norwood-Dingell to the conference committee where the final legislation is mediated between the House and Senate versions. The *New York Times* was outraged enough to editorialize on 5 November 1999, "This ploy may be a clever way around the rules. But it will only strengthen the public's perception that the Republican Party is opposed to popular concerns about health care and remains a captive of the insurance lobby" ("Thwarting Patients' Rights"). *Bulworth* not only said the same thing but much more.

The movie is, however, not without its ironies. Twentieth Century-Fox can produce such a critical film with impunity because of Hollywood's towering pre-eminence. The mystique of corporate capitalism seems unassailable at a time of economic boom and during an era without a significant alternative. Furthermore, Beatty, a wealthy celebrity, is an unlikely ally of the underclass. Paradoxically, Beatty was a major fund-raiser in the presidential campaign of progressive Democrat George McGovern in 1972. Is it, as novelist Tom Wolfe said, "radical chic?" A soundtrack featuring some of rap's most respected voices may attract the hip-hop crowd, but will they thrill to an older white man jiving? Conversely, won't the persistent profanity, however authentic, alienate a constituency for whom the political message might appeal? Nonetheless *Bulworth* is a landmark movie, an updated version of the classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), but Frank Capra with "soul."

Works Cited

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