

Music Analysis

Costandino Dufort Moraites

4 Pages

ARTH 3305 Film Formal Analysis

Claudine and the Welfare Man – Fighting Just to Get By

Claudine stands in stark contrast to many of the other films we have seen this semester in the way it portrays Black empowerment. After spending the semester being conditioned towards Blaxploitation heroes: drug dealers, pimps, avengers, secret agents and Kung Fu experts, we meet Claudine: a woman in a tough position that no one would ever hope to be in. She has six children, no husband and spends her days living embroiled in the financial perils of the welfare system. Where many Blaxploitation films portray their heroes in a position of control with some special power that allows them to stick it to the man, Claudine is a woman on her last ropes. She is unable to fight the man because she is married to him, to the Welfare Man. At the core of what makes *Claudine* so much different from the other films we have watched is how it deals with fear. During one of her heated arguments with her oldest son, Charles, Claudine puts it like this: “You better be afraid. That world out there will kill you. There ain’t no other kind of people, Charles. I’m scared all the time, but I do my job. If you ain’t scared, you don’t have no need for guts.” *Claudine* shows the struggle not from the perspective of someone who lives above it, but from the perspective of someone under the brunt of it. It does not try to sugarcoat the fear experienced by people just trying to get by, but portrays it as a necessary part of the struggle. This mindset is reflected in the soundtrack and the use of Curtis Mayfield’s “Mr. Welfare Man” during some of the toughest scenes in the film, which drives home the perils of managing a family dependent on welfare, the fear present in it, and finding the courage to keep going through it.

The first of these scenes comes during the first visit of a social worker to Claudine’s home to check up on her compliance with the rules for welfare compensation. Before the social worker even arrives “Mr. Welfare Man” is already playing in the background. In the moments leading up to the arrival of the social worker, Claudine’s family is happily bustling about the house enjoying some of the gifts that Rupert had gave them to make their home life a little more comfortable. The smooth, almost upbeat start of “Mr. Welfare Man” along

with the scene of the children playing in the apartment keeps the viewer from noticing the lyrics of “Mr. Welfare Man” discussing the harsh difficulties of dealing with the welfare system, that is until the social worker arrives and knocks on Claudine’s door asking for an inspection. Under the composed tone of Claudine’s voice as she greets the social worker, you can hear her fear as she is well aware of all that could go wrong if the social worker was to find Rupert’s gifts in the apartment. Like “Mr. Welfare Man” itself, the meeting with the social worker goes smoothly at first, but the tone turns sharply as the social worker starts drilling Claudine about her new man. The social worker suspects he has been giving her gifts and that is when Claudine’s fear comes to the surface. Rather than crumple under the social worker’s questions, Claudine turns them back on her interrogator to try to make the social worker realize the inhumanity of the questions she is asking. This is Claudine putting her abusive ‘husband’ in his place. She is afraid, but she recognizes that she cannot take it lying down when her Welfare Man interrogates her trying to accuse her of being a crook or a fraud for doing what little she can to provide for her family.

The song suggests that the dependence relationship welfare constructs between the state and the families that depend on it is similar to the situation in a bad marriage. This is reflected in lines from the song like “I must divorce him, cut all my ties with him cuz his ways they say // It’s a hard sacrifice. I just want to testify. Lordy Lordy Lordy Lordy // Um hmmm, keep away from me. Get on, get on, keep away from me, move on, Mr. Welfare // Keep away from me.” We see that these sentiments are not just hyperbole on the part of Curtis Mayfield, but in line with how the characters themselves think about their situations. Over the course of the film, we see how part of Claudine’s relationship to Rupert comes through in giving her a chance to get away from her family and actually think about her situation. During one of these ruminations, as she is preparing herself to return to her family, she calls herself a woman married to the Welfare Man, and she goes on to echo lines from Mayfield’s song which describes her situation perfectly: if she complies with the law

and does not work that does not leave her with enough to feed her family and it makes her look lazy, on the other hand if she tries to work on the side, she is breaking the law for circumventing welfare procedures. After stating her dilemma there is a slight pause and a cut to another scene. This reflects the progression of the song itself, even after identifying the tough situation welfare creates and proclaiming that a divorce is needed, the final lines of the song are not “I’m leaving the man,” but “Get on, get on, keep away from me” because Claudine cannot just walk out on welfare, she is dependent on it and she can only be free from it if it lets her, that is if she finds another means to support herself and her family. That is why the best she can do is keep living in limbo, working and trying to do the best that she can to raise her family.

As the film progresses, the role Rupert will play is unclear. He comes off as financially stable, and through the gifts he provides Claudine’s family, the audience gets the impression that if he marries Claudine, he will be able to fix the family’s problems with his added income. It really looks like this will be the case when he reassures Claudine that their marriage is still on even after storming out of the welfare office in a fury, but that is when “Mr. Welfare Man” starts playing again. Right before this stereotypical ending comes to fruition, the situation changes. Rupert and Claudine are about to announce their marriage to Claudine’s children when Rupert receives a court serving telling him he is charged with willful neglect of the children from his previous marriages. He is so shocked that they do not make the announcement to Claudine’s children and things keep getting worse. The next day at work, Rupert finds his pay is being cut. Now Rupert, the one portrayed as giving hope to Claudine’s family, has lost his confidence and he himself starts preparing to skip town after promising everything to Claudine.

As Claudine watches this downward spiral, she is clearly upset and disturbed, and things are not going well on her end either. The important part is that like in the song, Claudine voices her fears, she testifies, but then she resolves to keep on going and doing what she

can—even if it is just going back to work at her illegal job. In the end it is not Rupert that saves her family, but Claudine and her family that save Rupert. They convince him to stay in their lives by showing him that what is important in their struggle is not luck or financial soundness, which can be taken away at any time, but the attitude to stick it out, to not give up, and to keep on telling the Welfare Man that he is not wanted through a strong attitude and doing whatever you can to get by.