Film Critique: Devil’s Playground

Your Name

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Devil’s Playground

The documentary film Devil's Playground (1976) is an eye-opening account of a little known community of the Amish people. The chief value of the film lies in its anthropological commentary on the Old Order Amish lifestyle and culture. Although the "age of accountability" doctrine exists in many religions, the Old Order Amish begin their accountability process when their children reach the age of sixteen, which they consider to be the age at which children begin to sin consciously (Philosophical Films, 2003). Rumspringa is a tradition which allows the Amish teenagers, sixteen years of age, to experience the "dangerous" outer world i.e. the English world for a brief period. Rumspringa allows adolescents to enjoy the luxuries of modern technologies as well as the freedom of copulation and alcohol drinking. Afterward, they are expected to re-enter the extremely strict community to be baptized into the church.

Before Rumspringa commences, an Amish youth is raised in extremely restricted circumstances by contempo “English” Norms. It is interesting to know that the Amish who still speak Pennsylvania Dutch call the outsider as “English” (Dennis, 2002). Until age 13, the children attend one-room schoolhouses. As per the Amish belief, too much education eventually leads to the sin of pride. Therefore instead of educating them, children are put work after age 13. Factors that lead to the complete abstinence of the Amish community from any kind of non-Amish society's vices include their rejection of facilities such as automobiles, electricity, and all other modern facilities and amenities. These are the forces which maintain cultural differences (Lustig, Koester, & Halualani, 2017, p. 137). In the Amish society gender roles are narrowly defined, the dress is uniform and desexualized. Ethnocentrism was, therefore, one of the main barriers to intercultural communication between Amish and Non-Amish cultures. Ethnocentrism is one of the several cultural biases (Patel, 2006) (Lustig, Koester, & Halualani, 2017, p. 137).

Beyond theological motifs, the documentary raises many questions of ethics. For example, it makes one wonder if, after all, many of the Amish adolescents undergoing Rumspringa will decide upon not coming back to the Amish church, and therefore be destined to dwell in hell for eternity, why release them in the first place? The teenagers experience a cultural-clash shock in Rumspringa (Dennis, 2002). Can it be morally justified to expose them to the world outside the Amish community? One can argue in favor of proselytizing and indoctrination as an alternative to freedom and exposure to the English world with a myriad of distractions.

Another troubling ethical question pertains to the responsibility of the Amish parents who allow their children such freedom. For example, Faron, the movie’s protagonist, becomes a drug addict. Are Faron’s parents accountable for his condition? Again, one could argue that youngsters like Faron would not be pushed into such precarious situations if the practice of Rumspringa did not exist in the first place.

Several cultural groups exist in the United States (Lustig, Koester, & Halualani, 2017, pp. 59-61). It is shocking for the audience to see an American subculture that is so detached and different from the larger prevailing American culture. Also shocking is the film's final fact. It tells us that despite the contrast between the freedom of the outside world and the restrictions of Amish culture, The Old Order Amish church enjoys a far greater retention rate now than it did during the twentieth century.

The film presents the lives of many Amish adolescents after they are released from the stringent Amish laws to experience the outside secular English world. Most of them grapple with the question of whether or not to go back to the Amish community and get baptized into the Amish church. In this way, the film deal with the question of free will and the afterlife. While teenagers enjoy their freedom, doing drugs and driving cars, there is a constant fear in their minds. Despite enjoying the freedom of drinking alcohol and the tradition of "bed courtship", wherein a teenager is allowed to share a bed with an Amish girl, they never deny the existence of heaven and hell. Heaven and hell remain as real as Los Angeles and New York to them. Many of the boys are even tortured by the question, in their mind, that what would become of them if they are not baptized. There's a girl in the film who remarks that she might not enter heaven if she died during her Rumspringa. It shows how the fear of heaven does not let teenagers enjoy their freedom to the fullest. That constantly lingering fear is the reason why most of the teenagers choose the life of restrictions over the secular outside life.

To highlight what the adolescents go through, the examples of 16-year old Gerald, 18-year old Faron and Joann are given. They all indulge in hedonism during Rumspringa but eventually end up getting baptized. 23 years old Velda is a different case though. She decides not to re-enter the Amish fold and gets shunned. Although her steps do not seem rebellious as per the mainstream societal norms, they are indeed bold steps for an Amish person.

The concept of bed courtship may also be questioned. Parents of Amish adolescents simply assumed that the couples would only become intimate, but many girls ended up becoming pregnant. So it may be asked whether or not there is something religiously contradictory about this practice. Moreover, as Lucy Walker tells us, the highest return rate of adolescents to Amish church after Rumspringa may be partially attributed to the ritual of courtship. In a way, the girls acted as bait, and in order to proceed further in the relationship, the boys did not have any option other than getting married. In order to get married, it was mandatory to get baptized into the Old Order Amish Church. Mahayana Buddhism endorses the notion of using all the useful means to enable and facilitate people to achieve salvation (Wangchuk, 2007). Hence the question arises if the Amish use of girls as bait to attract teenagers to the church is morally and ethically justified.

"What if God didn't dictate the Bible," ask Emma and Faron each other during their conversation. The documentary highlights that in there is the absence of questioning attitude in Amish culture; everything is taken at face value. Independent thinking and questioning are discouraged. This is one of the biggest factors in the backwardness and regressive attitudes of Amish society. The absence of critical approach results in people becoming or remaining superstitious.

There exist several inconsistencies in the rules of Amish society. For example, tractors are allowed for bailing only and not for other activities such as plowing. Few rules are changed and that also very gradually, and consequently they cannot keep pace with the changing times. This has been the case with the Roman Catholic Church of the Medieval Era as well. The papacy was against scientific innovations and the conservatism was taking its toll on the whole of Europe (Boyd, 2018).

To ensure conformity, the tradition of shunning is also practiced. After getting shunned, Velda felt as if she did not exist. Even her family stopped supporting her. Other religious practices have similar practices of shunning people. Usually, a person is shunned when he or she leaves the faith or commit some serious moral offense. Shinning and making a person outcast is a tool to ensure conformity (Miller, 1988, p. 271).

The documentary provides a deep insight into the culture and traditions of a less known Amish community. The Amish people practice the tradition of Rumspringa which allows their kids to enjoy the outside world without any restriction, only to come back and get baptized into the Old Order Amish Church. Although adolescents have all the freedom during Rumspringa, the threat of dying unbaptized constantly lingers. The practice of Rumspringa, bed courtship and using girls as baits raise serious questions about morality and ethics of the Amish people. Moreover, in order to preserve their regressive culture intact, questions are discouraged and committers of grave mistakes are shunned. Most of the measures and rules are aimed at enforcing conformity. The value system of the Amish community is not without contradictions. The role of Amish church can be compared to that of the Roman Catholic Church that saw science as a threat to their dogmas. Indeed, it is surprising to see such societies existing in the age of information technology and globalization which has increased cultural exchange and people to people contacts.

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