

# Attica

by Manon de Boer

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## Film data

**Year:**  
2008

**Format:**  
16 mm film, black & white, mono sound

**Duration:**  
9:55 min.

## Synopsis

In Manon de Boer's new film installation, entitled Attica, music again plays an important role. The work is based on the composition of the same title by the American Frederic Rzewski which was written in 1971, as well as Coming Together, with which the film starts. The film tries to give a visual and auditive echo to the political subject of Rzewski's composition. On these works Rzewski wrote the following text:

Coming Together was written in November and December of 1971 in response to a historical event. In September of that year inmates of the state prison at Attica, New York revolted and took control of a part of the institution. Foremost among their demands was the recognition of their right "to be treated as human beings." After several days of fruitless negotiations, Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered state police to retake the prison by force, on the grounds that the lives of the guards whom the prisoners had taken as hostages were in danger. In the ensuing violence forty-three persons, including several of the hostages, were killed and many more wounded. One of the dead was Sam Melville, a prisoner who had played a significant role in organizing the rebellion.

In the spring of 1971, Melville had written a letter to a friend describing his experience of the passage of time in prison. After his death the letter was published in the magazine, Ramparts. As I read it I was impressed both by the poetic quality of the text and by its cryptic irony. I read it over and over again. It seemed that I was trying both to capture a sense of the physical presence of the writer, and at the same time to unlock a hidden meaning from the simple but ambiguous language. The act of reading and rereading finally led me to the idea of a musical treatment. The text is as follows: "I think the combination of age and a greater coming together is responsible for the speed of the passing time. It's six months now, and I can tell you truthfully few periods in my life have passed so quickly. I am in excellent physical and emotional health. There

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are doubtless subtle surprises ahead, but I feel secure and ready. As lovers will contrast their emotions in times of crisis, so am I dealing with my environment. In the indifferent brutality, the incessant noise, the experimental chemistry of food, the ravings of lost hysterical men, I can act with clarity and meaning. I am deliberate, sometimes even calculating, seldom employing histrionics except as a test of the reactions of others. I read much, exercise, talk to guards and inmates, feeling for the inevitable direction of my life."

Attica was originally intended to follow Coming Together after a short silence, so that the two pieces together would form a pair of dark and light images of the same subject. In this case it is a survivor of the event who speaks: Richard X. Clark, who was freed on parole some weeks after the massacre. As the car taking him to Buffalo passed the Attica town line, the reporter sitting next to him asked him how it felt to leave Attica behind him. His answer, "Attica is in front of me," became the text for this piece.

The compositional techniques employed in both pieces are similar. The basic device for the generation of melodic and rhythmic sequences is "squaring": a form which I first used in 1968, in 'Les moutons de Panurge', for an

indeterminate number of melody instruments. In this technique, a sequence of notes, measures, or phrases is gradually accumulated by adding elements one at a time, then diminished by subtraction. In Coming Together, seven pitches are used to generate eight triangular structures of 28 notes. Each of these melodic sequences is then "squared" to become eight large sections of  $28 \times 28 = 784$  notes. The resulting chain of 6272 notes is played by one or two instruments of the ensemble, while the others add only individual notes or melodic fragments from time to time, according to rules specific to each section. Only in the final section do all the players join in playing all of the notes. In Attica, a 28-beat melody is divided into four bars of seven beats, each of which is "squared" to become a period of 49 beats. The four periods are then themselves "squared" to become a sequence of sixteen periods. These are played over a constant drone, with a long dominant chord at the end.

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## Credits

**Music** "Coming Together" (fragment) & "Attica" (1972)  
composed by Frederic Rzewski

**Musicians:** Laurent Blondiau (trumpet), George van Dam (violin), Emmanuel Louis (electric guitar), Jan Rzewski (voice, saxophone)

**Camera:** Sébastien Koeppel

**Camera assistant:** Virginie Gourmel

**Technical assistant:** Jérôme Milecan

**Sound recording:** Aline Blondiau

**Final sound mixing:** Aline Blondiau & Gilles Bénardeau  
(Alea Jacta Production)

**Title design:** Stempel sprl

**Editing:** Stempel sprl

**Labo:** Color by Dejonghe

**Development sound negative:** Cineco, Amsterdam

**Production:** Fine Arts Unternehmen AG video+film,  
Switzerland (On the occasion of the first prize of FairPlay  
2007)

**Co-production:** Jan Mot, Brussels

**Thanks to:** Frederic Rzewski, Lionel Devlieger, Maarten  
Gielen, Luuk van Middelaar

**fine arts unternehmen ag**  
obmoos 4 / ch-6301 zug (switzerland)  
phone +41 41 711 68 20 / fax +41 41 711 54 15  
filmbox@artisant.com  
www.fineartsunternehmen.com

**fine  
arts  
unternehmen**  
video+film