

“Water is Life”

Hames, M. 2019. *Thirst for Power*. The Video Project.

“Water is Life” are the first words the viewer encounters when setting out to watch “Thirst for Power,” and I find them capturing the overall theme of the movie well. “Thirst for Power” is a media production based on the book by Michael E. Webber with the same name (Webber 2016). Yet, the title of the book continues with “Energy, Water, and Human Survival,” which are the three core aspects of the movie – and which seem also to connect to Webber’s later writing with his book “Power Tripp: The story of Energy” (2019). The first book takes the vantage point of water, while the second takes that of energy. However, as shown in the movie: they are interconnected, and both are critical for human survival in a so-called modern world.

The narrative of the movie is with the author in centre, explaining his reasons for writing the book and some of the events in his life that put him in the position he is now. It is a very personal narrative, trying to talk to the viewer instead of lecturing, using personal vignettes to illustrate large issues and how they interconnect. The movie does for example depict the author and his family visiting the famous Roman aqueduct in France, Pont du Gard, which he visited as a child and it had a profound impact on him. Now Webber shows this ancient construction also to his children – mimicking the core tenet of the movie: save what we have for the next generation to come. This scene also illustrates another of the movie’s main points, that the capacity to move water over distances, to control its flow, is power – which later is shown with dams along for example the Colorado river.

“Thirst for Power” starts by showing how water has been used as a de facto symbol of wealth, doing so with examples from the roman empire and its aqueducts, royal palaces

with their fountains and lush gardens, but also more recently with the construction of large dams to end floods, irrigate land, and provide energy – control over water equals power, and politicians and rulers knew and still know that, according to Webber. He jokingly retells a saying from the American West: “Whisky is for drinking and water is to fight for.”

The movie then continues to outline how water, energy, and modern urban cities are tied together – illustrating with a few examples how a deficit of water or energy often leads to a deficit of the other which then have grave consequences for society. This is for example clear with the case of waste. Humans generate waste, this waste ends up in water, and this wastewater needs to be cleaned – which demands energy. But today a lot of the world’s energy is produced by water. So, under circumstances of drought there might be a lack of both water for drinking and for producing the energy needed to transport water to humans, and to clean that water before and after use. The demand and supply relationship can crash, and following on this a potential blackout – as was the case in 2012 where large parts of India ended up without electricity for weeks. Situations as this clearly show how modern societies are addicted to energy and vulnerable to shortages – and water is a key component of this relationship.

This discussion on drought moved the plot towards potential dangers posed by climate change – with increasing temperatures, risks for drought and water shortage escalates. Webber asks ‘us’ to be conservative with the amount of water ‘we’ use, and to think about the energy consumed running our devices. Saving energy equals saving water, as less water will be required to provide the needed energy, more is left for human consumption. Webber argues that sustainability is an important tool that should be the first one used as it buys time for other ‘solutions’ to be invented and implemented. And this is where the movie ends, with Webber urging the viewer to think through the way we use water and energy so that there will be some left for generations to come.

“Thirst for Power” is an important movie as it provides an easy-to-access narrative for a general public on otherwise hard-to-access topics. And the movie is recommended for a general but curious audience, as well as scholars on topics of water, energy, power, and climate change that seek ways to talk about these topics accessibly. The movie resonates

with what has been told by various anthropologists, such as Orlov and Caton (2010) when they describe water as “a total social fact,” or the way that Andrea Ballestero (2019) engages water from a “Future History” perspective – for Webber does say that history has taught us much but that we got much more to learn – the future history of water to come.

What I find troubling with the movie is its heavy focus on the human – the wellbeing of other living organisms are not dealt with or recognised. In the middle of the plot the idea of engineering and taming nature is mentioned but never followed up. Water is throughout the movie treated as a resource to be used by humans, and saved for humans to use in the future. The ‘human’ is also not problematized much, in this narrative it is as if all humans have the same impact on and resources to make a difference in relation to the water humans use. From an anthropological standpoint these are issues I’d like to think careful about in relation to this movie. Despite these caveats, “Thirst for Power” is a thought-provoking movie that I am happy to recommend.

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