

# Michael Moore: A Man on a Mission or How Far a Reinvigorated Populism Can Take Us

Garry Watson (*Cineaction* 70)



My focus in this essay will be on Michael Moore's four documentaries – *Roger and Me* (1989), *The Big One* (1997), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) – with most of my attention being given to the first and third of these, and least to the second. These four films are significant and worth studying for a number of reasons: (i) The size of the audiences they have succeeded in reaching; (ii) the political impact they have had (on which, among other things, see Robert Brent Toplin's useful book on Michael Moore's "*Fahrenheit 9/11*": *How One Film Divided A Nation* [2006]); (iii) and the extent to which they helped prepare the reception for such recent political documentaries as, for example, Errol Morris's *The Fog of War* (2004), Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott's *The Corporation* (2005), Alex Gibney's *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2005), David Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), and Chris Paine's *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006). It may not be redundant to rehearse some of the facts. If *Roger and Me* was more successful at the box office than any documentary that preceded it, Moore went on to break the same record on two subsequent occasions – first with *Bowling for Columbine*, then with *Fahrenheit 9/11*. And as far as the latter is concerned, we get some sense of the excitement that was generated when it first screened in the US by the Foreword that John Berger wrote in 2004 for *The Official "Fahrenheit 9/11" Reader* (while the film was "still playing in hundreds of theaters across America"<sup>1</sup>). He begins with these words:

*Fahrenheit 9/11* is astounding. Michael Moore's film profoundly moved the artists on the Cannes Film Festival jury, and they voted unanimously to award it the Palme d'Or. Since then it has touched many millions of people. During the first six weeks of its showing in the United States the box office takings amounted to over 100 million dollars, which is, astoundingly, about half of what *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* made during a comparable period. People have never seen another film like *Fahrenheit 9/11*. (ix)

"Astounding" seems to me exactly the right word. It is astounding, first of all, that a documentary (and a political documentary at that) could ever have attained such popularity. And it is even more astounding if we consider when it made its appearance: at a time when (in Berger's words) "the daily wall of lies and half-truths," "the conspiracy of silence, [and] the manufactured atmosphere of fear," seemed impenetrable – at least "within the realm of the mass-media" itself (x, xi). It was precisely at that moment that Moore's film achieved its "breakthrough," nothing less than "an effective and independent intervention into immediate world politics" (x, ix).

But for all the commercial success of his documentaries, and all the praise they have received, Moore's stature as an artist is still something that needs to be argued for. And this is true in spite of what Quentin Tarantino (who headed the Cannes jury that gave first prize to Moore's film) states on one of the featurettes on the *Fahrenheit 9/11* DVD. "Know[ing] all this political crap would be brought up," he whispered the following in Moore's ear:

"I just want you to know it was not because of the politics that you won this award. You won it because we thought it was the best film that we saw." And he [Moore] said, "That means more to me than anything ... If I had wanted to make political statements I would run for office. I want to make movies."

Though Moore seems here to be accepting the rigid distinction between art and politics that Tarantino proposes, my own view is that such a distinction applies to only one of his documentaries so far – to *The Big One*, which has no particular cinematic ambition and is all political statement (even if of an often entertaining and by no means negligible kind). On the other hand, both *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* aspire to be – and largely succeed in being (unlike *Roger and Me*, which has the same aspiration but whose success is more qualified) – both the best films available on their subjects and, simultaneously, powerful political statements.

My guiding assumption, then, is that Moore implicitly asks to be taken seriously both as an artist and also (in John Berger's apt wording) as a kind of "People's Tribune" ("Foreword," xi). My argument will be that this is how he deserves to be regarded. My aim is to develop the discussion Moore says he wants: of his films, of course, but also (and at the same time) of some of the issues the films deal with. And since the first one, *Roger and Me*, opens with Moore introducing himself to us, that is where I will start.

### ***Roger and Me* (1989)**

I thought companies lay off people when they hit hard times. GM was the richest company in the world and it was closing factories when it was making profits in the billions. — Moore (just over 5 minutes into *Roger and Me*)

## The first ten minutes: Self-Portrait of the Artist

The credits are minimal: on an otherwise blank screen, we first see the words “A Dog Eat Dog Films Production,” then the title “Roger & Me,” then the information “A Film By Michael Moore.” The first image is from a family video of children (one of them Moore) at a party, and in voice-over we hear Moore informing us, jokingly, that he “was kind of a strange child. My parents knew early on that something was wrong with me.” We see film (again in colour) of someone we assume is his mother as he tells us that “It all began” – that is, began, presumably, to go wrong – “when my mother didn’t show up for my first birthday party ... .” This is followed by a black and white photograph of Moore’s father and of Moore himself as a tiny tot whom the camera slowly zooms in on (he’s in a high chair, a birthday cake with one candle on it in front of him), while the narrative voice explains that “My Dad tried to cheer me up by letting me eat the whole cake,” and follows this with the mock-serious confession: “I knew that there had to be more to life than this.”

From this intimate glimpse into his personal history (this private photograph of father and son), Moore then begins to introduce a more public history as he cuts abruptly to an old film of a TV show in which we see three smiling women introducing a smiling and singing Pat Boone, while the narrator tells us: “When I was a kid, I thought only three people worked for General Motors: Pat Boone, Dinah Shore” (here we see her on film) “and my dad” (who we see here again). With this transition in place, the next word we hear spoken is “Our,” as, while we see early black and white film of people in the streets, Moore tells us where we are and begins to spell out in more detail the importance of General Motors in his life: “Our hometown of Flint, Michigan, was the birthplace of General Motors, the largest corporation in the world.”

Where we are, then, is back in a moment of time when Flint was enjoying “a prosperity that working people had never seen before” and, out of a feeling of gratitude to the company, the town had thrown a birthday party, “for the people of General Motors on their fiftieth anniversary.” Here we see excerpts from a film General Motors made of the celebration the town held in its honour, accompanied by Moore’s voice-over telling us that this was Flint as he remembers it, “where every day was a great day.” In other words, he remembers it through rose-coloured glasses. But the memory of the parade celebrating GM’s 50th anniversary is now followed by a very different kind of memory.

As we reach the film’s three-minute mark, we see first a photograph of Moore’s extended family (parents, grandparents, etc.), then a photograph of his uncle, then old film of the strikers and the National Guard, and all the while we are hearing this:

My dad worked on the assembly line at GM’s AC Spark Plug in Flint for thirty-three years. In fact, as I grew older, I discovered my entire family had worked for GM: Grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins. Everyone but me. My uncle Laverne was in the Great Flint Sit-Down strike. Just before the year’s end in 1936 he and thousands of other GM workers took over the Flint factories and barricaded themselves inside, refusing to budge for forty-four days. The national guard was called in, and the eyes of the world were on Flint. On February 11, 1937, General Motors gave in and the UAW was born.

As he makes clear a few minutes later when he declares his mission, Moore thinks of this truly radical political act as an achievement to be proud of, to celebrate, and to retain as a model worth trying to live up to (if not necessarily directly imitate). But in the opening of

Roger and Me, instead of dwelling on this incident, Moore quickly moves on with his personal narrative, explaining that the assembly line wasn't for him and that his "heroes were the Flint people who'd escaped the life in the factory and got out of Flint," people like "Flint's most famous native son, Bob Eubanks, host of TV's hit show *The Newlywed Game*." For a moment, at least, Moore would have us believe that Eubanks (who later in the film reveals himself to be a real sleaze-bag) was his model as, after ten years of editing his own paper in Flint, he left to work on a "muckraking magazine in San Francisco."

But it soon turns out that the glamour of San Francisco was not for him, and for an interesting reason. Jokingly filming a straight-faced barista towering above him as she recites a list of coffee options, while claiming that "trying to get a simple cup of coffee in San Francisco" had become "a nightmare" for him, Moore portrays the dilemma he found himself in as follows:

I went to work and announced that I was going to give a monthly column to a Flint auto worker. The owner [of the magazine] instead told me to run an investigative report on herbal teas. I told him I had a better idea. Let's put the auto worker on the cover. The owner wasn't amused and declared that California and I were a mismatch ...

Of course, the conclusion we as viewers are being encouraged to reach is that the real mismatch is between two conceptions of radicalism: the middle-class one Moore lampoons with that reference to herbal teas and the working-class one he champions.

Still only just over five minutes into the film, Moore brings his personal narrative to an end with his return to Flint, just "a few days" before "the bad news hit." We hear the latter as it is delivered first by Dan Rather in an excerpt from CBS Evening News ("Good evening. General Motors confirmed it today. It is going to close plants employing almost 30,000 workers") and then by GM chairman Roger Smith ("Today we are announcing the closing of eleven of our older plants"). At this point, though Moore never raises his voice, his commentary starts to become increasingly sarcastic ("So this was GM chairman Roger Smith. He appeared to have a brilliant plan. First close eleven factories in the US, then open eleven in Mexico, where you pay the workers seventy cents an hour ... Roger Smith was a true genius"). Film of Roger Smith announcing the bad news is then succeeded by a brief sequence in which we see the last truck going down the line (Moore and his friends having posed "as a TV crew from Toledo" in order to get inside the factory and film it), which is in turn followed by groups of workers telling Moore what they think of Roger Smith. Not surprisingly, they think that he is the one who should be fired. But not everyone in Flint is of this opinion. Tom Kay, for example, the "spokesman and lobbyist for GM" whom we hear from next, is "sure that Roger Smith has a social conscience as strong as anyone else in the country." Prompted by Moore ("Have you ever talked to Roger Smith?" – "Sure." – "What kind of man do you find him to be?"), Kay says that he finds Smith "a very warm man." And it is in response to this, around the ten minute mark, that Moore (feigning doubt: "A warm man? Did I have Roger Smith judged all wrong?") declares his mission, which is to try to do something on behalf of the newly unemployed workers ("My mission was a simple one: to convince Roger Smith to spend a day with me in Flint and meet some of the people who were losing their jobs").

In its skillful blending of the personal and the political, its obvious anger over the workers being thrown out of their jobs, and its infectious love of festivity (of private parties and public parades), which seems irrepressible, and which, far from making us forget the anger,

somehow manages to accompany and focus it, in its revelation of a form of activism that is simultaneously serious and gay, Moore's *Roger and Me* has an impressive beginning. In retrospect, these qualities also make it seem like a typical Moore opening. What makes it distinctive is the fact that what we are being offered here is a self-portrait, which is striking on a number of counts: (i) because, in so far as the portrait in question is that of an artist, it is an exceptionally disarming one; and (ii) because of the degree to which this artist-in-the-making defines himself communally, in terms of place and politics, and in terms of his "mission."

Who's to blame? Moore's mission

I was raised in an Irish Catholic home, in Flint, Michigan, by working-class parents, and the lesson that they and the good sisters taught me while I was growing up resonates with me to this day. "We will be judged by how we treat the least among us. That a rich man will have a more difficult time getting into heaven than a camel will have getting through a needle." I mean, those were the lessons we were taught.—Moore (on *The Charlie Rose Show*)<sup>2</sup>

In her review of *Roger and Me*, Pauline Kael made it plain that she was not impressed by the "mock mission" (Moore "set[ting] out, with a camera crew, ostensibly to persuade Roger Smith to come to Flint and see the human results of his policies") that she identifies as "the peg that Moore hangs the picture on."<sup>3</sup> I myself find that the scenes in which we see Moore trying and (up until near the end) failing to gain access to Roger Smith (his being told that he can't take the elevator to the fourteenth floor, or that Smith isn't actually in the private club where Moore had been told he could find him) are not just frustrating and predictable (which on one level they are obviously meant to be) but also unilluminating and frankly (especially on a second viewing) irritating. But at the same time, it seems to me that Moore's subsequent work reveals that he is absolutely serious about his mission.

At one point in *Roger and Me*, Moore asks Pat Boone "Who's to blame for what happened in Flint?" "I don't," replies Boone, "think it's anybody's fault." This is of course a standard answer, which Boone then elaborates on in the usual way: "In a free society, in a capitalist, democratic society, things do change. There are shifts and trends. I'm sure General Motors doesn't have any desire to either close down a plant or put anyone out of work." Within its own terms of reference, Boone's answer may not seem entirely unreasonable. But for Moore, this is not good enough. If one thing about his films seems undeniable, it is the extent to which they are the product of his tireless drive to uphold the notion of accountability, of responsibility. Or to put it another way, the extent to which they are the product of his desire to uphold a sense of ethics.

We see this at work in all kinds of ways, including, for example, the moment when Moore ended the speech with which he accepted an Academy Award for *Bowling for Columbine* with the words, "Mr Bush we are against this war. Shame on you, shame on you Mr Bush."<sup>4</sup> Many of us felt relief and approval at that moment. In some circumstances, a sense of shame seems entirely appropriate, and shamelessness something to be deplored. Yet some of the attempts Moore makes to get others to acknowledge their share of responsibility for certain wrong-doings can (and perhaps ought to) make us uncomfortable. I'm thinking here not so much of his handing out "DownSizer of the Year" awards to nonplussed but usually polite representatives of various corporations in *The Big One* but more of his meetings with Phil Knights at the end of *The Big One* and Charlton Heston near the end of *Bowling for Columbine*.

I would think that one natural reaction to these scenes is to feel ill-at-ease. This doesn't mean that I wish they weren't there. But however much we may disapprove of the gun-happy position we see Heston taking throughout the film, he is an elderly man who doesn't look at all well and, on one level, Moore is clearly abusing Heston's hospitality. As for Phil Knight, while he is a younger, fitter man who seems better able to take care of himself, and while he is the one who has asked Moore to visit and so oughtn't to be surprised when the latter tries to persuade him to do what he has no intention of doing – even so, the moments when Moore puts him on the spot and we see him almost squirming are, I imagine, not likely to be easy ones for most members of the audience. So there is a real possibility that these endings could backfire and produce unexpected sympathy for Moore's targets. At one point in *The Corporation*, Noam Chomsky reflects on the significance of the fact that representatives of corporations or causes we consider harmful may sometimes be nice and charming when we meet them as individuals.<sup>5</sup> So perhaps it's simply a mistake to personalize the issues in this way? Possibly. I'm not sure. Is there an obviously better way of securing our attention and then getting us to think about our responsibilities?

Though I can see how some might want to read Moore's visit to Charlton Heston's house (and especially Moore's leaving behind a photograph of a murdered six-year-old) as a case of succumbing to the temptation of self-righteousness, satisfying a need to assign blame somewhere, to be able to hold someone wholly responsible, my own view is that it is best understood as part of the process in which he can be seen to be working his way towards a deeper, more complex sense of responsibility, broadening his sense of mission as he goes along. But I'll come back to this question. What I now want to do is look more closely at Pauline Kael's objections to *Roger and Me*, and to consider them in the light of some (in this context) highly suggestive remarks Philip Roth made back in 1961.

More of Kael's review, plus Roth's reflections on the descent into unreality

Kael's deepest objection to *Roger and Me* is that she feels it manipulates her into responding in a way she subsequently wishes she hadn't done. I find this particularly interesting because what for me always makes Kael worth reading is the directness with which she records her responses. Her directness makes it easier for us as readers to figure out where we stand. Unlike, then, those who find this "muckraking documentary" to be "scathing and Voltairean," Kael tells us that she finds it "shallow and facetious, a piece of gonzo demagoguery that made [her] feel cheap for laughing":

What happens is that Moore, a big, shambling joker in windbreaker and baseball cap, narrates his analysis of the ironies and idiocies of what's going on, and deadpans his way through interviews with an assortment of unlikely people, who are used as stooges, as filler. He asks them broad questions about the high rate of unemployment and the soaring crime rate, and their responses make them look like phonies or dupes ... elderly ladies on a golf course are confused as to what's wanted of them; visiting entertainers are cheery and optimistic; Miss Michigan, who is about to take part in the Miss America Pageant, tries to look concerned and smiles her prettiest. What does Moore expect? Why are these people being made targets for the audience's laughter?

It isn't difficult to see why Kael feels that the "assortment of unlikely people" we encounter in *Roger and Me* "are used as stooges, as filler," and her comments on the "elderly ladies on a golf course" (that they "are confused as to what's wanted of them"), and on Miss Michigan (that she "tries to look concerned and smiles her prettiest"), strike me as being accurate. But

the really interesting questions are first the one Kael then poses: “What does Moore expect?” And then the two further questions it prompts: What does Kael expect? And: What do we expect? Kael’s expectation is clear: she expects and assumes that “these people [are] being made targets for the audience’s laughter.” For my part, I think I half-expected this too but I don’t think it works out this way.

What about Moore? What did he expect? Kael’s assumption is that she knows what he expected. But perhaps she’s wrong. Then again, maybe not; or not entirely. Perhaps, beforehand, he did think of Miss Michigan and the lady golfers as likely “targets.” Who knows? That may indeed be why he chose to interview them. But if so, then it looks to me as if somewhere along the way he must have changed his mind. And the result is that what gets conveyed is a sense of Moore being unsure how to react and of his communicating this uncertainty to us (or to those of us who are able or willing to revise our expectations).

In order to begin to grasp the enormous implications of what I take to be at stake here, I think we need to turn aside for a moment to recall something the novelist Philip Roth had to say about American society and the nature of contemporary reality back in 1961:

[T]he American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination. The actuality is always outdoing our talents...

Several months back, most of the country heard one of the candidates for the Presidency of the United States say something like, “Now if you feel that Senator Kennedy is right, then I sincerely believe you should vote for Senator Kennedy, and if you feel that I am right, I humbly submit that you vote for me. Now I feel, and this is certainly a personal opinion, that I am right ...” and so on. Though it did not appear this way to some thirty-four million voters, it still seems to me a little easy to ridicule Mr. Nixon, and it is not for that reason that I have bothered to paraphrase his words here. If one was at first amused by him, one was ultimately astonished ...Whatever else the television debates produced in me ..., they also produced professional envy. All the machinations over make-up and rebuttal time, all the business over whether Mr. Nixon should look at Mr. Kennedy when he replied, or should look away – all of it was so beside the point, so fantastic, so weird and astonishing, that I found myself beginning to wish I had invented it. But then, of course, one need not have been a fiction writer to wish that someone had invented it, and that it was not real and with us.

The daily newspapers, then, fill us with wonder and awe (is it possible? Is it happening?), also with sickness and despair.<sup>6</sup>

Pondering Moore’s work (especially but not just his two most recent films) in the light of the above can help us to realise that one potentially huge advantage the documentary filmmaker has over the novelist is that he or she can make use of actually existing footage of characters like Mr. Nixon and of events every bit as “fantastic ... weird and astonishing” as the Presidential debate Roth mentions. So that, on the one hand, Roth’s reflections may help us understand the possibility that we may now be living in an historical moment when the documentary is arguably emerging as – for us, right now – the most dynamic and currently necessary of art forms.

On the other hand, the other reason Roth's reflections (on the increasingly unreal-seeming world he saw around him at the beginning of the 1960s) seem relevant here is because of the way they raise the question as to how we are supposed to react to these things. How does one react to a reality that seems to have become unreal, that seems (in the words of the French situationist, Guy Debord) to take the form of a Spectacle, or (as any number of thinkers maintained in the 1960s) that seems insane? As R.D. Laing put it back in 1964:

In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal.<sup>7</sup>

And again, to the extent that this is the case, the problem it creates is one of no longer being so sure as to what, in any particular circumstance, the appropriate reaction might be. How to react when one's first impulse is to want to ridicule, or to be scathing, but when both of these reactions threaten to "understand" the phenomena in question too quickly? What to do, in other words, when such reactions risk sealing us off from the possibility of encountering the new and unexpected, thereby perpetuating forms of misunderstanding? And how might such uncertainty affect the possibility of our arriving at, or pursuing, true judgement?

As Pauline Kael admits, her review of *Roger and Me* is partly written in reaction to the claim that this film is "scathing and Voltairean." This seems to have misled her into thinking that Moore "comes on in a give-'em-hell style," which he surely doesn't, but her thinking that he does then allows her to claim that "he breaks faith with the audience" by encouraging them to "laugh at ordinary working people." She sees him as coming on like a fierce satirist and then offering us "an aw-shucks, cracker-barrel pastiche" and revealing himself to be "a big, shambling joker in windbreaker and baseball cap."

There is no denying that Moore-the-"joker" exists; Kael didn't invent him. But the suggestion I now want to make is that this side of Moore may perhaps be best understood as his (actually, not unsubtle) way of responding to (maintaining a certain openness and flexibility in relation to) the kind of phenomena we have just seen Philip Roth noting back in 1961: those manifestations of contemporary life that seem both absurdly unreal and also, often, too easy to make fun of, to ridicule, or to satirize. This may help explain the tone in which he delivers his voice-over narrations and commentaries, which are invariably both deadpan and ironic, in one or another of the many different forms irony can take. Different forms of sarcasm, for example, are among these forms and Moore's tone is often sarcastic, in a way that recalls something Roland Barthes had to say near the end of the 1950s: "What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth."<sup>8</sup> But again, whether or not it is sarcastic, Moore's irony often seems non-judgemental, is seldom cheap, sometimes gives way to bemusement, pure and simple, and usually inclines to the light rather than to the heavy end of the scale. It seems to me that one can recognize all of this without missing the fact that at times his irony nevertheless manages, where appropriate, to be savage and, yes, scathing (there is, always, after all, much to be angry about).

By way of beginning to test out some of these ideas, I now want to look first at another sequence from *Roger and Me* and then at the opening of *Bowling for Columbine*.

**"Cheer up, America": Pat Boone (on optimistic, can-do kinds of guys), Anita Bryant**

**(on Margaret Thatcher), and the Amway consultant (trying to earn a living)**

At one point in her review of *Roger and Me*, Kael notes that “visiting entertainers are cheery and optimistic.” What we now need to see is that, while this is not exactly untrue, it is certainly misleading, because it is so extremely understated. Let’s look at the sequence that brings together Anita Bryant and Pat Boone. It is preceded by one of Moore’s attempts to get to see Roger, which ends with his admitting that he “wasn’t having much success bringing Roger to Flint.” This allows him to move into the next section, which he does by announcing that “the mayor ... was having better luck with an even higher authority. He paid TV evangelist Robert Schuller \$20,000 to come to Flint and rid the city of its unemployment plague.” We then see and hear Schuller delivering “his message of hope” to a large audience at the city’s hockey arena (we see a sign saying that unemployed are allowed in free):

You won’t pull your way from poverty to prosperity until you realize you have to be humble enough to say, “I need help.” Then what happens is you can turn your hurt into a halo ... Just because you’ve got problems is no excuse to be unhappy.

Shots of Schuller delivering this nonsense are intercut with glimpses of the town, and we see, accompanied by an angelic singing voice on the soundtrack, a picture of Jesus beside a church, a crucifix, a roadside sign (“Buy American or Apply for Japanese Welfare”) and some graffiti (“Assholes drive Imports”) on the side of a bridge. Moore’s only verbal comment, however, is a no doubt (even though you can hardly tell from the voice alone) ironical “Maybe Reverend Schuller was right. Things could be worse, and there was much to be thankful for, like the Star Theatre of Flint, funded with GM money to provide entertainment and escape during Flint’s hard times.” And then, after we hear from an enthusiastic representative of the theatre, we see Anita Bryant singing on stage – “put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee” – as Moore’s voice-over informs us that “Long before she sold orange juice, Anita Bryant sold spark plugs for General Motors’ AC division ... Now she was back in Flint offering advice to the unemployed.” Moore then intercuts footage of Anita on stage with footage of her on the street responding to his questions, and this is what she has to say:

[On Street:] Opportunities are still in Flint, Michigan. They’re still in America. Hang in there. Take a day at a time. [On Stage:] Go forward and be positive about life ... [On street:] Today’s a new day. It’s an opportunity for you to look about you, and look at the positive within yourself and within your community. I read something interesting Margaret Thatcher says: “Cheer up, America. You live in a great country. You’re a free country. You have a great President. Not everything’s perfect, but cheer up, because you live in a free America” ... So, we live in a free society ... Go out and do something with your hands. I don’t know.

Again, Moore makes no comment on this but cuts from it directly to old film of Pat Boone singing in praise of Chevrolet and America (“the greatest land of all”). On stage in the present, Boone is singing “Speedy Gonzales” and Moore is telling us that “now ‘Mr Chevrolet himself’ had “arrived in Flint just when we needed him.” After an obviously very happy Boone has recalled with evident satisfaction his Chevrolet Corvette, Moore asks him if he has ever met Roger Smith and Boone says that, while he hasn’t met him, he gathers that Smith “seems a very optimistic, can-do kind of guy.” His parting words assure Moore that he (Boone) is “sure General Motors doesn’t have any desire to either close a plant or put people out of work.” According to him, the key is to be found in “attitude”:

Folks wind up saying, "It was the best thing that happened to me when my job at the plant phased out. I was only gonna go so far at the plant. Now I've got my own business, whatever it is." It may be no accident that the Amway business, for one, is in ... Michigan offering anybody, for very little money, a chance to start earning dollars, having their own store in their home.

Part of my point is that if a novelist had invented characters saying these things, we might conclude that we were getting parody rather than realism. But their inanities add up to an ideology, an "attitude," that is very common in the US, and while Boone and Bryant are thriving on it, others are not so fortunate.

Moore immediately goes on to remind us of this by cutting from Boone's last words to Janet, a spokeswoman for Amway, who assures us that "If you have a dream, and you go after your dream, you can do it." As Kael sees it, the camera here "makes brutal fun" of Janet but I disagree. Moore's introduces her with these words:

Janet was one of hundreds of Flint's citizens who had taken Pat's advice. Although her husband was still working at GM, she'd seen many of her friends laid off, and didn't want to take any chances. She'd been the founder and host of Flint's feminist radio show. Now she was a distributor for Amway.

In this, I hear respect mixed with sympathy and concern. As a result, when I hear her enthusiastically explaining what is involved in color consulting (helping people to see their "seasons," and what colour clothes suit them best) I find my impulse to laugh (colour consulting seems so strange) muffled somewhat by the emergence of another impulse: curiosity. When we then learn that three months after Moore filmed Janet's Amway meeting for us she "phoned in a panic" to confess "she'd made a terrible mistake," I don't – when I hear her explanation (the people who had colour-analyzed her had made a mistake: "I've very recently learned that I am not an autumn ... Little did I know that I was not the season that I was telling people I was") – find myself laughing at her. And while it is certainly true that Moore looks very funny as we see him sitting in a chair and allowing himself to be colour-analyzed by Janet ("As it turned out," he tells us, "we were the same season"), I don't myself, not for one moment, believe that the humour is at her expense. On the contrary, in fact. I find nothing patronizing when Moore tells us that he "felt sorry for Janet. So to cheer her up, I let her do my colours."

Janet's newfound occupation may well strike some of us as a bit weird, as for that matter might the behaviour of Reverend Schuller and the attitude espoused by Pat Boone and Anita Bryant (especially given the circumstances in which they profess it).

But it seems to me that we have two distinct kinds of weirdness here, one of which seems harmless and endearingly eccentric, while the other is surely pernicious. My own sense is that Moore wants us to see that, unlike the second kind, the first – Janet's – is worth respecting. And I think it's important that, while Moore's main concern in this sequence of the film (as in others) is to make sure we realise how hollow the talk about opportunities in Flint actually is, he is nevertheless able to pause along the way to note such instances of human eccentricity as this one.

## ***Bowling for Columbine***

Moore begins by creating the impression that the film we are about to see is not his but rather the NRA's. In fact, to begin with we are, momentarily, watching an old NRA film as we see, in black and white, a soldier in uniform, standing to attention, and saying these words: "The National Rifle Association has produced a film which you are sure to find of great interest. Let's look at it." We then cut to colour, as (in a calm, soothing, confidence-inspiring voice) Moore's narration begins (along with the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which starts very quietly in drum taps and then becomes gradually easier to hear, though it never gets loud):

It was the morning of April 20th, 1999, and it was pretty much like any other morning in America. The farmer did his chores, the milkman made his deliveries, the president [Moore's tone doesn't waver one iota here] bombed another country whose name we couldn't pronounce.

These words are accompanied by images, first of the Washington Monument, then of a farmer and milkman at their respective jobs, and then of buildings destroyed by the President's bombs. The narration then resumes, soon culminating in the detail: "And out in a little town in Colorado, two boys went bowling at six in the morning. Yes," Moore sums up (as we now see images first of a blonde, bikini-clad "babe" brandishing a rifle in the desert, and then of the Statue of Liberty), "it was a typical day in the United States of America."

Up until this point, Moore's presence has been limited to our hearing his voice, but now, very abruptly, he becomes visible as participating actor. Having (the narrative voice informs us) "spotted an ad in the local Michigan paper that said" (and we are shown the ad in question) "if you opened an account at North Country Bank – the bank would give you a gun," Moore enters the bank in question, goes through the necessary procedure, and acquires a shotgun. "Well," says Moore (as, with the weapon in his hand, he addresses a bank employee), "here's my first question: 'Don't you think it's a little dangerous, handing out guns in a bank?'" At which point, he strides outside, triumphantly waving his new weapon up in the air, and we begin to hear the driving beat of Teenage Fanclub's "Take the Skinheads Bowling." This immediately takes us into the credit sequence, with the credits coming up over early black-and-white footage (from the fifties?) of people bowling. So as we hear the lines "Some people say that bowling alleys got big lanes/Some people say that bowling alleys all look the same," and then the refrain – "all look the same/all look the same" – we see, in slow motion, first around a dozen people bowling in unison from the right of the screen, then some bowling (also in unison) from the left; then more bowling accompanied by the lines "Everbody's comin' home for lunch these days/Last night there were skinheads on my lawn/Take the skinheads bowling/Take them bowling."

The effect of this credits sequence is (to use an overworked but unavoidable term here) surreal, surreal and dream-like: partly because, as the clothes clearly signify, this is a scene from the past; also because of the slow-motion, the identical, uniform gestures, the song's refrain ("all look the same"), and the prospect of difference (in the form of the skinheads) being introduced into this setting. But in addition to seeming dreamily surreal, this sequence also manages to engender a sense of barely-contained excitement. Or, rather, it builds on, and deepens, the excitement already engendered by the preceding scenes. And considering that these scenes remind us of the fact not only that April 20th was the day both of the Columbine shootings but also the day when some of the bombs dropped in the Kosovo war

landed on a hospital and primary school in the village of Bogutovac near Kraljevo, the distinctly upbeat mood might well seem perverse. How to explain it? Well, to begin with, it's not as if the film doesn't take these events with the appropriate degree of seriousness later on. And knowing this, it seems to me that what both explains and justifies the bubbling sense of comic exuberance we feel during the opening is that there is, after all, an exhilarating side to American freedom and we are being exposed to it first. What is exhilarating is the fact that the craziness is out in the open; no-one is hiding it. For the filmmaker who would make use of it, the incriminating evidence (the bikini-clad, shotgun-wielding woman, the ad in the paper encouraging readers to open a bank account by offering them the enticement of a free gun) is so out-in-the-open that (if you know what you're looking for) you can't miss it. It is so incredibly easy for Moore to film the sequence in the bank, and just as easy, soon after the opening credits, to film the sequence in which we see him entering the local barbershop with gun in hand and purchasing ammunition for it there. To anticipate the opening of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it seems natural to wonder if these are not scenes out of a dream. But of course they are not, and while their implications may be scary, watching these scenes is (at least, I imagine, for most of us) fun; it feels like being on the edge (of madness); it's wild, hilarious, exciting. As Philip Roth clearly knows, American reality fills us not just with "sickness and despair" but also with "wonder and awe"; it doesn't by any means only stupefy, sicken and infuriate; it can also be liberating – often, no doubt, dangerously liberating, but genuinely liberating, nevertheless.

Now as I've already suggested, when we recall the grim nature of the film's ostensible subject matter (the Columbine shootings), this upbeat opening may well make some of us feel a bit uneasy. So it's important to note that what makes the opening's almost amoral-seeming gaiety so remarkable is the fact that it co-exists in Moore's work with the moral sense I commented on earlier – a moral sense that I suggest we see as a work in progress, deepening and becoming more complex as Moore broadens and refines his sense of mission.

"Accept[ing] responsibility for our collective action"

In the little speech he delivers at the end of *The Corporation*, Moore recalls how, when he discovered – while visiting Littleton, Colorado, after the Columbine shootings – first that Lockheed Martin, the builder of weapons of mass destruction, was the main employer, and then that the parents working there couldn't "see the connect between what they do for a living and what their kids do (or did) at school," his initial reaction was to get on his "high horse." Only afterwards did it dawn on him (and it's revealing in what follows to see how easily he slips into identification with the auto workers, whose cause he had been championing for so long) that neither he nor his wife (both children of auto workers in Flint), nor so far as he knows anyone else in Flint, had "ever stopped to think this thing we do for a living, the building of automobiles, is probably the single biggest reason why the polar ice caps are going to melt and end civilization as we know it":

There's no connect between "I'm just an assembler on an assembly line building a car which is good for people in society and moves them around" ... [and] the larger picture and the larger responsibility of what we're doing. Ultimately we have to as individuals accept responsibility for our collective action and the larger harm that it causes in our world. (My italics)<sup>9</sup>

It is, I believe, in the light of this hard-won declaration of mature faith that we need to read

Moore's decision both to buy that shotgun at the beginning of *Bowling for Columbine* and to end the film not with his confrontation with Charlton Heston but rather with a shot of himself bowling. Far from being evidence of egotism, these actions should be seen as his way of implicating himself, of showing us that he realises he must assume his share of responsibility too. And it seems to me that the culminating shot (one of my favourites) of him bowling (it has to be said, impressively, with some force) also serves to underline the fact that, in his case at least, maturity does not entail any repudiation of the explosive energy we see him displaying as he hits the bull's eye, knocking all the pins down in one hit.

I would say that the efforts Moore makes to define the subject matter of *Bowling for Columbine* in relation to Flint, Michigan, should be understood as part of the same strategy – as one of the ways in which he is trying to reinforce this sense of shared responsibility. “By the time I was a teenager,” he tells us early on, “I was such a good shot I won the National Rifle Association's Marksman award.” Then, making sure we see the photograph of himself with the award in question, he adds, by way of explanation: “You see, I grew up in Michigan, a gun-lover's paradise. And so” (as we see film of Charlton Heston) “did this man ... We come from a state where everyone loves to go hunting.”

The next connection is when we are told that “not far from where Charlton Heston and [Moore] grew up is a training ground for the Michigan militia.” And the latter “became known around the world when, on April 19th, 1995, two guys living in Michigan who had attended the Militia meetings, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people.” This provides Moore with another strand (that of the Oklahoma bombing) to weave into a fabric that we might have otherwise thought was going to focus exclusively on the Columbine shootings. When, after interviewing some members of the militia, he next visits James Nichols, it is still the Oklahoma connection he is exploring. And again, his justification for the visit is that James Nichols (the brother of Terry, one of the two convicted bombers) is almost a neighbour. “James graduated from high school the same year I did, in the district next to mine. On this farm in Decker, Michigan, McVeigh and the Nichols brothers made practice bombs before Oklahoma City.” Finally (in this particular sequence), Moore visits Oscoda, Michigan, which is “across the bay from the Nichols farm.” He visits Oscoda because “Eric Harris, who would later go on to commit the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, spent part of his childhood [there]. Eric lived on the air-force base in Oscoda, where his dad flew planes during the Gulf War.” In Oscoda, in a pool room with video games in the background, Moore meets Brent and his buddy DJ, and learns that the latter went to school with Eric Harris. It turns out that Brent got expelled from school for pulling a gun on a kid. “Could've been a lot worse,” he tells Moore. “Could've been Eric Harris,” Moore suggests. “It could've been,” Brent allows. And as for DJ, he says his “name was second on the bomb list” and admits, after some prompting, that he built a bomb using home-made napalm. Sounds as if in his case too, it could have been Eric Harris.

It is also important to note here the extent to which Moore's method, in all four of his documentaries, might be said to be Socratic, in the sense that it is often the people he is engaging in dialogue who raise the issues he wants to explore. It is, for example, one of the Militia members who claims, near the beginning of *Bowling for Columbine*, that owning guns is “an American tradition. It's an American responsibility to be armed. If you're not armed, you're not responsible ... It's your job to defend you and yours. If you don't do it, you're in dereliction of duty, as an American. Period.” This is also the view of a female Militia member, who tells Moore, “We have a desire to fulfil our responsibilities and duties as Americans, and armed citizenry is part of that.” These claims raise fundamental questions, questions that

reveal the extraordinary scope of Moore's ambition, which I now want to look at in a bit more detail.

### **Examining “the American psyche”: the extent of Moore's political and artistic ambition**

This ultimately is not just a film about guns. It ultimately isn't a film about gun control. This is a film about the American psyche and the American ethic, such as it is. That's what I'm hoping to get to, in the exploration of these subjects. And guns are just ... my entry point into the much larger discussion that I wish would take place ... I'm much more concerned about the fact that we've gone nuts, as opposed to whether we've got too many gun nuts in America.<sup>10</sup>— Moore (on *Bowling for Columbine*)

As I have come to see it, Moore is wonderfully ambitious in two ways: politically and artistically, or (since I don't intend – and I don't believe he intends – to give either of them precedence or priority over the other) artistically and politically. As a result, it isn't really possible to talk for long about the one without simultaneously saying something about the other.

This should now become evident as I turn to briefly consider the sense in which it can be said that he is politically ambitious. I'm thinking of a moment in the 1961 essay by Philip Roth that I cited earlier. “Recently,” Roth says, “in *Commentary*, Benjamin DeMott wrote that the ‘deeply lodged suspicion of the times [is] ... that events and individuals are unreal, and that power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere’ (Roth 121). I'm also thinking of the last words spoken in *The Corporation*: “I'm convinced that a few people are going to leave the movie theatre or get up off the couch and go and do something, anything, to get the world back in our hands” (My italics). As it happens, these last words in *The Corporation* are spoken by Moore.

Ironically, DeMott's pronouncement was followed by the most politically active decade since the Thirties. But that aside, my point is that since then, for much of the last three and a half decades, there has been – at least among those of us who have been deeply unhappy with the kind of status quo that was restored in Western countries at the end of the Sixties – a widespread feeling of powerlessness, a feeling that is accurately summarized in DeMott's words. And in the face of this, from 1989's *Roger and Me* onwards, Moore has done a lot to help spread the feeling that doing something “to get the world back in our hands” may indeed still be an option.

What I want to emphasize here, however, is the extent to which the “something” Moore hopes to stimulate people to do involves some pretty tough and extremely wide-ranging questioning. In fact, what his films put into question is nothing less than the all-embracing “system” in which he and his fellow Americans live. Thus, at the end of *Roger and Me*, Tom Kay, the spokesman for GM, says this:

If you're espousing a philosophy, which apparently you are, that the corporation owes employees cradle-to-the-grave security, I don't think that can be accomplished under a free enterprise system.

But this is only one of a number of references in Moore's work to the "system." Almost half an hour into *The Big One*, we see Moore relating to an audience an exchange he had with a businessman he found himself sitting next to on a plane trip. "What," the businessman asked him, "have you got against profit? Company's got a responsibility to its shareholders. That's our system. The shareholders." Moore disagreed:

That's not our system. Our system's a democracy. I've read the American Constitution. The word "shareholder" does not appear once in that document. I've seen the word "people," "of, for, and by the people." But I've not seen the word "shareholder."

Though Moore never (at least in his films) espouses the philosophy Tom Kay attributes to him (condensed into the proposition that "the corporation owes employees cradle-to-the-grave security"), his films do strongly imply that, insofar as the Free Enterprise system is geared to the interests of shareholders at the expense of the people-at-large, it is a betrayal of American democracy and so needs to be substantially changed. But it would seem that a clear majority of American citizens sees the Free Enterprise system (or Capitalism) quite simply as the American Way, which means (given his critique of it) that, in the eyes of many, Moore is inevitably seen as a being anti-American. There is, furthermore, a sense in which this charge is not wrong and, however obvious the point may seem to some, it is perhaps worth quickly listing some of the things one has in mind when maintaining that his films clearly are anti- the version of the US that has for a long time now been (and currently still very much is) in the ascendancy. Recall, for example, the mocking endings of *Roger and Me* (a shot of Anita Bryant advising the unemployed of Flint that "If you decide to go for it, you'll make it," while Pat Boone's voice can be heard singing "I am proud to be an American, part of a great democracy" etc.) and of *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore ironically declaring this to be "a glorious time to be an American," while Joey Ramone sings his version of "What a Wonderful World"). Yet at the same time, it is possible to argue (as John Berger does of *Fahrenheit 9/11*) that there is a sense in which Moore's films are the work of a patriotic American. In fact, I'm quite sure that this is the case. But what this therefore means is that he stands for the possibility of a radically different kind of American society to the one his films examine and put into question, even (I think it's imperative to add) if many of the seeds of the former (the energy, the humour, the decency and generosity of ordinary Americans) can be detected in the latter.

In short, what I take to be admirable about Moore's political ambition is the way in which he has stepped outside the "framework of fixed and unquestionable presuppositions" which Noam Chomsky claims limits debate in the US.<sup>11</sup> This means that he makes heavy demands on his audience, expecting them not only to ponder extremely unsettling questions but also to contemplate disturbing possible answers, one of which comes in response to the question as to whether or not all the emphasis on the need for Americans to protect themselves (with guns, in specially designed shelters, etc.) doesn't imply that, on some level, even if they don't look particularly fearful, Americans are afraid of something? In the statement Moore made while at the Toronto Film Festival for the screening of *Bowling for Columbine*, we find him saying this:

I believe that if we were able to get rid of all the guns in America and have stronger gun laws then we would still have the central problem ..., of being afraid of the other, and being manipulated so easily by politicians, by corporations, by the media ... (My italics)

Moore is not the only person to conclude that his fellow countrymen and women live in

fear.<sup>12</sup> Here, for example, in the opening chapter of his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, is D.H. Lawrence on the subject (back in the 1920s):

This the land of the free! Why, if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that's my freedom. Free? Why I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow-countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch him the moment he shows he is not one of them.

One reason it seems to me appropriate to recall this here is that, like Lawrence (in his *Studies*), Moore too traces the fear he finds around him all the way back to the Pilgrim Fathers. He does this in an astonishingly provocative cartoon that he wrote himself and that offers "A Brief History of America"; it appears around fifty minutes into the film. I suppose it might be said that here Moore is lecturing us, albeit in a much more entertaining form than the usual lecture format allows. But here again, we find the argument he is advancing being made for him, in a variety of ways, by others. By Matt Stone, for example, who remembers going to highschool in Littleton years earlier and how "they scare you into conformism and doing good in school by saying: 'If you're a loser now, you're gonna be a loser forever.'" Or, at the very end, just after Moore has emerged from Heston's home, by the mere presence (however unrepresentative he may seem to be on the surface) of the young man in the gun shop wearing a cap that says "Fuck Everybody" on it. "In your mind," says Moore, "you imagine somebody who might break into your house, to harm you or your family. What does that person look like?" "You," responds the young man. "Her. Him. The camera guy, anybody. Could be a gun in the camera, I don't know."

In summary, then, what Moore's films offer is the spectacle of the US undergoing a penetrating self-examination, which often takes the form of a fairly devastating self-critique – the kind, I would add, that those of us who are non-Americans might do well to emulate. And as I indicated earlier, to say this – that Moore wants to make the kind of films that can raise fundamental questions; to do this for the widest possible audience; and in as non-patronizing a way as possible, one that won't end up by making these questions seem less challenging than they are, or by blunting their edge – is clearly to go a long way towards saying what needs to be said concerning Moore's artistic (as well as his political) ambition. Which is just as well since at this point I clearly don't have the room to say much more about it. In fact, in the circumstances, I will restrict myself to just a few remarks on *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Though there can be no question of my attempting, in the space remaining here, an exhaustive analysis of this film, I do want to make it clear why I think so highly of it.

### ***Fahrenheit 9/11***

We worked hard on creating a work of cinema that would move people not just politically but on an emotional and visceral level. I hope we have made a contribution to this art form we love so much. —Moore (Introduction to *Official Fahrenheit 9/11 Reader*, xv)

#### The film's opening

The first image is of one of America's favourite ways to celebrate: a fireworks display. We first see and hear the sound of fireworks against a dark and otherwise silent background before cutting to a shot of Al Gore and his supporters celebrating his Florida victory and (in

the film's opening words) Moore's voice-over asking "Was it all just a dream?" If *Bowling* ended with Moore leaving "the Heston estate" and reentering what he calls "the real world," our first glimpse of which (from slow motion footage of people fleeing in the subway, taken I imagine from some disaster movie) makes it look more like a nightmare, Fahrenheit begins by making clear what Moore and many others believe "really happened" on election night 2000: the election was stolen. Instead of explicitly stating this in his film, in the opening minutes, Moore shifts (in the first transition) from the dream-like atmosphere of Al Gore's victory celebration (accompanied by somewhat muted, jolly, banjo music in the background) to some of the connections that suggest this is what happened. Then, around the three-minute mark, the banjo stops, the screen fades to black, and we get the second transition, this time to footage of Al Gore presiding over a Joint Session of Congress and being obliged to publically deny the attempts made by various Black Congressmen and women to recognize him as their legitimate President. Our feelings during this scene are surely mixed: on the one hand, it is heartening to see these brave men and women standing up for what they believe; on the other, it is sad to reflect on how they have been let down; and maddening to see how they are surrounded by politicians themselves unwilling to risk stepping outside the framework of legality that protects them. I would think that in many of us this mixture is likely to produce, in reaction, a lump in the throat. The scene takes us up to the five-minute mark, at which point we get another abrupt change of mood as the screen dissolves to TV coverage of a rainy Inauguration Day.

Now, for many of us, the mood becomes one of first relief and then positive elation because we see that there are crowds protesting, calling out "Hail to the thief," and pelting Bush's limousine with eggs. This brings the Inauguration parade to a halt and Bush's limousine is then forced to accelerate as we see security guards running to keep up. As the voice-over tells us, "Bush's limo hit the gas to prevent an even larger riot. No President had ever witnessed such a thing on his Inauguration Day." It looks for a few moments like one of those movies in which a President is under threat, but it is real footage. For a short while, then, the mood remains triumphant before it shifts again, as we move this time into an upbeat, breezy sequence in which the President seems to be spending an excessive amount of time on vacation and is frankly made (admittedly, though, with his active cooperation) to look ridiculous. This takes us up to the ten-minute mark, at which point we get the second fade to black and the credit sequence begins. To the accompaniment of deliciously quiet, tinkling music, and to our great delight, we see, during the credits, Bush and some of his cabinet members getting their faces made up before they appear before the camera. (The fact that, as we of course know very well, everyone who appears on TV has to go through a similar process in no way diminishes our keen enjoyment. After all, a good deal of the power these people exert has to do with their success in manipulating image and spectacle.)

Finally, at the end of the credits (around twelve minutes in) the screen goes black again, but this time it stays black for just over a minute as we hear planes hitting towers and the sounds of distress and great confusion on the streets. When we begin to see the people on the street, we can't hear the actual sounds they are making; for a while, all we can hear is a bell tolling, followed a few moments later by the sound of violins. Only at this point do we very briefly hear some voices ("Save their souls, Lord") before silence again descends and, in slow motion, we see people running away from the falling debris.

I submit that what we have in this opening sequence is an artist at the height of his powers. The pacing is superb and the mood changes are masterly, as we (we non-Bush supporters)

move from disappointment through anger and then sadness to exultation and then anger again, and then to feelings of awe as we find ourselves again taking in the bottomless grief on the faces of passers-by, the human effects of the attack on the Trade Center. It seems to me that there is absolutely nothing inappropriate in noting that all of this is transmitted to us through art. Moore's touch is so respectful (where respect is due) and so splendidly irreverent (where irreverence is due); the aesthetic effects he achieves (the use of sound, of silence, of slow motion) are entirely in the service of what seems humanly and morally most important. It is an astonishingly accomplished performance. And here, as elsewhere in Moore's work, a by no means negligible part of what astonishes us (and feels liberating) is the realisation that so much material is out there and available<sup>13</sup>; and that Moore is one artist who knows how (cinematically) to make use of it to maximum effect. I now want to offer some thoughts on the kind of audience I think the film is appealing to.

How should we understand the "our" in "get[ting] the world back in[to] our hands"?

Though it is *Fahrenheit 9/11* I have in mind, I want to take my first example of someone I think "our hands" now includes from outside of Moore's work: Wilton Sekzer is a retired NYPD sergeant, who tells his story in Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2005). Sekzer fought in Vietnam. At twenty-one-years of age he was a door gunner in an army helicopter. "I grew up," he explains, "knowing that should the situation arise, you were expected to answer the call when the country made the call":

There was no such thing as 'Well, I wonder if my country is right. Is anybody lying to me about this?' You don't grow up thinking that. You grow up saying 'If the bugle calls, you go.'

When Sekzer subsequently learned that his "country" had lied to him and his fellow citizens (that the reason President Lyndon Johnson gave for declaring war – his claim that US ships were attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin – was false), it seems that his reaction was one of sad resignation ("There was no need to lie"). In itself, it did not succeed in shaking his sense of patriotism. So after he lost his son in the Trade Center on 9/11, he believed President Bush when the latter went before Congress and identified the enemy as Saddam Hussein, who he maintained was "harboring terrorists, including members of Al-Quaeda." An enthusiastic supporter of the war, Sekzer even went so far as to request that his son's name be put on one of the guided bombs to be dropped on Iraq. And his request was granted. But Sekzer has a change of heart when he later hears his President pressured into admitting that "we've had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved in September 11th." Sekzer's reaction to this news is worth giving in some detail:

What is he? Nuts or what? What the hell did we go in there for? ... I was mad ... My first thought was "You're a liar." I'm from the old school. Certain people walk on water, the President of the United States is one of them. If I can't trust the President of the United States ... [there is a particularly significant pause here] ... I don't know. It's a terrible thing when American citizens can't trust the President. You begin to wonder, what the hell's with the whole system. There's something wrong with the entire system.

I should note that the above speech is full of thoughtful pauses as we see Sekzer leaving his apartment and getting on the subway train for New York, the one he was on when he first saw the Trade Center in flame, and also that the speech culminates in an obviously painful self-examination. Sekzer feels that some will call him a war-monger for arranging to have his son's name put on the bomb, but he says that he's not sorry because he "acted under the

conditions at that time.” He then asks himself “Was it wrong?” and quickly answers, “It was wrong but I didn’t know that.” And finally, he asks the question “Is it regrettable?” – his only answer to this being a deep sigh.

On the one hand, then, I would say that Moore is trying in his work to reach such “ordinary” people as Wilton Sekzer – people whose willingness and ability, when challenged, to question the deeply held beliefs on which their sense of reality is founded makes them extraordinary. Think, for another example, in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, of the role played by Lila Lipscomb, who we first see at work in her job of executive assistant in Career Alliance, Flint. Lila is someone who, in the past, has advised her children that the military is a good option since she “can’t afford to have [them] go to college.” We next see her outside her home, putting the flag up in the morning, something she started doing when her daughter was in Desert Storm, and has been doing every single day since. In response to Moore’s questioning, she confesses that she “always hated the protesters” (“It was just, like, they were dishonoring my son” [a soldier in Iraq]), right up until she “came to understand that they weren’t protesting the men and women that were there, they were protesting the concept of the war.” Then a bit later on, we see her surrounded by her family, in a very emotional scene in which she recalls the moment when she learned that her firstborn son died in action. Choking back tears, the anguished Lila reads from a letter she had received from her son in which he had expressed his anger against the President (“He got us out here for nothing whatsoever. I am so furious right now, Mama”). And as Lila’s husband, Howard, adds, the “sickening part” about such lost lives is the question “For what?”

Since I am apparently not alone in this,<sup>14</sup> I will admit for what it’s worth that on a first viewing I too found myself resisting the later scene in which we see Lila distraught outside the White House, but I have come to think it powerful and justified. This is partly because I have belatedly taken in the significance of Moore’s telling us in the film that the scene took place as a result of Lila’s calling to tell him “that she was coming down from Flint to Washington, D.C., to attend a jobs conference” and that she “was going to go and pay a visit to the White House” on her break. It is also because I have now become convinced of the wisdom (human and political) in Moore’s giving such prominence to someone like Lila, a proud patriot and self-declared “conservative Democrat.” And finally, another factor in there somewhere is my sense that my initial resistance was largely to Lila’s expression of grief, to her tears. I have a tendency to too quickly equate such scenes with sentimentality and that tendency in itself is perhaps what I ought to be resisting: it may be more my problem than the film’s.

We can see Moore’s genuine concern for people like Lila and Wilton in a sequence in *Fahrenheit 9/11* that begins with Donald Rumsfeld claiming that the “targeting capabilities and the care that goes into targeting is as impressive as anything anyone could see” (intercut with shots of an area being carpet bombed, then of an “Iraqi baby’s head being sewn up with no anesthesia”). This is followed first by newsreel footage of an Iraqi woman “standing in rubble – hysterical with grief,” and then by Britney Spears (“looking,” again – like the previous quotation – in the words of the screenplay, “bored and obnoxiously chewing gum”) being interviewed by CNN’s Tucker Carlson (“Honestly,” she tells him, “I think we should just trust our President in every decision that he makes ...”). This sequence ends with Moore’s voice-over narration pointing out (over “footage of Bush taking podium for State of the Union address – to large cheers”) that “Britney Spears was not alone. The majority of the American people trusted the President, and why shouldn’t they? He had spent the better part of the last year giving them every reason why we should invade Iraq.”<sup>15</sup>

If Lila is perhaps less “old school” than Wilton (she wears what she calls “a multicultural, a multicolor cross” and says proudly that her family is “multicultural”), I suggest we might think of the two of them together at the conservative end of a spectrum of the various types we could think of as being included when Moore speaks of trying to “get the world back in our hands.”

### **Moments of elation**

This is an impressive crowd. The haves, and the have mores! Some people call you the elite. I call you my base.—President Bush in tails, addressing a fund-raiser (in *Fahrenheit 9/11*)

Immoral behavior breeds immoral behavior. When a President commits the immoral act of sending otherwise good kids to war based on a lie, this is what you get.<sup>16</sup>—Moore’s narrative voice-over, as we see footage of US soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees (in *Fahrenheit 9/11*)

I will make my final point with the help of the four San Francisco Bay Area-based authors of *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. They start off by reminding their readers that on “February 15, 2003, and again on March 15, with the first wave of bombing by that time a matter of hours away, millions of people took to the streets to voice their opposition to the oncoming invasion of Iraq.” This is what they then go on to say:

The marches began in Melbourne and Sydney, and swept westward with the sun. The centers of Rome, Tokyo, London, Paris, Madrid, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Dhaka, Barcelona, New York, San Francisco, and a thousand other communities were choked with banners and echoing with rejection and disgust. Believable estimates the day after put the number of demonstrators in February between fifteen and twenty million ... The “embittered few” had become the disbelieving and contemptuous many.

In common with almost everyone, the writers of this book could hardly believe their eyes as they swung with the crowd into San Francisco’s Market Street. Out of the torpor and humiliation of “politics” in George Bush’s America had come, abruptly, a foreshadowing of a different way of life ... Where had this energy been sleeping? Why had the months-long combined opposition of Republicans and Democrats, aimed at making opposition to empire unthinkable – unrepresentable – so signally failed? How could it be that the idiom of the chants and placards, which for a moment made a world, had so unerringly decided on the proper form of reply to the predawn barrage of lies ...

We take such moments of elation seriously.<sup>17</sup>

But of course, as these authors go on to admit, “Elation is one thing, effectiveness another” (3). In the event, *Fahrenheit 9/11* could not prevent the reelection of the war President. But a mark of the film’s authenticity, a sign that it is indeed a work of true artistry (even if – to offer an instructive contrast – it is less obvious as artistry than the work of the other great contemporary documentarian, Errol Morris),<sup>18</sup> is that it can still produce moments of elation, even now. They signify what may still be possible and I would have thought that, in our present predicament, we can not afford to overlook them.

*Garry Watson teaches in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. He has contributed two earlier pieces to Cineaction: on the Western, and on the film Naked. His book The Cinema of Mike Leigh: A Sense of the Real was published by Wallflower Press in 2004.*

## Notes

1 John Berger, "Foreword: 'The Work of a Patriot,'" to Michael Moore's *The Official Fahrenheit 9/11 Reader*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004: (ix-xi) xiii. ([return](#))

2 Moore was responding to Rose's asking him "What has shaped you and your political thought?" See the *Bowling for Columbine* dvd. "Probably most important," Moore responded, "was the parents I was raised by." ([return](#))

3 Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker*, January 8, 1991. Reprinted in *Kael's Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988-1991*, Dutton: New York, 1991: 242-45. ([return](#))

4 See *Bowling for Columbine* DVD. ([return](#))

5 Distinguishing between the individual and the institution, Chomsky says that, while "slavey, for example, or other forms of tyranny are inherently monstrous ... the individual participating in them may be the nicest guy you can imagine – benevolent, friendly, nice to their children, even nice to their slaves, caring about other people. As individuals they may be anything. In their institutional roles they are monsters." He says this, incidentally, shortly before we see Moore talking with Phil Knight. ([return](#))

6 Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," *Commentary*, March 1961. Reprinted in *Roth's Reading Myself and Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975: 120-21. ([return](#))

7 R.D.Laing, "Preface" (1965), *The Divided Self* (1960), Harmondsworth: London, 1970: 11. ([return](#))

8 Roland Barthes, "Preface," *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers, New York: Noonday P, 1992: 12. ([return](#))

9 If this sounds a bit awkward, grammatically, it is (or seems to be) improvised speech. ([return](#))

10 See *Bowling for Columbine* DVD. In the rest of the speech, Moore suggests that Americans need "to aspire to be more Canadian like." Moore's completely uncritical and highly idealistic notion of Canada is something that clearly needs to be examined but (not having the space to do it here) I will do that elsewhere. What I perhaps ought to note, however, is that assuming Moore is serious about the possibility that his country may be "nuts" may help us better understand the kind of humour (anarchic, sick, crazy, sometimes almost deliberately-seeming unfunny, hectoring, stubbornly persistent) that we find him indulging say, in *TV Nation* (what little I've been able to see of it so far) and in his one, non-documentary film, the political satire (or burlesque), *Canadian Bacon*. The logic would seem to dictate that if we are indeed nuts, then it may take nutty, manic, disconnected-seeming

forms of humour to restore us to our senses. I suppose it could be argued that Stanley Kubrick (who Moore says is his favourite director) was pursuing this logic in his film *Dr Strangelove*, an obvious influence on *Canadian Bacon*. ([return](#))

11 Chomsky is discussing the impact Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's 1992 film *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* has had (see the dvd version). ([return](#))

12 Of course it isn't just a question of one fear: Moore's films describe quite a few. One he neglects to mention – fear on the highway, and the SUV as one answer to it (at least for those inside the vehicle – it actually makes me, on the outside, more fearful) – gets expressed in *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (Of course, some of the Supersize vehicles one sees more and more on American highways make the point even more forcefully.) I'd also like to draw attention here to something the fine novelist and short-story writer, Mary Gaitskill, had to say on the subject a few years ago in a piece on the film made from her story "Secretary." As against those who claim Americans want to be victims, Gaitskill argues that "this apparent desire to be a victim cloaks an opposing dread – I believe," she tells us, "that Americans are in fact profoundly, neurotically terrified of being victims, ever, in any way. This fear is conceivably one reason we just waged a grotesque and gratuitous 'war' in Iraq – because Americans couldn't tolerate feeling like victims, even briefly. I think it is the reason every boob with a hangnail has been clogging the courts and haunting talk shows across the land telling his/her 'story' and trying to get redress for the last twenty years." ("On the Film 'Secretary' – Victims and Losers: A Romantic Comedy," *Zoetrope*, Fall 2003: [102-5]: 105.) ([return](#))

13 Toplin informs us, for example, that the video "showing seven minutes of inaction after the president was informed of the attacks of 9/11 ... fell into Moore's hands with little effort. His research team called the Sarasota school to ask if anyone had made a recording of the president's visit. Sure enough, a teacher had set up a video camera to capture the important moment in the school's history. School officials were happy to turn over their coverage of the entire event" (43). ([return](#))

14 Toplin tells us, for example, that Mark Kermode, writing in the *English Sunday paper*, the *Observer*, found "the film's treatment of Lila Lipscomb especially troubling. Moore 'heartlessly records Lipscomb's anguish, reported Kermode, who felt "growing revulsion for a film-maker who would resort to such tactics" (Toplin 53). ([return](#))

15 I have been quoting in this paragraph from the screenplay of *Fahrenheit 9/11* in the *Reader*. ([return](#))

16 here is, in this connection, an interesting moment in the exchange Moore had with Charlie Rose shortly after the release of *Bowling for Columbine*. Explaining that he believes Bush has taken the US into Iraq on the basis of a Big Lie, Moore says that the "kernel of truth to this lie is that Saddam Hussein is a really bad guy." "And," says Rose, "he has and wants weapons of mass destruction." "As," Moore adds, "do a lot of bad guys in this world." "The point is," says Rose, "he has them, and wants them." (See the *Bowling for Columbine* dvd.) Since Rose seems basically liberal and fair-minded in his sympathies, this nicely gives us a glimpse of the kind of consensus Moore later found himself up against. ([return](#))

17 an Boal, T.J.Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts, (*Retort*), *Afflicted Powers*:

Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War, London & New York: Verso, 2005: 1-2. ([return](#))

18 Their styles are radically different and I greatly admire both of them. Unlike Moore's, Morris's style is austere. Think, for example, of Morris's decision to do without a musical score throughout *Gates of Heaven* and of his reliance solely on the music of Philip Glass in *The Thin Blue Line* and *The Fog of War*. This, together with a much tighter, I would say narrower, conception of the subject under investigation, help convey a sense of purity, high art and classicism. Compared to this, Moore's works seem deliberately impure: their soundtracks are extremely varied (though mostly drawing, very freely, on popular music) and the visual archive material Moore utilizes is much more heterogeneous. ([return](#))