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# The People and Me: Michael Moore and the Politics of Political Documentary

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THE PEOPLE AND ME:  
MICHAEL MOORE AND THE POLITICS OF POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY

A Dissertation Presented

by

JON S. OBERACKER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Department of Communication

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JON S. OBERACKER

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## DEDICATION

For my parents, who made this possible.

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First and foremost I extend the most heartfelt thanks to my advisor, Carolyn Anderson, who has literally been with me every step of the way throughout my graduate career. As all her students know, the word “advisor” hardly does justice to the care and dedication Carolyn brings to her work as a scholar, teacher and mentor, and I am eternally grateful to have had her steady hand to guide me throughout the years. Her knowledge and expertise have shaped this dissertation in innumerable ways. Her intellectual generosity and professional mentorship have permanently effected me, both as a scholar and a teacher.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE PEOPLE AND ME: MICHAEL MOORE AND THE POLITICS OF POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY

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Perhaps no one has had more influence on the role of political documentary in the contemporary public sphere than filmmaker Michael Moore. His unique melding of committed political arguments with an ironic reflexive style have changed the very look and feel of documentary film, contributing significantly to the form's newfound popularity. Furthermore, his steadfast commitment to progressive politics has given the issue of socioeconomic "class" the kind of attention it rarely receives within the mainstream media. However, Moore's films have also been the recipient of viscous attacks from his political opponents, and subject to some of the most contentious public debates over the documentary form since the 1960s. This study integrates documentary theory and poststructuralist discourse analysis within a critical/cultural studies perspective to map out the ways in which generic conventions, interpretive strategies and rhetorical maneuvers have often combined to undermine the political goals and cultural legitimacy of Michael Moore and his films.

First, I look at the ways in which Moore's own deployment of a patronizing mode of address transforms his films into "fantasies of advocacy"; narratives that invite an



imagined audience of fellow advocates to evaluate and judge the lives and behaviors of the working-class subjects depicted on-screen. Such a depiction only works to strengthen middle-class forms of social authority which have worked, historically, to encourage class resentment. Second, I describe the ways in which Moore is also undermined by a mass media system within which progressive views are not often welcome. I explain how a number of discursive logics worked to frame Moore at various times throughout his career as an untrustworthy documentarian pushing Leftist propaganda, as an “indie film auteur” providing innovative cinematic experiences to middle-class audiences, and as a savvy celebrity-huckster selling political entertainment to embattled liberals. Finally, I describe how Moore’s opponents on the political Right exploited the problematic aspects of both his rhetorical strategies and public reception to paint Moore as a “Liberal Elitist,” a move that worked to derail the political effectiveness of *Fahrenheit 9/11* during the 2004 election.

By describing the complex, public articulations of Michael Moore and his films, this study contributes to the fields of documentary studies, media studies, cultural studies and political rhetoric.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: ARTICULATING MICHAEL MOORE

*"We violated the two rules of documentary filmmaking.  
Our film is entertaining and people are going to see it."*<sup>1</sup>

– Michael Moore

#### Introduction

In September, 2004, filmmaker Michael Moore brought documentary film to a place it had never been before: the floor of the Republican National Convention. The spectacle of Senator John McCain, not only referencing Moore in his convention speech, but gesturing to Moore himself, who responded in kind from the balcony press corps with gestures of mock humility, stands as an intriguing and important moment in the history of American documentary. This scene is particularly intriguing where *political* documentary is concerned.

As Paula Rabinowitz has pointed out, political documentary, at least on the Left, has more often than not been geared towards a targeted audience; namely, itself: “Radical reportage and documentary films often provide the Left, or its various subcultures, with a self-understanding. It represents itself to itself ...” (11-12). While this kind of rhetoric may have its place, it has led many to denounce the effectivity of political documentary as a vehicle for social change, mainly because it fails to “reach” a popular audience. Many fault the partisan nature of explicitly political documentary discourse. As Jay Ruby has put it: “... documentary images with a political intent are usually viewed by the already committed, people who immediately comprehend the film’s thesis. Few

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<sup>1</sup> Hartl, “Oscar” L8

revolutions were won in a movie house ..." (147). Others have faulted political documentary's own weighty sense of self-importance for short-circuiting its ability to do what film does best: excite and entertain. As Brian Winston has bluntly argued, the tradition of American political documentary, from Grierson onwards, has been nothing but "a virtual guarantee of boredom" (254). Seen in this light, whatever the "effects" of his films may be, the fact that Moore was not only referenced in an RNC speech by one of the party's most prominent figures, but made the direct recipient of an ad-hominem attack, marks the documentary's conspicuous move out from under the shadow of such marginalization.

Whether or not this has been a move for the best is another matter. McCain's remarks are particularly important for the way in which they framed the filmmaker and his work. Making a somewhat coy, but hardly disguised, reference to *Fahrenheit 9-11*, McCain offered a damning indictment of Moore that night which played well to the Republican party faithful:

Our choice wasn't between a benign status quo and the bloodshed of war. It was between war and a graver threat. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Not our political opponents. Not – and certainly not – and *certainly* not a disingenuous filmmaker who would have us believe that Saddam's Iraq was an oasis of peace ....

McCain's choice of words here is important, for it reveals an interpretation of Moore and his work that, in the wake of *Fahrenheit*'s release, became a common sense frame for understanding the film and its importance. Moore's work, his public persona, and the public reception of both, will be the subjects of this dissertation. By combining careful textual analysis of Moore's first four feature films (*Roger & Me* [1989], *The Big One*



[1997], *Bowling for Columbine* [2002]) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* [2004]) with a broader discourse analysis of the interpretation of these texts by the popular press, I hope to analyze the ways in which Moore's work was articulated within a variety of discursive contexts that effected both his status as a political documentarian, in general, and his status as a *working class* documentarian, specifically.

But before I sketch out my plans for such an analysis, it is useful to look at the way in which McCain's comments offer a particular understanding of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. This understanding relies upon two accusations about the film: first, that it was dishonest, and second, that it was in some way "elitist." This is an important interpretation because the concepts of honesty and elitism are crucial points around which the very meaning of documentary has often been focused.

The accusation of dishonesty is obvious, and here McCain's use of the word "disingenuous" is important. Moore's detractors constantly accused him of clever manipulation and misleading representations – of "playing fast and loose with the facts." *Fahrenheit 9/11* was often characterized as nothing more than a clever piece of political propaganda masquerading as documentary.

Perhaps more important than the accusation of disingenuousness, however, is the implication of Moore's elitist attitude. McCain makes a dramatic plea for people to assert their own agency against Moore's authoritative stance: "*Don't let anyone tell you...!*" In this careful phrasing, McCain not only alludes to the accusations of dishonesty surrounding *Fahrenheit*, but the charges of "liberal elitism" continuously leveled against Moore. In this interpretation, Moore is characterized, in stereotypical terms, as a

“limousine liberal” (Goldstein 7), or a member of the “entertainment elite” (Medved 15A) – a figure detached from the wants, needs, and values of “real Americans.”

Both of these accusations coalesce around Moore, himself – pointing as much towards his role as media celebrity, as to his role as documentary filmmaker. As such, they point to the problems that arise when documentary filmmakers attempt to insert themselves into their texts, and take specific stands on political issues – the very essence of what is often called “committed” documentary. In Moore’s case, the interpretation of *Fahrenheit 9-11* was often centered not around the text itself, and the arguments it so cleverly made, but around Moore as political activist and “media hound.” Within this interpretive framework, *Fahrenheit 9-11* ceased to be a serious interpretation of the Bush Administration’s decision to go to war, and instead became nothing more than an act of “shameless self-promotion” (Kermode 32). This understanding of Moore is, ultimately, what McCain’s accusation of “disengenuousness” is all about.

What is perhaps most intriguing about this interpretation of Moore and *Fahrenheit 9-11* is that it turns a well-rehearsed critique of the documentary tradition on its head. The development of documentary studies in the past two decades, in the wake of theoretical insights garnered from cultural studies, poststructuralism and postmodernism, has centered around a similar “attack” on classic documentary forms. Whether referencing the expositional films of the Griersonian tradition, the observational-style documentaries pioneered by the cinema verite and direct cinema movements in the 1960s, or ethnographic films developed within the field of anthropology, the documentary, as a form, has been accused of the exact two crimes for which many have accused Moore: ideological dishonesty and patronizing elitism.

In this well-rehearsed argument, documentary forms are dishonest in the way that they present interpretations as truths, framed sequences as “actual reality.” Rabinowitz summarizes this argument:

Documents may appear to be neutral sources of historical truth, but documentaries have and present values; they are persuasive, not simply artifactual. A document purports to tell the truth, but it is always suspect because the truth-claim depends on differentiating itself from fiction, naming itself as non-fiction. Documentary forms often claim to occupy the neutral position of the document.

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This claim of neutrality masks an ideological agenda beneath its surface: documentary is dishonest for the way in which it hides its inherent bias.

More often than not, this inherent bias is bracketed within relationships of social power. As cultural anthropologist and documentary scholar Jay Ruby argues, documentary speaks *from* one position and *for or about* another and, in this way, controls the manner in which those “others” are defined (*Picturing* p#). Thus, the history of documentary film has been marked by a catalogue of essentialist representations – such as the noble savage or the sympathetic working class victim – that work to “explain” other cultures/classes/races/genders in a way that also, and always, puts them in their place. Thus, the “neutral” lens of classic documentary constructs an elitism best captured by Trinh T. Minh-ha’s descriptive phrase: “the power of film to capture reality ‘out here’ for us ‘in here’” (“Totalizing” 95). The very *positionality* of all involved – filmmaker, subject, and spectator – is key to the documentary’s most basic power and, more often than not, that positionality is constructed along an axis of oppression and domination. “A conversation of ‘us’ about ‘them,’” Trinh argues, “is a conversation in which ‘them’ is

silenced’” (*Woman* 67). In this way, documentary has been critiqued not only for its inherent dishonesty, but for an oppressive form of elitism that purports to speak for a whole host of subjects.

The reason McCain’s argument becomes paradoxical is that it highlights as dishonest and elitist the *very tactic* that many scholars have argued might alleviate classic documentary of these problems: what is often called “reflexivity”.<sup>2</sup> Undergirding McCain’s comments is the assumption, held by many in the popular press, that *Fahrenheit 9/11* is an illegitimate form of documentary expression precisely because it is so *subjective* in nature. This is one man’s *opinion*, he seems to be saying – not the *truth*. Indeed, Moore’s films are best known for their unapologetically subjective and openly opinionated style. Moore is always present on-screen, making his case in his own words, and up-front about his political allegiances and strategic purposes. As such, his films owe much to what many documentary scholars call the “reflexive turn” in documentary filmmaking, a turn that many argue works to overturn the most ideologically oppressive aspects of documentary filmmaking. For instance, Jay Ruby has argued vociferously that a reflexive cinema, in which filmmakers “systematically ... reveal their methods and themselves as the instrument of data generation,” is a cinema that *demystifies* the representational process itself – hence, a cinema that is more open and honest, and thus, purportedly less oppressive. By giving up the lie of objectivity, and revealing themselves as makers of meaning, filmmakers should be able to counter act the dishonesty and elitism inherent to the documentary form.

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<sup>2</sup> In the literature on documentary theory, the terms “reflexive” and “self-reflexive” appear to be used, at different times and by different authors, to refer to the same phenomenon. As the term “self-reflexive” seems somewhat redundant, I will use the term “reflexive” throughout.

This critique of classic documentary form has led some scholars to call for what Thomas Waugh calls a more “committed” style of filmmaking (Zimmerman 2000; Ruby 2000; Waugh 1984). According to Waugh, committed documentaries are films that claim solidarity with a specific group or coalition, take an “activist stance” towards certain issues or goals, and work *within* and *alongside* political and social movements (xiv). Thus, many scholars have argued that Moore’s reflexive style, including his “average-Joe” persona and overt commitment to working class issues, place him firmly within this committed tradition (Toplin; Misiak 2006; Orvell 1994-5).

The problem for Moore, however, is that, more often than not, his films are attacked within the public sphere precisely for these reflexive characteristics. Indeed, far from alleviating the problems inherent to the documentary tradition, his reflexive style often seems to exacerbate them. The much-discussed controversy over *Roger & Me* serves as a case in point. The controversy was started by a pair of well-circulated articles (much of the circulating performed courtesy of General Motors): an interview with Moore by Harlan Jacobson in *Film Comment* and a review of the film in the *New Yorker* by famed critic Pauline Kael.<sup>3</sup> Jacobson questioned the way in which Moore “manipulated” the time-sequencing of historical events in an effort to construct a compelling story arc. For Jacobson, there is a rigid distinction between narrative-fiction and documentary and, as such, the very presence of authorial “manipulation” served to delegitimize *Roger & Me* (“Michael” 157). Pauline Kael seconded Jacobson’s complaints about Moore’s subjective manipulations, but directed the brunt of her criticisms at Moore’s first-person, semi-autobiographical style: she felt that Moore exploited his own intimate standing within Flint, MI to depict himself as a knowing savior to a town full of

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the controversy, see Bullert (167-171).

“phonies or stupes” (91). “Moore is the only one the movie takes straight,” she complained. “Almost anybody else is a fun-house case.”

In many ways, the criticisms of Jakobson and Kael became the blue-print for all subsequent attacks on Moore and his films. Throughout his career, Moore’s detractors have decried his subjective style as evidence of dishonesty and deceit, and they have often read his attempt to place himself in and amongst the working class people he films as an act of elitist exploitation. Moore, we are told, is a filmmaker who bends the truth to fit his own arguments, and misleads and cajoles his subjects into unwittingly serving his cause. Indeed, we can see both of these arguments in McCain’s address. Thus, for Moore, the “committed documentary” has been a format rife with contradiction.

This dissertation takes these contradictions as its starting point. Are Moore’s films *committed* in the way that film scholars such as Waugh have advocated? Is “reflexivity” enough to transform documentary into the kind of politically progressive form that Moore strives to create? And what happens when committed documentaries, like Moore’s, enter into the public sphere? How are they interpreted, and according to what criteria? Is there any guarantee that a truly committed documentary will be “read” in the manner scholars recommend? Finally, what is it about Moore’s films and his persona that invite such vicious attacks, especially from his political opponents? Are comments like McCain’s nothing more than empty, right-wing rhetoric, or is there a grain of truth to the inevitable accusations of dishonesty and elitism that have marked responses to every film Moore has produced?

To answer these question, this dissertation will pay close attention to both the texts, themselves, and their contexts. Specifically, this project will integrate theoretical

insights from the field of documentary studies within a broader, critical/cultural studies perspective to map out the ways in which generic conventions, interpretive strategies and rhetorical maneuvers often combine to articulate the political meaning and cultural legitimacy of Michael Moore and his films. The analysis comprises three parts. In the first section I employ close textual analyses to evaluate Moore's narrative strategies. In Chapter Two, I question whether or not Moore's "reflexive" style alleviates the problems associated with the documentary's traditional mode of address. In Chapter Three I evaluate the way in which Moore's narrative strategies affect his portrayal of working class subjects and "working class identity." In the second section I analyze Moore's reception within the popular press. In Chapter Four I employ a historiographical perspective, based in Foucauldian discourse analysis, to examine the ways in which popular understandings of both documentary and art/independent film work to rearticulate the meaning and importance of Moore's films. In Chapter Five I analyze the ways in which Moore's status as a "movie star" and bona fide celebrity rearticulate his working-class image. Finally, in Part Three, I perform a rhetorical analysis of the discourse surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11* in conservative publications and on right-wing websites during the summer of 2004. Chapter Six serves as a case-study, describing the ways in which Moore's political opponents often exploited the problematic aspects of both his films *and* their public interpretations, in an effort to derail the film's political effectiveness.

First, I will place Moore's work within the context of contemporary documentary studies and review the scholarly work on Moore to date.

### **Literature Review: Michael Moore and the "Reflexive Turn"**

## Theorizing Reflexivity

Documentary studies has had a long tradition in American and European film studies, but only since the 1980s has it taken a decidedly theoretical turn. As John Izod and Richard Kilborn argue in their overview of the field, most contemporary theoretical investigations of documentary have started with John Grierson's definition of the form: "the creative treatment of actuality" (427). Implicit within Grierson's rather paradoxical definition is the idea that documentary is never really what it purports to be: an accurate and objective reflection of the historical world. Following the insights of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and deconstruction, along with those of politically-driven projects such as postcolonialism and cultural studies, scholars began to challenge documentary's ability to perform what have long been considered its two most essential functions: to represent reality and tell the truth.

Highlighting the innumerable choices any filmmaker must make – such as camera angle, camera distance, lighting, and editing schemes – scholars began to focus on the fictive elements of nonfiction. Indeed, as more attention was paid to the use of narrative techniques, characterization, musical accompaniment, and other devices more typically associated with fictional cinema, scholarly focus shifted away from the *content* of documentary films, and towards the way in which that content was shaped. It became the working assumption of documentary theory that, as Michael Renov put it (evoking the terminology of Hayden White), "documentary shares the status of all discursive forms with regard to its tropic or figurative character [in] that it employs many of the methods and devices of its fictional counterpart" ("Truth" 3)



In short, scholars shifted their attention away from thinking about the “fact” of documentary, to thinking about the *process* of documentary, a process that hinged upon constructing various interpretations of the historical world *as true*. Postcolonial theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha’s claim that “there is no such thing as documentary” perhaps best summarizes this shift in documentary theorizing:

The real world: so real that the Real becomes the one basic referent – pure, concrete, fixed, visible, all-too-visible. The result is the elaboration of a whole aesthetic of objectivity and the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and what is wrong in the world, and by extension, what is “honest” and what is “manipulative” in documentary.

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Here, Trinh maps out the coordinates for a new theory of documentary. For many scholars, this power to construct a sense of objectivity/neutrality – in other words, the power to present an interpretation of the world as *true* – was understood to be an explicitly ideological function, implicating documentary within larger structures of power. For instance, visual anthropologist Jay Ruby linked the documentary – as a social practice – to the field of anthropology, and specifically cultural ethnography, arguing that they all shared certain underlying assumptions:

They were founded on the Western middle-class need to explore, document, explain, understand, and hence, symbolically control the world, or at least that part of the world the middle-class regards as exotic. Ethnography and documentary are what the West does to the rest of humanity. ‘The rest’ in this case are frequently the poor, the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the politically and economically suppressed.

*Picturing* 168

Thus, acknowledging documentary's complicity in constructing various forms of historical truth, scholars began to focus attention on deconstructing the aesthetic strategies by which it claimed this power. Through this kind of analysis, an "aesthetic of objectivity" was revealed.

Perhaps no other scholar has contributed more to the mapping out of this "aesthetic of objectivity" than Bill Nichols, who coined a phrase that captures this idea perfectly. In his influential 1991 study, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Nichols argued that the documentary form obtained its special status as a truth-telling medium from a broader discursive strategy connected with 20<sup>th</sup> century positivism, what he calls the "discourse of sobriety":

Documentary film has a kinship with those other nonfictional systems that together make up what we may call the discourses of sobriety. Science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare – these systems assume they have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself; they can effect action and entail consequences. Their discourse has an air of sobriety ...

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This discursive logic maintains its power precisely through its ability to define its object of study as part of the actual world: "Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real world as direct, immediate, transparent" (4). In this way, any nonfictional system depends upon an aesthetic strategy of realism, a strategy that has as its primary purpose the construction of a "reality effect." Thus, Nichols mapped out a new analytical taxonomy of documentary based upon what he calls documentary's various "modalities" – organizational strategies utilized by filmmakers to construct a certain kind of relationship between the filmic text and the real world that text depicted.

Nichols describes four main modes, each representing a different relational characteristic: expository, observational, participatory and reflexive.<sup>4</sup> The expository mode is geared towards producing and maintaining the documentary's traditional truth-claim. Usually driven by voice-over commentary which is stylistically marked as neutral and distanced (the "voice-of-God"), its editing style "serves to establish and maintain rhetorical continuity." Every image in the film acts as "evidence" supporting what is said by the narrator, as does any added material such as interviews with subjects. Stylistically, the expository documentary creates an insular sense of textual *authority*.

While the expository documentary saw its heyday in the 1930s, 40s and 50s (and continues, today, as the primary documentary style on broadcast and cable television), it found its counterpart in the 1960s direct cinema movement. These documentaries, by filmmakers such as Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, Frederick Wiseman, and the Maysles brothers, serve as exemplars for what Nichols terms the "observational mode." Characterized by indirect address (overheard/recorded speech, rather than a pre-recorded voice over), observational cinema seems, stylistically, to be the polar opposite of expository filmmaking. But, in fact, it harbors similar conceits about its relationship to the historical world. Utilizing the capabilities of then-new light-weight, portable camera equipment and synch-sound technology, observational filmmakers sought to exploit the indexical power of the recorded image to "capture the real." Unlike the expository mode, the observational documentary seeks to remove all evidence of the filmmaker's presence – or, at least, control – over the filmed event. Thus, the observational mode is geared towards constructing a distancing-effect, in which viewers purportedly observe the world

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<sup>4</sup> Nichols has expanded his taxonomy to include two new modes; the "poetic" and the "performative" (*Introduction*). However, for the purposes of this discussion, reference to his four main modes is sufficient.

from a removed, and hence “neutral” position, deciding for themselves what to think about the goings-on.

From this standpoint, it is apparent that the first two modes represent styles firmly ensconced within Nichols’ “discourse of sobriety,” and thereby, styles that are fully complicit with what Trinh, Ruby and others have revealed to be documentary’s ideological project. However, Nichols’ following two modes indicate a more nuanced awareness of, and perhaps challenge to, documentary’s ideological underpinnings. The third mode in Nichols’ model – the interactive mode – arose from “a desire to make the filmmaker’s presence more evident” (*Representing* 33).<sup>5</sup> In this mode the filmmaker makes an appearance within the diegesis of the film. Characterized by interviews in which interviewees often contradict the filmmaker (as well as one another), the interactive documentary shifts the authority of the film away from the text and towards the subjects of the film (44). As a result, the interactive mode constructs a relationship to the historical world that is markedly different than that of the first two modes. In the interactive mode, truth is often multiple and colored by perspective.

In Nichols’ fourth mode – what he calls the reflexive mode – the text not only seeks to represent the historical world, but engages in a kind of “metacommentary” about the process of representation itself (*Representing* 56). In this mode, the tenets of Realism (or what Trinh calls the “aesthetics of objectivity”) are employed only to reveal and expose them as nothing more than cinematic techniques. In this way, the reflexive mode can be defined as one which rejects the twin assumptions/imperatives of the documentary form: its ability to represent reality and tell the truth:

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<sup>5</sup> Nichols has since renamed this mode the “participatory mode” (*Introduction*).

This mode arrives last on the scene since it is itself the least naïve and the most doubtful about the possibilities of communication and expression that the other modes take for granted. Realist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable argument, the unbreakable bond between an indexical image and that which it represents – all these notions prove suspect.<sup>6</sup>

*Representing* 60

It is precisely this lack of naiveté that so many scholars have latched onto in recent years, claiming the reflexive documentary as a mode that might serve to undermine the ideological function of documentary. As John Corner has argued, reviewing the field of documentary studies at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this suspicious attitude towards traditional documentary modes, and its concomitant theorization of a truly “reflexive” alternative, drives academic writing today, as can be seen in recent work such as Jane Gaines and Michael Renov’s *Collecting Visible Evidence* series (starting in 1999) and in what Corner calls the “intensified academic interest” in reality TV formats, which “have created a whole new popular awareness of representational fraud” (“What” 682). However, scholarly focus on reflexivity was also occasioned by what was defined as a specific shift in documentary *practice*, often referred to as the “reflexive turn,” which began in the 1970s but came to fruition in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

For instance, Paul Arthur describes three central “moments” in American documentary: the New Deal sponsored films of the 1930s, the direct cinema theatrical features of the 1960s, and what he calls the “fashionable, mainstream postmodern documentaries” of the late 1980s and early 1990s (133). According to Arthur, the central

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<sup>6</sup> According to Nichols, the reflexive mode shifts the central relationship at the heart of the documentary from the encounter between filmmaker and subject to that between filmmaker and *viewer*, by inviting the viewer to contemplate the way in which the historical world is actively constructed by the documentary text (60).

features of this new documentary mode are reflexive: the “explicit centering of the filmmaking process and a heavily ironized inscription of the filmmaker as (unstable) subject, an anti-hero for our times” (127). Arthur refers to this reflexive mode of filmmaking as “an aesthetics of failure,” in which “*failure* to adequately represent the person, event, or social situation stated as the film’s explicit task functions as an inverted guarantee of authenticity” (127).<sup>7</sup>

The question of reflexivity is important because most scholars who have written on Michael Moore have located him *within* this reflexive turn. Indeed, Arthur offers *Roger & Me* as an exemplary text for this “postmodern moment.” Not all scholars have agreed, however, on whether or not Moore succeeds in constructing a truly reflexive form of documentary.

### **The “New Documentary” and *Roger & Me***

Of the scholarly work done on Michael Moore, Miles Orvell’s analysis offers the most critically supportive interpretation. Orvell situates his analysis within a comparative critique of two films that deal with the subject of labor relations in corporate America: *Roger* and Barbara Kopple’s Oscar-winning film on the Hormel plant strikes, *American Dream* (1990). Like many scholars working within this theoretical tradition, Orvell uses Nichol’s typology of modes as a starting point. In Orvell’s reading of the films, *American Dream* serves as a straw man of sorts, against which Moore’s reflexive style proves superior. Kopple’s film, he argues, utilizes “the relatively traditional documentary forms

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Williams offers a similar description of what she calls “the low-budget postmodern documentary” (11). Like Arthur, she defines these new documentaries as taking an “ironic stance” towards their goals, as opposed to the more “old-fashioned earnestness” that previous modes displayed (12). This ironic stance is conditioned by the realization and acceptance of the fact that any purported documentary truth “is subject to manipulation and construction by docu-auteurs who, whether on camera (Lanzmann in *Shoah*, Michael Moore in *Roger and Me*) or behind, are forcefully calling the shots.” Williams defines this new role as, specifically, “anti-verite” (15).

that Bill Nichols calls expository and observational,” and thus “conforms to our customary documentary expectations as viewers that we are comfortably in the hands of an all-seeing, all-sympathizing filmmaker” (10). Specifically, Orvell argues that Kopple’s film undermines its own political aspirations by essentializing her subjects in a patronizing manner:

Kopple’s documentary mode is, in rhetorical terms, squarely in the mainstream of the tradition, a function that has, from its beginnings ... offered us the implicit spectacle of a sympathetic observer, empowered by the camera technologies of observation, picturing the powerless for the information (and often entertainment) of the more powerful.

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Thus, Orvell echoes the arguments of many scholars who advocate for the concept of reflexivity when he concludes that Kopple’s film “extends [the classical documentary] tradition without essentially questioning it” (14).

Reflexivity, of course, is the manner by which documentarists *can* question this tradition, and that is precisely what Orvell claims *Roger & Me* does. By incorporating himself and his own self-deprecating perspective into the text, Moore creates a different kind of documentary truth – what Orvell calls “the oblique truth of satire” – as opposed to the sobering “‘straight’ truth of documentary” (16). In so doing: “Moore successfully interrogates the whole premise of traditional documentary form that Kopple, incidentally, accepts” (15). Orvell argues that Moore’s inscription of himself as shambling everyman who fails to achieve his ultimate goal (interviewing Roger Smith), “turns the tables on the traditional documentary form [as] he himself, the man with the camera, becomes the ‘powerless subject (and serves as an analogue to the powerless worker as well)’” (17).

Through his deployment of a reflexive style, Orvell argues, Moore overturns the power relationship between filmmaker and subject, giving full voice to the people of Flint.

Paul Arthur makes a similar argument:

His new job as filmmaker is consistently identified with the conditions of the (often eccentric) unemployed workers; and it is predicated on their mutual failure to make the system work. ... Moore's social solidarity is grounded in a trope of technical awkwardness, a feigned inadequacy and victimization defined against the ruthless instrumentality of General Motors – and, by extension, Hollywood.

130-1

Arthur argues that Moore's critique of GM rejects what has traditionally been a staple of the documentary form: the simplistic replacement of "one acknowledged source of authority with another" (132). *Roger & Me*, Arthur argues, along with a spate of new mainstream documentaries, "substitutes reflexive abnegation for New Deal and direct cinema paradigms of authority" (133).<sup>8</sup>

More recently, film scholar John Dovey has offered a similar reading of Moore's work. Dovey locates Moore's films, up through and including *The Big One*, as part of a new spate of documentaries he terms "klutz films," a category that also includes the work of Nick Broomfield, Ross McElwee, and Alan Berliner. Following Nichols' definition, Dovey describes these films as being "as much about the film itself as they are about a work's nominal subject" (27). This reflexive gesture is constructed via an autobiographical framework that depicts the filmmaker as a "klutz, a failure who makes

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, however, that Arthur does *not* ascribe to *Roger & Me* the radical potential that Orvell claims. Arthur acknowledges that Moore's film is "reminiscent" of the "self-implication" practiced by Jean Rouch, but what remains missing is "a willingness to actually take apart and examine the conventions by which authority is inscribed" (128). Instead, Moore simply "mak[es] sport of them." Thus, while Moore's postmodern irony may loosen up the authoritative nature of the documentary form – and make it more entertaining, to be sure – his reflexive posturing does not constitute, in Arthur's eyes, the kind of transgressive purpose that a truly political reflexivity might achieve.



mistakes and denies any mastery of the communicative process” (27). In Moore’s case, his “self-mockery and witty montage style ... attempts to create [audience] identification not through proclamations of authority but through its opposite: accounts of failure, clumsiness, confusion and ambivalence” (36). Like Orvell and Arthur, Dovey sees political potential in this “aesthetics of failure,” arguing that Moore’s clumsily comedic ambush-sequences, in which he is inevitably thrown out of one corporate lobby or another, work to “position us as the excluded, like Michael, like the workers of Flint, or the workers at Johnson Controls in *The Big One*” (37).

Thus, all these accounts highlight Moore’s formal innovations to the documentary mode. These scholars argue that by incorporating himself within the text, both as historical subject and author of the film, and by openly acknowledging his ability to shape and manipulate the events and images depicted, Moore creates films that are more honest about the power of documentary to shape our understandings of the social world, and that overturn the power-dynamic implicit between filmmaker and subject. Far from working ideologically to shore up the power of the status quo, Moore empowers his subjects and his viewers by adopting a more open, committed and *reflexive* mode of address.

However, this is not the only interpretation of Moore’s oeuvre, and it is here that the concept of reflexivity becomes a bit more complicated. For instance, in his thoughtful and important analysis of *Roger & Me*, Mathew Bernstein rejects the notion that Moore operates within the reflexive mode. Instead, he argues that *Roger & Me* is an ingenious mixture of the interactive and *expository* modes; a mixture that actually leans heavily towards the expository. *Roger*, he argues, offers up a clear, concise thesis that permits

“no ambiguity in terms of the audience’s interpretation of the people, places, and events they see” (402). This lack of ambiguity is achieved, Bernstein argues, via Moore’s deployment of traditional expository strategies, such as rhetorical continuity, in which images consistently corroborate an authoritative voice-over narration. The fact that Moore addresses us in first-person, rather than employing the more traditional omniscient voice of an absent narrator (or “voice-of-God”), does not do much to change the expository nature of *Roger & Me* since, as Bernstein puts it, the narrational strategies deployed by the film (ironic and otherwise) all work towards achieving the same effect: cementing the fact that “only Michael Moore and those who share his views can be believed” (402).

Linda Williams makes a similar argument about *Roger* in her analysis of the “new documentary.” Like Toplin, Williams applauds Moore’s unapologetically personal, and openly partisan style of filmmaking, supporting his contention that, “as a resident of Flint he has a place in the film and should not attempt to play the role of objective observer but of partisan investigator” (388). However, she agrees with Bernstein’s contention that simply being honest about one’s personal feelings does not necessarily translate into radically reflexive filmmaking. For Williams, a truly reflexive documentary would emphasize the “postmodern awareness that there is no objective observation of truth but always an interested participation in its construction.” In her analysis, *Roger & Me* does not hold true to this stance. Instead, the film goes after its own, single-minded version of the truth; “opposing a singular (fictionalized) truth to a singular official lie” (388).

For the most part, I agree with the contentions of Bernstein and Williams, although I don’t think their analyses go far enough in delineating what, exactly, is going

on in Moore's work. For, in many ways, both Moore's scholarly supporters and critics construct a false dichotomy around the concept of reflexivity. According to this logic, reflexivity is the key to constructing a film that is politically ethical and, as such, the question becomes simply to figure out whether or not Moore's films conform to this aesthetic demand. However, while numerous scholars have championed reflexivity as a commendable form, some have challenged the notion that simply employing reflexive gestures *automatically* makes a film more ethically laudable and politically progressive (Ruby; Zimmerman; Minh-ha; Nichols *Representing*; Waugh). Moreover, while most scholars who tackle Moore's work pay close attention to the way in which he "addresses" working class issues, they often tend to take for granted the concept of *class identity*. Moore's films aren't simply *about* working class issues; they are also attempts to shape and define what it means to *be* "working class" in America. As many scholars working from within a cultural studies perspective have argued, media texts never simply "reflect" cultural identities, but aid in their very construction by reinforcing, or sometimes subverting, dominant assumptions and beliefs. Thus, the process of representation – and especially media representation – is crucial to the operation of power structures within society. As Stuart Hall argues,

how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life.

"New" 443

Given such a perspective, it is crucial to not only analyze Moore's mode of address, but the ways in which this mode of address works to construct particular notions of class identity. How do Moore's films "constitute" particular notions of class identity? What modes of identification does he offer up to viewers who may or may not identify themselves as "working class"?

At least one scholar has posed such questions in relation to Moore's work. In his analysis of *Roger & Me*, John Corner focuses on two of the film's more memorable scenes: when Moore visits with a woman who has become a "color consultant" for Amway hair products, and a woman who sells home-raised rabbits as "pets or meat." For Corner, the problem lies with the way Moore constructs these sequences. Through a carefully calculated performance, characterized by dead-pan sarcasm and visual asides to the viewer, Moore constructs a kind of "bonding with the viewer" which serves to objectify the women in a way that is either openly comic, or "darkly grotesque" (*The Art* 162). The reason for these comic portrayals, Corner argues, is the film's "nervousness about appearing to embrace 'dull' documentarist values" (163). However, the result is a tactic that evinces a certain kind of "'bad faith' towards [Moore's] participant[s]," and ultimately deflects attention away from his own social message.

While Corner's analysis does not dig much deeper than that, it does offer a pertinent starting point for looking at the ways in which Moore's films work in relation to the processes of class identification. Scenes like those described above seem to mark a shift in Moore's depiction of working class subjects – from a sympathetic view point, to one of marked embarrassment and even *shame*. What do these portrayals have to say about working class identity, and how do they fit with the way in which class is typically

represented in American culture? These are critical questions that have seldom been asked by Moore-scholars (although references to these issues abound in the popular press). As such, this dissertation will analyze not only Moore's "modes," vis-à-vis his reflexive style, but it will also seek to place his films within the broader context of class discourse and class identity, as it has been traditionally represented in American culture.

### **Discourse and the "Documentary Idea"**

Of course, attending to Moore's texts, themselves, only tells us part of the story. Documentaries do not exist in a vacuum, and this is especially the case with Michael Moore. Almost every one of his films has been met with a series of public controversies that, often times, threaten to upstage the films themselves. And more often than not, it is Moore's "reflexive" strategies and unapologetic *commitment* to particular people and causes that have stirred up these controversies. As such, this dissertation will attend not only to the manner in which Moore's films change the traditional documentary text, but the way in which those changes get interpreted within the public sphere. According to what criteria are Moore's films judged by journalists, critics and pundits? And to what effect? These questions lead us towards another way of defining documentary, and the ideological problematic at its heart; they lead us towards the crucial notion of discourse.

Once again, the work of Bill Nichols serves as an important touchstone. Nichols argues that documentary modes of address are constructed within a particular discursive logic, and in their ritualistic repetition, help to legitimize and reinforce that logic (*Representing* 17). Seen in this way, the documentary "modes" that Nichols defines are not only understood as particular ways to organize the documentary text, but are

understood to be traces of broader, discursive logics at work; logics that determine what a documentary can and can't do; and thus, what it can and can't look like.

In this sense, the audience, itself, becomes a crucial part of what determines a “documentary.”<sup>9</sup> While documentarians may, indeed, be in control of what we see on the screen, they do not create documentaries within a cultural vacuum. Any film communicates to viewers on the basis of pre-given assumptions and conventions, and documentary is no different. Basic expectations – such as the idea that the images we see and the sounds we hear bear an indexical relation to the historical world – are fundamental to the popular understanding of what a documentary is. But, more importantly, they also help define what a documentary *isn't*. Thus, the postmodern, reflexive shifts that Williams and Arthur have described, and that Ruby and Waugh advocate, exist within a discursive logic that is maintained by a variety of interpretive communities which are not predisposed to accept such changes readily. Indeed, according to this logic, the very concept of *committed* documentary, itself – whether overtly reflexive or otherwise – is understood to be somehow corrupt.

Perhaps no one has had more to say about the discursive logic undergirding the documentary tradition in the US (and Britain) than Brian Winston. His influential book, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations* (1995) puts the notion of “legitimacy” front and center. Winston takes as his object of analysis the “realist” documentary impulse, and poses as his central question, *why* this impulse, as opposed to any other? Like Michel Foucault, Winston engages in an “archeology” of ideas, an attempt to map out how and why documentary came to be a realist project to begin with, and an inquiry into the results of that development.

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<sup>9</sup> This argument has also been made, eloquently, by Eitzen.

A summary of this development would be too long to include here.<sup>10</sup> For now, it is enough to say that Winston shows how popular understandings of what a documentary *is* have been shaped by a tradition based upon the positivistic criteria of objectivity and neutrality; a way of thinking that Winston labels “burdensome” (255). As this particular construction of the “documentary idea” took hold, Winston argues, so too did a system of documentary *evaluation*. Thus, despite the continued existence of a real tradition of “committed” documentary, these overtly subjective films continuously became “subject to attack for failing Griersonian standards of ‘objectivity’ and seriousness, that is for being *in their essence* committed” (256). What Winston reveals, then, is a broad discursive logic at work that polices the definitional boundaries of what a documentary is, and what it can be. When documentarians attempt to construct a film that works outside those discursive parameters, they are delegitimized to a point that their effectivity as agents of social change – or even instigators of public discussion – is put in jeopardy.

Thus, paying attention to the way in which such a discursive logic has been deployed to evaluate Moore’s films within the public sphere is crucial. Most scholarly work on Moore has ignored this dimension, although two scholars, B.J. Bullert and Robert Brent Toplin, have addressed it. Bullert’s analysis of the *Roger & Me* controversy describes how the film was framed by the popular press in a way that “relegated the main subject matter of the film into the background when the filmmaker became the story, not the realities he sought to present” (168). Once this interpretive frame was in place, Bullert argues, the political message of the film was lost. Discussion of Moore and his role as documentarian “upstaged” the actual content of the film. Thus, Bullert describes the ability of the popular press to influence the way in which a film is received (168). Her

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<sup>10</sup> I will discuss Winston’s analysis in more detail in Chapter Four.

analysis also shows the ways in which such interpretive schemes can be exploited by political enemies to discredit a particular film, as GM circulated a “truth packet” on the film that reiterated many of these arguments (158).

While Bullert offers a detailed analysis of the way in which the *Roger & Me* controversy played out, however, I do not think her analysis goes deep enough into understanding how this frame was constructed in the first place and, more importantly, *why it worked*. In her analysis, reviewers alone have “the power” to determine the meaning of a film. As a result, reviewers run the risk of becoming pawns for corporate PR spinners, as journalists “unwittingly ... strengthened GM’s campaign to discredit the film” (169). This analysis is too deterministic. Reviewers cannot simply construct an interpretation that defines a film – they work from within discursive frameworks that are already in operation; these discursive frameworks help make their interpretations “make sense” to the public at large. Furthermore, while certainly an example of savvy public “spin”, GM’s PR campaign to discredit Moore’s film *as a documentary* could not have worked unless particular notions of what is and is not a documentary were already held by the general populace. In short, the controversy over *Roger & Me* reveals not only an attempt by political rivals to discredit a particular film, but a discursive logic that makes it difficult for *any* committed, reflexive documentary to be taken seriously *as a* documentary.

Robert Brent Toplin offers a similar analysis of both the *Roger* controversy and that surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11* which also misses their discursive aspects. For Toplin, the controversies over Moore’s films stem from a limited public understanding of documentary’s aesthetic history. Moore’s films, he argues, represent a type of



documentary filmmaking that is “more honest and candid than the traditional reportorial documentary style” (79) Thus, journalists who attacked the filmmaker “demonstrated a rather limited appreciation of the style of documentary production that Michael Moore was undertaking” (26). According to this frame, what was missing in the public reception of Moore’s work was an appreciation of Moore’s contribution to “innovative cinema” (31).

While it is true that *some* journalists certainly displayed a limited understanding of the documentary tradition when criticizing Moore’s films, however, I would disagree with Toplin’s analysis. In fact, despite attempts by GM to quell the tide, *Roger & Me* was hardly made a pariah within the public sphere. Quite the contrary: *Roger* was largely considered a rousing critical *success*. While Moore had his detractors, to be sure, he had a virtual swarm of fervent supporters, especially from within the critical community, who defended Moore in precisely the fashion Toplin advocates: as a brilliant artist and “indie” auteur who had the right to say what he wanted in the way that he wanted to say it. Indeed, it was through a particular “discourse of independent film” (Pribram 2002; Perren 2001-2; Wyatt 1998) that *Roger & Me* maintained a certain kind of legitimacy in 1989, and through that same discourse many of his subsequent films have found support. As such, analyses of Moore’s public reception need to pay attention to this discourse and how it affects the “discourse of documentary” against which it is so often deployed. Mapping out the ways in which these discursive constructs combine to articulate the public image of Moore and his films will be a central part of this dissertation.

Furthermore, Bullert’s argument that Moore, himself, became the central focus of the debate over *Roger* (rather than the film or its arguments) points to another aspect of

his public reception that scholars have neglected to consider in full: the inflated role Moore's celebrity persona plays in his public understanding. As argued, one of the tenets of reflexive documentary is the fact that the filmmaker situates himself (and his politics) front-and-center. Indeed, it is this reflexive gesture that virtually defines Moore's style. As such, any analysis of Moore's public reception must pay attention to the manner in which Moore's image is constructed by and within a contemporary "discourse of celebrity" (Turner; Marshall, *Celebrity*; Gamson, *Claims*). This dissertation will consider the ways in which Moore's image as working class filmmaker and "average Joe" work in conjunction with such a discourse.

Ultimately, analyses of Moore's public reception that focus solely on their controversial status as "documentaries" only uncover the tip of the iceberg. And furthermore, they miss the way that Moore's political opponents have been able to exploit a host of problems, associated both with Moore's public reception *and* the rhetorical strategies deployed by the films themselves, to their advantage. As such, this dissertation will undertake an integrative approach to the study of Michael Moore. I will combine textual analysis and discourse analysis, along with a broadly "rhetorical" perspective, to analyze both the ways in which Michael Moore constructs a particular version of political documentary and the ways in which that construction gets articulated within the public sphere. In particular, I will evaluate the ways in which Moore's textual strategies, their interpretation by the popular press, and their rearticulation by the political right, work to undermine Moore's commitments to working class issues.

### **Methodology and Chapter Overview: Michael Moore as "Cultural Study"**

#### **Articulation Theory and "Media Events"**

This study employs a cultural studies approach to the analysis of what I call the “Michael Moore phenomenon.” In so doing, I begin by characterizing Moore’s films not as texts, per se, but as what John Fiske calls “media events.” According to Fiske, media events are phenomena “whose reality lay, in part, in their mediation” (*Media Matters* xiv). Moore’s documentaries are events that not only produce meaning (about class issues and class identities, for instance), but are also “made to mean” in particular ways, through the ways in which they, themselves, are interpreted and represented within the public sphere. As Fiske argues: “We can no longer think of the media as providing secondary representations of reality; they affect and produce the reality that they mediate. We live in a world of media events and media realities” (xv).

This perspective owes much to the work of Stuart Hall and, in particular, the concept of articulation, which has been so central to cultural studies as a theory and method for social analysis. Hall develops the notion of articulation from the work of Gramsci (by way of Ernesto Laclau), to describe the manner in which dominant ideologies work to shape and define the social world. “Ideologies,” as Hall defines them, “are the frameworks of thinking and calculation about the world – the ‘ideas’ which people use to figure out how the social world works, what their place is in it and what they *ought* to do” (99). This notion of ideology comes from Marx, but Hall utilizes the concept of articulation to loosen up its “determinist” quality; the idea (central to classical Marxism) that ideologies simply “reflect” the economic realities of society and, hence, the interests of those in power. While ideological frameworks do have a determining effect on the way in which we construct our social worlds, Hall argues, those frameworks are not always produced in the same way, by the same social forces. Instead, they are

historically specific constructs, born in one social context, and influential upon the construction of the next. Economic relations play a part in all this, but not a totalizing one. In the end, ideologies maintain a certain “autonomy” of their own and, as such, it is important for scholars to provide an accounting of how ideological constructs work to shape the social world; the concept of “articulation” allows them to do this.

Hall borrows the notion of articulation from Ernesto Laclau, who argues that articulations are the “links between concepts,” and articulation the process through which those links are forged (*Politics*). He uses Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which the cave dweller “mistakenly” ascribes the voices he hears outside the cave to the shadows on the wall. It is only when he ventures outside the cave, “into the light,” that the cave dweller sees the true source of the voices, and ascribes to them their true meaning. Laclau argues that in this allegory, Plato constructed a “primitive notion of articulation,” the way in which *events in the world* become linked to *ideas about the world*. The problem with Plato, of course, was that this allegory led to an opposite illusion: that exposing false links would lead to revealing the true, necessary ones. Of course, in the realm of the social, there are no necessary, universal links, only historically contingent ones. “Consequently, the analysis of any concrete situation or phenomenon entails the exploration of complex, multiple, and theoretically abstract non-necessary links” (Slack 119).

In this formulation, then, articulation refers to “a moment of arbitrary closure” (Slack 115). For Lawrence Grossberg: “Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, and this experience to those politics (quoted in Slack 115). In short, articulation is a way of describing how certain meanings

become fixed at a given historical moment and, thus, how dominant ideologies congeal within complex and ever-changing social landscapes.

The very fact that ideologies must be “fixed” alludes to the fact that dominant ideology is never *given*; it must be struggled over. Hall adopts Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to describe the social world as precisely a struggle over meaning – a constant “war of position” in which various interests struggle to define what will become known as “common sense.” According to Hall, common sense:

represents itself as the ‘traditional wisdom or truth of the ages,’ but in fact, it is deeply a product of history, ‘part of the historical process.’ ... it is the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed.

“Gramsci’s” 431

From this perspective, the social realm constitutes a struggle to control this terrain and, thus, define common sense. The “moment of hegemony” refers to that moment at which this struggle has been (momentarily) won – in which the interests of a dominant group are coordinated with those of other groups, such that one conception of the world, an issue, or an event holds sway (“Gramsci’s” 424).

Articulation, then, refers to the way in which the hegemonic process is carried out. By linking important ideas, issues and events to a particular set of meanings, groups attempt to establish those meanings as common sense (for instance, the way in which free market capitalism is often linked by conservatives in the US to nationalistic understandings of “democracy” and “free choice”). It is through this process of articulation that popular consensus is achieved.

Here it is important to point out a crucial caveat in Hall's theory. The concept of articulation can, at times, give way to an overly optimistic belief in human agency: all we have to do to change the world is "articulate" it in the way that we want. To temper this notion, however, Hall points out that there is also, always a *double articulation* at work in any social structure. Any one articulation always serves to set the terrain for subsequent articulations. Articulation Hall argues, is a "practice" that produces social structures; and those structures have effects. Each set of practices results in a structuring moment that serves as the "given conditions" – the "necessary starting point" – for the next generation of practices. Thus, he argues: "In neither case should 'practice' be treated as transparently intentional: we make history, but on the basis of anterior conditions which are not of our making" ("Signification" 95).

From this perspective, Moore can be understood as a filmmaker attempting to subvert dominant ideologies, specifically those regarding class relations. However, it is not enough to simply acknowledge the fact that Moore's films construct transgressive arguments. Moore's arguments *about* class are made within a social context in which the concepts of "class" and "class identity" have already been articulated in particular ways. Furthermore, Moore must insert his documentaries into a public context in which ideas about "documentary," "art" and "celebrity" have already been established. As such, it is crucial to understand the ways in which Moore's films and personal image resonate within such a context. Finally, by entering into the public sphere, Moore inevitably opens the door to further re-articulations, especially by those who explicitly oppose his political viewpoints. As such, we must pay attention both to the ways in which Moore *articulates*

his arguments – and to the manner in which those arguments get *re*-articulated within the public sphere.

### **Analytical Methods and Chapter Outline**

This study will use a combination of close textual analysis and a type of historiography best defined as discourse analysis to analyze the ways in which Michael Moore's films and image get articulated within the public sphere. Together, these two methods result in a cultural studies approach that is modeled on what Douglas Kellner has defined as "diagnostic critique." According to Kellner, diagnostic critique, broadly defined, is a multiperspectival method that "uses history to read texts and texts to read history" (116). Starting from the basic assumptions of cultural studies – namely, that "media culture is a contested terrain across which key social groups and political ideologies struggle for dominance" – diagnostic critique understands media texts as forms which can both "help to reproduce the current relations of power" and, at the same time, "provide resources for ... empowerment, resistance, and struggle" (2). As such, media texts are understood to be both productive of, and products of, their historical contexts.

Diagnostic critique involves the kind of close, textual analysis used by scholars in the field of film studies, but does not depend upon textual analysis alone. Following Kellner, media texts should always be read "in terms of actual struggles within contemporary culture and society, situating ideological analysis within existing socio-political debates and conflicts, rather than just in relation to some supposed monolithic dominant ideology" (Kellner 103). Furthermore, diagnostic critique should not be understood as just another "theory," but as an actual method for producing a bonafide

“cultural study.” Thus, diagnostic critique is really a form of case study, in which specific phenomena are analyzed in relation to the general theory of cultural formations offered by a cultural studies perspective (as described above). “Theories of the media and culture,” Kellner argues, “are ... best developed through specific studies of concrete phenomena contextualized within the vicissitudes of contemporary society and history” (3). Thus, taking a cultural studies approach towards media texts involves, as Kellner puts it, “carrying out studies of how the culture industries produce specific artifacts that reproduce the social discourses which are embedded in the key conflicts and struggles of the day” (4). By combining textual analysis with discourse analysis, I hope to perform just this kind of diagnostic critique.

### **Part One: Textual Analysis**

The first two chapters of this dissertation will employ close textual analysis to analyze the ways in which Moore’s texts articulate meaning, specifically in regards to Moore’s most enduring subject: the contemporary class structure and working class identity. My approach to textual analysis owes much to the work of Roland Barthes’ concept of semiotic analysis. Barthes envisioned semiotics as a demystifying theory – a way to analyze not only what signs mean, but *how* they mean, within particular historical contexts. My textual analysis of Moore’s work will be based upon the semiotic method, as it was envisioned by Barthes, and as it has been developed within the fields of cultural studies, film studies and documentary studies.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, semiotics has a strong historical connection to cultural studies. In his overview of the field, Dick Hebdidge argues that Barthes’ version of semiotics offered cultural studies practitioners a method by which the ideological analysis of cultural phenomenon, such as media texts, could be undertaken. “Barthes’ application,” he claims, “of a method rooted in linguistics to other systems of discourse outside language (fashion, film, food, etc.) opened up completely new possibilities for contemporary cultural studies” (10).



In his early work on semiotics, Barthes was, as Terrence Hawkes argues, primarily concerned with the way in which everyday speech and writing bore an air of “innocence” (107). Starting with the presumption that “we ‘encode’ our experience of the world in order that we may experience it,” Barthes constructed an analytical method geared towards describing the ways in which cultural texts, from newspapers to photographs to literature, endowed the world with meaning. A key term in Barthes’ semiotics is the concept of “myth,” which refers to “the normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (*i.e.* those in power) are rendered universal and ‘given’ for the whole of society” (Hebdidge 9). The point of Barthes’ methodology was to reveal the manner in which these arbitrary meanings were put in place, and then naturalized as common sense. Thus, semiotics is meant to be a “science of forms.” It attempts to study not only the content of signs but the process of “signification” itself.

It is from Barthes’ semiotic model, among others, that documentary theorists have critiqued the manner in which documentary often performs an explicitly ideological function through what Trinh calls the ‘aesthetics of objectivity’ (REF). In the Chapter Two, I will employ such insights from the field of documentary studies to investigate whether Moore’s “reflexive” form manages to counteract this ideological function (as some scholars have claimed). Specifically, I will argue that it fails to do so. In fact, Moore’s films act as virtual celebrations of some of the most ethically problematic aspects of the documentary form – its ability to interpret, define and often *malign* the subjects we see on screen. While politically, Moore positions himself “in solidarity” with his working class subjects, the singular pleasure offered up by his films is that of social

*advocacy*, in which Moore assumes a position of power and privilege over his subjects, and invites his viewers to do the same. As such, I will argue that Moore's films do not ultimately connote the kind of "political reflexivity" envisioned by scholars such as Nichols, Minh-ha, Ruby and Waugh. Instead, Moore's films constitute "fantasies of advocacy," in which audience members are invited to put themselves in Moore's heroic shoes, speaking truth to power while simultaneously bringing truth to "the people," who can't see the truth for themselves.

In the Chapter Three, I will expand upon this initial analysis, by placing Moore's "fantasy of advocacy" within the broader context of class identity and class relations, as they have been articulated within the US context for the last half a century. I will utilize work done on class and class identity from a cultural studies perspective to describe the ways in which the authoritative mode of address inherent to Moore's films reproduces and reinforces a patronizing discourse of class identity which has often marked Left/liberal articulations of class relations. This discursive logic has often defined working class identities as problematic and, indeed, *shameful* identities subject to inspection, analysis, judgment and *classification*. As such, far from "giving voice" to the working class, Moore's work should more appropriately be understood as one more instance in a long tradition of classifying discourses that serve to cultivate middle class privilege and working class resentment.

## **Part Two: Discourse Analysis**

I not only plan to analyze the main discourses within which Moore's films are structured, but also the public discourses that are brought to bear upon those films. Thus,

through discourse analysis, I will map out the cultural context within which Moore's films are situated, and through which they take on specific meanings.

The definition of discourse analysis I employ stems from the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, the study of society is never simply the cataloguing of events, the description of institutions, or the search for primary "causes." Instead, Foucault is interested in mapping the cultural terrain within which events, institutions, and human actions, exist and, hence, the logic by which society makes sense of them; indeed, the manner in which they literally come to *make sense*. "I think," he has argued, "the central issue of philosophy and critical thought has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: *What* is this Reason we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?" ("Space" 137).

Foucault defines discourse analysis as a method for describing the "relations between statements" about a given topic (*The Archeology* 31). Traditionally, the unity of a discourse had been attached to the object it described (madness, for example), the style utilized to speak about it (medical language), the type of concepts used to describe it, or the persistence of specific themes. However, in every case, what one finds, Foucault argues, is not unity at all, but "systems of dispersions," in which contradictions arise at every turn; objects that change in definition, styles that develop with time, concepts that differ in structure and use, and themes that are incompatible. Thus, for Foucault, the task of discourse analysis involves "describing these dispersions themselves; ... discovering whether, between these elements ... one cannot discern a regularity: an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space ..." (37).

For many scholars, Foucauldian discourse analysis is seen as a method for doing history, or, as Laurie Ouellette has defined it: “discourse as a mode of historiography” (230). This mode of historiography is entirely compatible with a cultural studies approach. For instance, Ouellette references not only Foucault, but the work of John Fiske as exemplary of this type of analysis (230-1). In his book, *Television Culture*, Fiske adopts Foucault’s notion of discourse to analyze the ways in which hegemonic meanings are circulated within popular culture: “Discourse is a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about a given topic area” (14). As such, discourses are inherently ideological in nature, since the meanings they produce tend to “serve the interests of that section of society within which the discourse originates” (14). Thus, according to Fiske, it is through discursive formations that particular meanings become naturalized into “common sense.”

In the realm of film studies, Janet Staiger has contributed what is, perhaps, the most detailed version of a critical methodology based in discourse analysis. In *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Staiger makes the case that “interpreting texts or films is a historical reality determined by context, not an inherent or automatic act due to some essential human process” (18). The goal is to describe the historical emergence of various “interpretive strategies,” and the ways in which these strategies work, in conjunction with texts, to produce specific meanings. Thus, Staiger offers the concept of “reading formations,” which she defines as “the variety of procedures or protocols historically available” for interpreting films (21). I take this concept to be a version of Foucault’s discursive formations; and one that will be

useful for my analysis of Moore's reception within the public realm.<sup>12</sup> To map out a reading formation, the analyst must describe the textual, and extra-textual, "interpretive frames" through which a viewer understands a film. The goal of the analyst is to account for the existence of these frames (why do they exist?), and to describe the way in which they affect actual readings.

For instance, one type of interpretive frame has to do with a text's aesthetic history. Here, Staiger references the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss, whose concept of "horizons of expectation" describes the manner in which "the successive interpretations through which a text has been perceived becomes a ... background that sets up assumptions about a text's meaning and thus influences its current interpretations" (46). Thus, we can describe what Winston calls the "documentary idea," or what I call the "discourse of documentary," as just such an interpretive frame. Seen in this way, the Griersonian tradition of documentary legitimations is understood to be a "horizon of expectation," against which all future documentaries are understood. This is why, in the public realm, Moore's reflexive style often becomes a liability he cannot overcome.

It is important to distinguish my approach from that of a reader-based, or "audience studies" approach. Whereas much of Staiger's work attempts to link discursive formations with historical groups of viewers, I am defining discursive formations as "symbolic constellations" that achieve ascendancy at specific historical moments, and through which various audiences interpret specific texts.<sup>13</sup> Here it is useful to consider the

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<sup>12</sup> Here, it is important to note that Staiger's methodology follows more closely the discourse theory of Foucault than it does, for instance, reader-response theory, as her use of the term "receptions studies" might indicate. Indeed, she references Foucault as an important influence, especially his notion of "historical discourses [and] their function of providing structures for interpretation" (16).

<sup>13</sup> Here I credit to Lisa Henderson for the term "symbolic constellation," and for highlighting this important distinction.

distinction Douglas Kellner makes between *public* readings and *audience* readings. According to Kellner, audience readings would investigate the meaning making processes of specific viewers, as in audience studies or a certain type of ethnographic research. “While these studies provide valuable ... insight into the effects of media culture,” he argues, “there are other ways to study its effectivity” (106). Specifically, he argues that analyzing reviews, criticism, and other references within the popular press can illuminate “the ways that ... texts become embedded in popular discourses and generate a multiplicity of diverse effects” (106). From this perspective, the popular press becomes a site within which to locate and evaluate various public discourses at work.

Indeed, there is much precedent for such an approach. For instance, E. Deidre Pribram has argued that film reviewers, specifically, represent “a second tier of interpretation” that mediates between the intentions of industry personnel and a particular film’s audience (142). Many other scholars, including Staiger herself, have taken a similar approach, analyzing the role that popular press journalists, critics, pundits and reviewers play in the production and circulation of cultural discourses that work to articulate the popular understandings of particular films and texts.<sup>14</sup> My analysis will take a similar approach.

In Chapter Four I will look at the ways in which three cultural “discourses” – the “discourse of documentary,” the “discourse of independent film,” and the “discourse of infotainment” – all worked at various times to delegitimize the political potency of Moore’s films and the integrity of Moore, himself. In so doing, I hope to reveal a broader social logic that appears to inhibit the legitimate airing of alternative political views within the public sphere. Furthermore, I will consider the ways in which all three

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<sup>14</sup> See: Cooper and Pease; Projansky; Projansky and Ono; Staiger, “Taboo”; Morris.

discourses work to reinforce the problems associated with Moore's patronizing mode of address, as it will be defined in Chapters Two and Three. Chapter Four will describe the ways in which Moore's textual strategies often combine with their public interpretations to re-articulate his documentaries as "indie" films geared towards an elite, discerning audience of "serious" film goers (read: "educated" and middle-to-upper class), rather than as popular entertainments geared towards broad, mass audiences (that would presumably include working class constituencies).

In order to perform this analysis, I compiled a convenience sample of newspapers and periodicals featuring writing on Moore's four main films as well as his two television series, *TV Nation* (1994) and *The Awful Truth* (1998). As there has been an inordinate amount of material written on Moore since *Roger & Me* debuted, this sample had to be narrowed considerably. For newspapers, I analyzed only those papers listed in Lexis-Nexis under the "Major Papers" category. Furthermore, since my project focuses on the public debates surrounding Moore and his work, I looked only at material that was written during the theatrical runs of his four major films, and the debuts of his two television series; the moments in which public debates about Moore were most intense. I examined articles published roughly two weeks prior to a film's opening weekend and three to four weeks after.

I also identified moments of increased public attention specific to each film and included material written around those time periods. For *Roger & Me* these moments included its screenings at the Telluride, Toronto and New York film festivals, as well as the moment Oscar nominations were announced in early 1990 (when *Roger* was infamously "snubbed"). For *Bowling For Columbine*, I considered articles written during

the 2002 Cannes Film Festival (at which it received the Special Jury Prize) as well as articles written around the 2003 Oscar ceremony (at which Moore delivered his infamous anti-war speech). For *Fahrenheit 9/11*, I examined articles written during the 2004 Cannes Film Festival (at which Moore received the Palme d'Or, and during which news of the Disney-scandal first broke), and articles written during the 2004 Democratic and Republican National Conventions (both of which were attended by Moore).

Beyond newspapers, I also looked at popular periodicals, such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Rolling Stone* (among others). To compile this list I used the Reader's Guide Abstracts database to search for articles using Moore's name, or the names of his films/shows, as subject-headings. As the overall output for magazines is significantly less than that of newspapers, I did not use any time-frame restrictions to narrow my list. In addition to these sources I also analyzed a small sample of television news reports covering Moore, which I obtained from the holdings of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive. I also used the television transcript search engine on Lexis-Nexis to find specific programs in which Moore appeared or was discussed, when led to them through researching other materials.

This same sample of sources was used in Chapter Five, which analyzes the way in which Moore's public persona has often been constructed by and within the popular press. One of the keys to Moore's popular success is his attempt to combine the progressive goals of political documentary with the pleasures of celebrity culture. Ultimately, however, Moore's ability to promote himself as a political star has been a double-edged sword. His status as political celebrity has provided the popular press with a convenient trope with which to delegitimize the meaning and importance of Moore's



political project. To develop this argument I follow work done on stars and celebrity culture by scholars working from a cultural studies perspective (Turner; Dyer, *Stars*; Marshall, *Celebrity*; Gamson, *Claims*). I describe a number of ways in which Moore's role as celebrity-advocate has impacted his political efficacy: by reframing structural arguments in terms of individualist narratives; by distancing Moore from his working-class roots and recontextualizing him as "political provocateur"; and by rearticulating his working-class background as a carefully constructed "pose" that is deemed inauthentic. Ultimately, I argue that these frames allowed the mainstream media to soften the radical edges of Moore's work, while also undermining his credibility as a "working-class" figure.

### **Part Three: *Fahrenheit 9/11* as Case Study: A Rhetorical Perspective**

In the first four chapters I perform a discursive analysis of the "Michael Moore phenomenon," analyzing the ideological consequences of Moore's mode of address, his patronizing depiction of class identity, his public reception as an indie-auteur, and his status as a political celebrity. In this last chapter I consider the *strategic* consequences these discursive acts have wrought. Using *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a case-study, Chapter Six considers the political consequences of Moore's particular version of political documentary. Placing Moore's work within the historical context of what Chip Berlet and Mathew N. Lyons call "right-wing populism," I analyze the ways in which Moore's political opponents framed the filmmaker within a discourse of "liberal elitism," thus transforming *Fahrenheit 9/11* from a brilliant critique of the Bush administration into a convenient symbol with which to denounce the entire Democratic Party. Furthermore, I describe the ways in which Moore's own rhetorical strategies and articulation within the

public sphere *invited* such an interpretation, by unwittingly invoking many of the same tropes upon which right-wing populist discourse is based.

In order to make this argument, I will reconceptualize the analysis of the previous four chapters in explicitly rhetorical terms. If textual analysis and discourse analysis (as I have defined them above) provide us with a method for describing how film-events come to mean within particular historical contexts, rhetorical analysis helps us to describe how specific rhetors utilize those meanings towards persuasive ends. Moore's films, and the subsequent flurry of evaluations that surround them, constitute attempts by filmmaker and pundit alike to enter into the symbolic game: to frame issues, conjure identifications, and win consent in the political realm. As such, they must be understood not only as films, or film reviews, but as rhetorical acts. While this chapter does not employ the language of rhetorical theory, *per se*, it does owe much to the theoretical perspectives established by scholars generally working within the field of critical rhetoric as well as scholars who have applied rhetorical theory to documentary, in particular.

Critical rhetoric can be described not so much as a critical "turn" in classical rhetorical studies, but as an attempt to bring the insights of contemporary rhetorical criticism into dialogue with the fields of cultural studies and social theory. John Lucaites and Michelle Condit argue that, beginning in the late 1960s, rhetorical criticism shifted its attention from intellectual history and rhetorical pedagogy towards understanding "the relationship between rhetoric and social change" (9). In so doing, rhetorical criticism rejected what had become a somewhat positivist enterprise, concerned with "teaching speeches or observing their immediate effects," for a more postmodern conception of rhetoric as "central to the constitution of collective life" (13). This new focus dovetailed

in many ways with the insights of cultural studies and, as such, the notion of a *critical* rhetoric sought to connect contemporary rhetorical criticism with these broad concerns.

Critical rhetoric importantly understands communicative discourse not only as constitutive of social relations, but also as a “strategic art” that must be used in order to make and remake the world in which we live. Instances of rhetoric – such as documentaries by Michael Moore, or the attacks upon them by conservative opponents – are not only to be analyzed in terms of the discourses that articulate them, but evaluated as instances of strategic rhetoric geared towards effecting political results. For instance, Maurice Charland defines rhetoric not just as something structured by and within discourse (although it is that), but as something which can also *act upon* discursive structures. While rhetorical studies has always understood, and shared, the theoretical insights of “the recent ‘linguistic turn’ of the human sciences,” rhetoric’s analytical aim is more modest in nature: “It seeks only to explore the status of language-in-action ... its main object is *praxis*” (“Rehabilitating” 465). Rhetorical studies begins with an insistence that human beings act in and upon the world (structured, as it is). Thus, critical rhetoric focuses its attention on the fact that, “and this is key, *the artful deployment of language*, through topics, arguments, tropes, figures, has real effects upon language itself, upon meaning, upon what humans do” (465, my emphasis). Thus, whereas cultural studies proceeds from a theory of *structure* (ideological, hegemonic, etc.), Charland argues, “rhetorical criticism begins with argument” (467). Arguments “produce new understandings, knowledge, and commitments;” and rhetorical criticism “permits an analysis and deconstruction of this productivity.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Importantly, as I hope is apparent, my use of critical rhetoric in this project should not be seen as an “addition” to a cultural studies methodology, but as a *compliment* to it. Indeed, scholars who have

Seen in this light, new questions about Moore's work emerge. Does Moore "create good and compelling reasons" for his viewers to agree with his arguments (Charland, "Rehabilitating" 472)? Does he provide political motivations that will work in the current context? And does he invite identifications to which his intended audience can relate? These are questions that a rhetorical perspective helps to foreground. Chapter Six will be concerned with evaluating how successful Moore is at reshaping political discourse, and how agile his attackers are at rearticulating those attempts.

Chapter Six also relies upon the insights of scholars who have applied a rhetorical perspective to the study of documentary film. As Thomas Rosteck has argued, a rhetorical perspective "fits hand in glove" with the analysis of documentary (5-6). A rhetorical analysis of documentary, then, is useful in the way that it orients the critic towards the type of rhetorical experience the text invites the viewer to have. This notion of "invitation" is a crucial one, and I draw my understanding of this term from the work of Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, whose close analysis of filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's oeuvre provides an excellent working example of what a rhetorical perspective towards documentary can do. In *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*, Benson and Anderson describe their rhetorical approach:

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described the contours of a critical rhetoric have acknowledged the insights of cultural studies as an important influence upon their own critical turn. Both Charland ("Rehabilitating" 470-471) and McKerrow (443; 455) reference Stuart Hall, in particular, as a crucial influence on the development of a critical rhetoric. Indeed, Charland makes the case that rhetorical theory "shares a terrain with certain strands of Marxist poststructuralism, particularly those influenced by the work of Stuart Hall and British Cultural Studies" (468). However, Charland wants to make the case that, while critical rhetoric and cultural studies have much in common, they each offer different perspectives on a similar problematic: "while these two groups share a concern with the structuration of power through discourse, and will often employ similar concepts, they form two distinct speech communities" (464). Specifically, Charland believes that it would be fruitful for cultural studies and rhetorical theory to have "an encounter" with one another, in which "each could serve as a corrective to the other's blindspots" (469).

Our approach to the rhetorical study of film is not to claim that the films are trying to argue something or even to say something. Rather, we take the rhetorical study of film to be an inquiry into how the films invite response ... searching the texts not for what they “mean,” but for the ways in which they induce the action of meaning-making in a willing spectator.

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If we want to consider the “effectiveness” of Moore’s work, we must pay attention not only to what his films mean, but to the type of responses his films seem to invite. Chapter Six uses *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a case study to examine the ways in which Moore’s films do just that.

Specifically, I will look at the ways in which Moore’s “fantasy of advocacy” often works against him by reinforcing a particular version of “leftism” that has been rhetorically constructed by activists on the right over the last half a century. This version of leftism is centered around the trope of “liberal elitism” which, as I will argue, both Moore’s mode of address *and* his construction within the popular press often work to reiterate rather than overturn. Here, Laurie Ouellette’s analysis of the cultural discourses surrounding public television in the mid-1990s serves as a useful guide. Ouellette argues that conservative attacks on PBS have always utilized a similar strategy: describing PBS as an elitist institution foisted upon the mass public by arrogant and patronizing liberals. This is an argument that has often seemed to strike a popular chord, but the reason for its success had less to do with the facts of the case, and more to do with the way in which public television conceptualized itself. Ouellette argues that PBS defined itself in terms of a discourse of “enlightenment” and “cultural uplift.” In so doing, PBS implicitly divided the nation between cultural haves and have-nots, invoking a patronizing

discourse of class division that invited the very charges of “liberal elitism” the right levied against it.

In Chapter Six I will argue that a similar problem besets Moore: his own rhetorical strategies, combined with his problematic public reception, often work to *invite* a similar kind of right-wing, populist critique, rather than discourage it. I will utilize Ernesto Laclau’s theoretical concept of “populism,” along with historical work on populist movements in the US, to compare Moore’s rhetorical strategies with those of the political right, who strove to delegitimize Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11* through a rhetoric of “liberal elitism.” As such, this chapter offers not only a re-assessment of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but a detailed analysis of what I call the “Michael Moore Attack-Industry.”

To construct a working sample of right-wing rhetoric directed at Michael Moore, I focused on three areas of political discourse: conservative opinion journals and news-sources, anti-Moore documentary films, and conservative websites and blogs. First, I compiled a convenience sample of conservative magazines and news-sources. I assembled this sample through my own knowledge of popular conservative magazines, by consulting Ronal Lora and William Henry Longton’s useful book, *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America* (1999), and with the help of Professor Stephen Gencarella. This list included periodicals, such as the *Weekly Standard* and the *National Review*, and newspapers such as *Human Events* and the *Washington Monthly*. I then searched these magazines, using Lexis-Nexis, for articles referencing Moore or *Fahrenheit 9/11* by name.

Secondly, I looked at two major anti-Moore documentaries produced to rebut *Fahrenheit 9/11* in 2004: *Michael Moore Hates America* and *Fahrenhype 9/11*. Both

films were released in 2004 before the presidential election and, as such, entered into the public debate surrounding *Fahrenheit*'s initial release (especially in the conservative blogosphere, where the films were continuously referenced and rehashed).<sup>16</sup>

Finally, I compiled a list of conservative websites which I searched for references to Moore. Of course, the world of political websites is vast, and references to Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11* incalculable; considerable narrowing was once again required. First, I searched for sites dedicated solely to attacking Moore (such as *moorewatch.com* and *mooreexposed.com*), as these sites tended to serve as clearinghouses for most of the anti-Moore invective circulating at the time. I also looked at the top 10 "A-List" conservative weblogs in 2004, and searched their sites for posts referencing Moore or *Fahrenheit 9/11* by name.<sup>17</sup> I believe these 10 sites serve as a representative sample for the majority of on-line writing concerning Moore within the conservative sphere. As Daniel Drezler and Henry Raffell (2004) found in their analysis of political weblogs, readership of such blogs is heavily skewed towards a small number of "elite" blogs which the vast majority of bloggers read and link to. "Because of this distribution," they argue, "a few 'elite' bloggers can serve as both an information aggregator and as a 'summary statistic' for the

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<sup>16</sup> In the interests of space and clarity, I focus only on these two films. A third anti-Moore film also debuted in 2004, entitled *Celsius 411*. But whereas *MMHA* and *Fahrenheit* address themselves specifically to the topic of Moore and his films, *Celsius* actually focuses on the figure of John Kerry, using *Fahrenheit* more as a marketing hook than anything else (although, this tactic speaks volumes about the level of public interest surrounding *Fahrenheit* in 2004). Other Moore-related films released after 2004, such as Larry Elder's *Michael & Me* (produced in 2004 but released in 2005), *This Divided State* (2005), *Me & Michael* (2006) and *Manufacturing Dissent* (2007) were not considered as they fell outside the time-periods covered in this study.

<sup>17</sup> Here, I relied upon the work of Adamic and Glance, who have identified the 20 most-linked conservative blogs during the run-up to the 2004 presidential election (5).

blogosphere” (4).<sup>18</sup> In addition to this list of websites, I also occasionally considered sites which were linked to these elite blogs when their content seemed salient to my analysis.

By combining a rhetorical perspective with my cultural studies-based analysis, I analyze Moore’s particular style of political documentary not only on ethical grounds, but strategic ones as well. Ultimately, I describe the ways in which Moore’s textual strategies and problematic reception within the public sphere often undermine his political goals and aspirations.

### **Conclusion**

This study seeks to subject the “Michael Moore phenomenon” to what Douglas Kellner’s has called a “contextualist cultural studies” (103). According to Kellner, there are three main aspects to such an approach. First, he argues, the analyst reads the texts in question relationally; for instance, against other films from within its genre, or cycle. The first part of my dissertation follows this guideline reading Moore’s films, first, against other forms of “committed documentary,” and then against a more general “discourse of class,” constructed in a variety of rhetorical settings by and within the left for the last half a century. Second, Kellner argues that a contextualist approach will take into account not only how those texts make meaning, but how they are made to mean within the public realm. The second part of this dissertation follows this guideline, analyzing the public reception of Moore’s films and Moore’s celebrity persona, respectively.

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<sup>18</sup> This pattern of dominance exists, Drezler and Raffell argue, because of the “networked structure of the blogosphere” (7). Political blogs of like-mind tend to link to one another, a tendency that serves to “keep the conversation going” but can also create an “echo-chamber effect” which helps solidify common-sense frames and understandings of particular events (7). The sites garnering the most links become what Drezner and Raffell call “focal point” blogs; convenient places for lesser-known bloggers to publicize their own posts. As such, elite blogs tend to become a central clearinghouse for a variety of political frames, arguments, etc., filtering out the least important and reiterating those that will become dominant. Mainstream media outlets seeking to report on opinion coming from the blogosphere tend to focus only on these elite weblogs, further solidifying their dominance (4).



Finally, Kellner highlights the importance of analyzing what he calls “resonant images.” It is rare, of course, that one film, or one filmmaker, will have direct effects within the social realm, but nonetheless, he argues, certain images do “resonate to our experiences and stick in the mind, moving us to later thought and action” (107). While it would be somewhat presumptuous to claim that Moore’s work had any kind of a direct and determining “effect” on documentary film, political thought, or indeed the 2004 Election, it is inarguable that his work has been a generative site for a variety of public debates and controversies over these issues. As such, I offer Michael Moore as just such a resonant image. Specifically, in the final chapter, I use *Fahrenheit 9/11* to assess the relative success of this “resonant image” in regards to contemporary political discourse.

Thus, by combining close textual analysis grounded with a broader discourse analysis and, finally, a distinctively rhetorical perspective, this project employs a contextualist methodology similar to that proposed by Kellner and others within the field of cultural studies. In so doing, I hope to analyze the ways in which generic conventions, interpretive strategies and rhetorical maneuvers combined within broader, discursive contexts, to articulate Michael Moore and his films within the public sphere.

## CHAPTER 2

### **BAD REFLEXES: MICHAEL MOORE AND THE “FANTASY OF ADVOCACY”**

*“Generally speaking, I don't like documentaries. I don't like PBS.  
I think that stuff is pretty boring.  
We should have more documentaries made by people who don't like them.”*<sup>19</sup>

– Michael Moore

#### **Introduction**

In the introduction to this dissertation, I offered Thomas Waugh's definition of “committed documentary” as a useful one with which to assess Moore's contribution to the genre. According to Waugh, committed documentaries are films that wear their ideological commitments on their sleeves, rather than mask them behind an implausible claim to “objectivity.” They are films that claim solidarity with a specific group or coalition, take an “activist stance” towards certain issues or goals, and work within and alongside political and social movements (xiv). As I discussed in the literature review, this has led many scholars to argue that Moore's reflexive style, including his autobiographical format and overt commitment to specific political causes, place him firmly within this committed tradition (Toplin; Misiak 2006; Orvell 1994-5).

To be sure, in many ways Moore's work *does* fit Waugh's definition of committed documentary. Moore's films unapologetically claim a sense of “solidarity” with what he defines as the American working class, and they adopt what can only be described as an activist stance towards political and social movements. More than this, they do so in an openly “reflexive” fashion, leaving behind implausible claims to

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<sup>19</sup> Sterritt 10

objectivity. As such, Moore's films do enact a kind of "contextual" reflexivity, in that they ask the viewer to think critically about the manner in which class issues are typically dealt with in the mainstream media.

Many scholars have argued that mainstream journalism is largely an elite affair (Badikian; Fiske; Herman and Chomsky; Lewis, Hartley, Harrison), beholden to the needs and demands of powerful corporate interests. This has transformed the mainstream mediascape into what journalism scholar Chris Atton has argued is a relatively closed and un-democratic space:

...the organizational and professional routines of the mainstream media produce a media system that is monolithic and inflexible, within which the representation of dissident, radical and otherwise "unofficial" voices is largely predictable: if heard at all, such voices will be demonized or marginalized.

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The result, Atton argues, is a journalistic practice in which specific topics, issues and ideas are hardly ever aired, and specific people, groups and voices hardly ever heard: "an elite of experts and pundits tends to have easier and more substantial access to a platform for their ideas than do dissidents, protesters, minority groups and 'ordinary people'" (492). This is especially the case where economic issues are concerned. As the vast majority of research in this area has shown, the news media tends to over-represent (or, in many cases, *only* represent) the interests of the business community (Kumar 16). This tendency stems, of course, from the news media's own dependent relationship with the for-profit media system (Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney; Croteau and Hoynes; Kumar). These structural limitations put a variety of pressures on the news media,

encouraging it to shape the news in particular ways. These structural limitations naturally lead to a very narrow and stringently ideological set of class representations where economic issues are concerned.

From this perspective, Moore's films can be seen as an effort to redress this lopsided view of economic issues perpetuated by the mainstream media. Indeed, this is the way in which scholars such as Orvell, Arthur, Dovey, Toplin, and others have defined Moore's work. By leaving the tenets of "objectivity" and "balance" behind and, instead, adopting the radical perspective of working-class activist, Moore, they argue, represents working class issues where they are usually ignored, and gives voice to working class people, where they are often silenced.

However, despite Moore's political commitments, I would argue that the transgressive nature of his reflexive stance is not so simple. As Larry Gross has argued, when considering the ethical implications of media forms it is not enough to pay attention to what issues are represented, or what types of subjects we see on screen. Even when minority groups/perspectives *are* represented, he argues, "the manner of that representation itself will reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda" (190). As such, Gross argues, "we need to consider the ethical obligations that apply when groups are *not* speaking for themselves" (192). Importantly, Gross references the work of Brian Winston and his argument that, more often than not, "social problem" documentaries cast their subjects in the role of passive victim, while positioning the filmmaker in the role of heroic advocate. By deifying the advocate, while objectifying and essentializing the victimized subjects, Gross argues, such films don't really succeed in challenging social power relations at all: "There is a crucial difference

between a filmmaker who acts as the agent of the majority, spying out the lay of the outlands, and one who truly attempts to represent the perspectives and views of those living outside the mainstream” (192).

In this chapter, I will argue that the problem with Moore’s reflexive, narrative-driven style is that, while it changes the look, feel, and “experience” of the political documentary in its traditional guise, it does not fundamentally change its *mission* – namely, that of social advocacy as defined above. Specifically, I would like to argue that while Moore adheres to Waugh’s first two principals, he relinquishes the third. Moore’s films do declare “solidarity” with a variety of groups (the working class, African Americans, etc.) and with a variety of movements (the anti-gun lobby, the anti-war movement, etc.), and they do most certainly take an activist stance (one that is perhaps most pronounced in *Fahrenheit 9/11*). But all the same, Moore’s films emphatically do *not* work with and alongside those subjects and movements with whom he claims solidarity. Instead, they offer what I call a “fantasy of advocacy” for an imagined audience of would-be advocates who thrill to the image of an heroic compatriot “speaking truth to power,” and bringing that truth to those not fortunate enough to obtain it on their own.

In order to make this argument, however, it is necessary first to revisit the concept of reflexivity, itself. How is it that Moore’s clearly reflexive style perpetuates some of the worst aspects of the traditional documentary form? It is my contention that much of the enthusiasm for Moore as a reflexive documentarian stems from a somewhat oversimplified reading of Nichols’ original development of the concept. In the first section of this chapter, then, I will attempt to re-theorize the concept of “reflexivity,”

making an important distinction between “formal” reflexivity, and “political” reflexivity. Relying upon the work of documentary scholars such as Nichols, Trinh, Ruby and Zimmerman, I will argue that a truly *political* reflexivity not only concerns itself with documentary’s relationship to the various events, issues and causes, but to people, groups and communities as well. Specifically, I will argue that since its inception, and throughout its long history, political documentary has imagined that relationship as a form of social *advocacy*, rather than in terms of Waugh’s more egalitarian concept of social *commitment*. As such, more often than not, political documentary has unwittingly worked to reinforce many of the power relationships it has sought to challenge or overturn.

### **(Re)-Theorizing Reflexivity**

#### **“A Style You Don’t Seem to Like”: Formal vs. Political Reflexivity**

Perhaps one of the problems with theorizing reflexivity as a concept has been the way in which Nichols initially places it within a kind of aesthetic history. In Nichols’ account, while all four modes of documentary “have been potentially available from early in the cinema’s history” (*Representing* 33), the reflexive mode, by in large, arrives “last on the scene,” gaining “some degree of prominence in the 1970s and ‘80s” (63). Thus he argues that changes in modes are often aesthetically motivated, and generically based:

The four modes belong to a dialectic in which new forms arise from the limitations and constraints of previous forms in which the credibility of the impression of documentary reality changes historically. ... Gradually, the conventional nature of this mode of representation becomes increasingly apparent: an awareness of norms and conventions to which a given text adheres begins to frost the window onto reality. The time for a new mode is at hand.

Clearly, writers such as Orvell, Arthur, Dovey, Bernstein, and Williams are working from this model when they try to place (or displace) Moore within a new documentary “moment.” Many scholars, such as Stella Bruzzi, have since critiqued this aesthetic “genealogy” as an artificial and overly simplistic construct that overlooks a long-standing and vibrant tradition of reflexive documentaries (such as the work of Vertov or Vigo), while ignoring the prevalence of expository and didactic work that dominates the field today (the annual output of the *History Channel* comes to mind) (2). But the argument over whether or not Nichols’ aesthetic chronology is a useful one is, in many ways, beside the point. For, in debating such a genealogy, we risk confining reflexivity to its *aesthetic* qualities, alone. Understood in this way, reflexivity becomes a purely formal operation. But this is not, as it turns out, the only way in which Nichols employs the term. It is useful to return briefly to his discussion of the concept in *Representing Reality*.

To be sure, Nichols defines reflexivity as, in part, a formal operation:

In its most paradigmatic form the reflexive documentary prompts the viewer to a heightened consciousness of his or her relation to the text and of the text’s problematic relationship to that which it represents. Editing often works to increase this sense of awareness, a consciousness of cinematic form rather than of the historical world on the other side of the realist window.

*Representing* 60

Here, the documentarian employs any number of stylistic strategies that are geared specifically towards breaking with received aesthetic conventions. Clearly, Moore’s films do all of this, and more. Far from deploying a traditional “aesthetics of objectivity,”

Moore's films are overtly expressionistic from beginning to end; cleverly constructed collages made up of ironic musical accompaniment, shocking visual juxtapositions, all sorts of editing tricks, and, of course, Moore's witty, irreverent persona. Indeed, the real pleasure offered up by any of Moore's films is located squarely within the spectacle of his cinematic style through which the historical world gets filtered. As such, they are a textbook case of what Nichol's calls a kind of formal reflexivity.

But this is precisely the problem; in Moore, as in many reflexive documentaries, its all a matter of *style*: "one of the oddities of the reflexive documentary is that it rarely reflects on ethical issues as a primary concern, other than with the sigh of a detached relativism readier to criticize the choices of others than to examine its own" (Nichols, *Representing* 59). As Nichols points out, when a reflexive style started to gain some prominence in the 1970s and 80s, "it clearly derived from both formal innovations and political urgency" (63). As such, reflexivity was not merely an aesthetic operation. It also assumed a kind of "political engagement ... that pleases, instructs, and alters social consciousness" (65). Thus, as a *political* concept, reflexivity should not only ground itself in "the materiality of representation," but it should "return the viewer beyond the text, to those material practices that inform the body politic" (67). And it is this imperative to return the viewer to the social world that the formally reflexive documentary often ignores.

To explain, Nichols turns to the work of Peter Wollen and Dana Polan, who offer similar critiques of reflexivity as an aesthetic gesture. Wollen compares the formally experimental work of Stan Brakhage with the political theatrics of Bertolt Brecht to



describe the difference between a reflexivity that courts the pleasures of style, and one that invokes the exigencies of politics:

Peter Wollen describes the issue as that of two materialisms. One, regarding the materiality of the cinematic signifier, becomes the central concern of the avant-garde. The other, regarding the materiality of social practices, including that of viewing and the cinematic apparatus but extending well beyond it to the discursive formations and institutional practices that characterize a given society, becomes the central concern of a political Brechtian cinema.

*Representing* 66

It is this act of “extending beyond” that Nichols argues a purely aesthetic reflexivity does not do. In fact, it can often do the opposite – encouraging the viewer to forget the “world” being represented by focusing solely upon the *cinematic* world within which that representation takes place. Here, he references Dana Polan’s comparison of Brecht with a quite different text: the Daffy Duck cartoon, *Duck Amuck*. Polan argues that *Duck Amuck* (in which the cartoon characters attempt to rebel against their own animator) is “extraordinarily reflexive, but in a limited way” (Nichols, *Representing* 66). While the film engages quite explicitly in “the kind of self-consciousness common to comedic forms, it remains noticeably disengaged from the material conditions confronting the spectator as social actor” (66). Nichols quotes Polan directly:

The film opens up a formal space and not a political one in viewer consciousness. *Duck Amuck* closes in on itself ... the text becomes a loop which effaces social analysis. This is the project of all non-political art, realist or self-reflexive.

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In this way, Nichols argues that reflexivity is not *necessarily* the politically-progressive tool that documentary theorists sometimes claim it to be. The question is not, therefore, whether or not a documentary is “reflexive,” but *how* it is reflexive.

As such, Nichols is careful to make an important distinction in his development of the concept; one that I think film scholars are often quick to overlook. This is precisely a distinction between “the formal and political dimensions of reflexivity” (*Representing* 69). While formal reflexivity refers specifically to a set of stylistic techniques, political reflexivity “operates primarily on the viewer’s consciousness, ‘raising’ it in the vernacular of progressive politics, decentering it in an Althusserian politics in order to achieve a rigorous awareness of commonality” (69). Thus, *politically* reflexive film will draw attention to itself for a specific reason; to situate itself within a specific social context, and to map out its relationship *to* that context. Conversely, in a formally reflexive film, the text simply invites the spectator to return their attention to the film-as-film. As Nichols puts it: “Too tight a reflexive loop squeezes [the] crucial social element out. Instead of what can be represented through realism (lived experience) forming the focus of reflexivity, the question of realism itself, or of representation (formal structure), becomes the focus” (67).

### **Honesty and Responsibility in Reflexive Documentary**

This definition of “political reflexivity” then begs the question: what would a politically reflexive film actually look like? To answer this question, we must return to the initial poststructuralist critique of documentary form. To repeat Ruby’s succinct summation, documentary has traditionally been what “the West does to the rest” (CITE). In short, the realist sensibilities of documentary are critiqued not only for their naïve

assumptions about the ability of the camera lens to “capture the real,” but for the way in which that assumption has been put to use historically. In short, it is a critique of the way in which realism is used as an ideological tool. Thus, for reflexivity to be politically transgressive, it must work not only to reveal the subjective limitations of the documentary-as-text, but it must also reveal the *relationship* documentary bears to the social world it seeks to represent. Political reflexivity works against not only the naivete of documentary realism, but also the cultural *authority* that documentary, as a form, has traditionally enjoyed.

This is the point that has been made so eloquently by Trinh T. Minh-ha in her theoretical writing on the relationship between documentary and social power. Trinh argues that realist assumptions of objectivity not only claim the *ability* to represent the real, but the *right* to do so, as well. Thus, a truly reflexive gesture would have to reveal – and hence revoke – this assumed authority to tell the truth about anything – or anyone. However, as Trinh argues, a reflexivity that is purely formal in nature often works to achieve the opposite. By emphasizing the textual at the expense of the social – and the author at the expense of the subject – the reflexive film can actually work to reinscribe and reinforce the “right to represent” that documentary film has long wielded:

The notion of “making strange” and of reflexivity remains but a mere distancing device as long as the division between “textual artifice” and “social attitude” exerts its power. The “social” continues to go unchallenged, history keeps on being salvaged, while the sovereignty of the socio-historicizing subject is safely maintained. With the status quo of the making/consuming subject preserved, the aim is to correct “errors” (the false) and to construct an alternative view (offered as a this-is-the-true or mine-is-truer version of reality). It is, in other words, to replace one unacknowledged source of authority by another, *but not to challenge the very constitution of authority*. The new sociohistorical text, thus, rules

despotically as another master-centered text because it unwittingly helps to perpetuate the Master's ideological stance.

(my emphasis) 100

For Trinh, far from challenging the ideological nature of documentary film, formally-reflexive documentaries work to shore this power up. And in so doing, they paradoxically re-commit the very "sin" they are supposed to be critiquing – namely, the documentary's "truth-claim." Rather than rejecting the documentary's ability to tell the truth, they simply alter the way in which it can "realistically" make that claim, substituting a subjective register for an objective one. As Trinh argues, this hardly changes the relationship documentary bares to its subject(s):

What is evidence remains evidence, whether the observing eye qualifies itself as being subjective or objective. At the core of such a rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and object which perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world. The emphasis is again laid on the power of film to capture reality "out there" for us "in here." The moment of appropriation and of consumption is either simply ignored or carefully rendered invisible according to the rules of good and bad documentary.

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In this way, formal understandings of reflexivity simply alter the aesthetic "rules" of the game, without paying any real attention to the way in which documentary operates as an ideological system. As Nichols puts it: "Explorations of the difficulties or consequences of representation are more common than examinations of the *right* of representation" (59). Or, as Trinh puts it:

Left intact in its positionality and its fundamental urge to decree meaning, the self conceived both as key and as transparent mediator is more often

than not likely to turn responsibility into license. The license to *name*, as though meaning presented itself to be deciphered without any ideological mediation.

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Like the ‘aesthetics of objectivity’ before it, the ‘aesthetics of reflexivity’ – when defined solely as a question *of* aesthetics – works to grant the documentary filmmaker the cultural authority to represent the world as he or she sees fit. And this is precisely the power that politically-reflexive documentaries are meant to undermine.

### **The Importance of “Positionality” in Reflexive Documentary**

This question of cultural *authority* – the right to represent, or the “license to name,” as Trinh puts it – broadens our focus to include not only the relationship of text to viewer and filmmaker to viewer, but of text/filmmaker to subject, and thereby, viewer to subject. The problematic that is central to politically reflexive documentary is not just a given film’s ability to represent reality, but its ability – and right – to represent *specific* realities. What right, for instance, does Moore have to represent the “realities” of laid-off autoworkers in Flint, or American soldiers in Iraq?

For many of the scholars above, Moore claims that right (at least in *Roger & Me*) via community ties. The autobiographical nature of the film not only serves as reflexive acknowledgement of his subjective perspective, but licenses him, as “part of the working class,” to speak *for* the working class. But is Moore’s biographical stature enough to alleviate the authority with which he represents these subjects? And does his working-class background license him to do with these subjects what he will – to represent them in any way he deems necessary to get his point across? The initial reactions of reviewers like Kael, who recoiled at what they perceived to be Moore’s demeaning depiction of

Flint residents, would suggest otherwise.<sup>20</sup> Like formal reflexivity, autobiographical reflexivity can serve to endow a filmmaker with the license to represent indiscriminately.

This point has been made most stridently by scholars analyzing the ethical implications of ethnographic filmmaking. For instance, Catherine Russell has argued that simply turning the camera over to subjects who represent themselves (and their cultures) does not necessarily constitute a reversal in power relations:

Within the arena of ethnographic film, “handing the camera over” to a native filmmaker often simply perpetuates the realist aesthetics that experimental film form has dislodged. The “authentic identity” of the film– or videomaker is not, in other words, a sufficient revision of ethnographic practice because differences exist within cultures and communities just as surely as they do between cultural identities.

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Once again, to return to Trinh, the issue here is one of authority. No filmmaker can claim to hold the “truth” about any subject, regardless of their relationship to that subject.

Simple claims to biographical “authenticity” do not let the politics of representation off the hook.

This is, of course, *not* to argue that biography is unimportant. It is, in fact, crucial. The question, once again, is how a filmmaker’s biographical positioning – vis-à-vis his/her subjects – is articulated. Perhaps no scholar has contributed more to this discussion than visual anthropologist Jay Ruby, whose conceptualization of an ethical form of reflexivity in documentary film remains, in my opinion, the most useful.<sup>21</sup> Ruby

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<sup>20</sup> While overt critiques of Moore’s depiction of working-class people in *Roger & Me* were few and far between, there were a few who voiced criticisms. See: Beam; Bensman; Crowds.

<sup>21</sup> Here it is important to note that Ruby is primarily concerned with developing an ethically responsible form of ethnographic film as a tool for anthropology. However, in addressing the problems associated with anthropological filmmaking, Ruby inevitably deals explicitly with the issues and debates surrounding

acknowledges the importance of a filmmaker's relationship to the culture, community etc. that he or she is representing:

The chief value and inherent limitation of all ethnography still remains that it is the product of professional outsiders – people whose lifelong loyalties, commitments, obligations, and so forth do not lie exclusively with the community represented. The agendas of people representing a culture in which they are native have to be different from those who are not.

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However, as Ruby argues, there is both value and limitation to the perspectives of both “outsider” and “insider.” Relegating ethnography or documentary to one, specific perspective would only serve to cripple the form completely. Furthermore, as Russell alludes to, it would only serve to reinforce a binary logic that underwrites an essentialist notion of identity that represses differences within and among cultural groups, communities, etc. As Ruby puts it:

No one way has an inside track to the truth. All suffer the limitations of being from a particular point of view. To confuse one with the other inhibits critical discourse about all of them. *Once it is acknowledged that no one can speak for or represent a culture but only his or her relationship to it, then a multiplicity of viewpoints is possible and welcome* – some from within and others from without and all marvelously gray areas in between.

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documentary; specifically, the crisis in representation (*Picturing* 5). Thus, he argues that while much of his writing deals expressly with ethnographic documentaries his argument applies “equally to all forms of actuality representations of the human condition” (14). Indeed, Ruby’s theoretical recommendations are firmly grounded not only in anthropological theorizing but film theory and cultural studies as well. To describe a way of making ethnographic films that are responsible to the ideological concerns inherent within the documentary enterprise, he argues, “means creating a critical approach that borrows selectively from film, communication, media, and cultural studies” (5-6).

The key, then, for Ruby, is not to emphasize one cultural position over another, but to emphasize the importance of *positionality* itself. As argued, reflexive films are those that reveal themselves to be, not objective representations, but subjective interpretations – one filmmaker’s personal perspective on the world. But implicit in the notion of perspective is the concept of positionality. To construct a perspective is to speak from a particular position. It is, in fact, to construct a relationship between filmmaker and subject – and to invite the viewer to do the same. As such, it is the positionality of all involved – filmmaker, subject, and spectator – with which a politically reflexive form of filmmaking must be concerned.

Traditionally, this positionality has been constructed along an axis of oppression and domination best captured by Trinh’s phrase: “the power of film to capture reality ‘out there’ for us ‘in here’” (“Totalizing” 95). Thus, Trinh argues that documentary filmmakers relinquish their positions of authority, standing outside and above the subjects they represent, and instead reposition themselves “among” their subjects, trading the singularity of authorship for the plurality of dialogue: “meaning can be political only when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empties it, or decentralizes it. Thus, even when this source is referred to, it stands as one among many others, at once plural and utterly singular” (100).

Ruby parallels Trinh’s notion of standing “as one among many” when he calls for “the development of cooperative, collaborative, and subject-generated films as a response to the felt need to rethink authorship” (196). For Ruby, this is what a truly reflexive documentary must do. This collaborative gesture does not mean simply “turning the camera over” to the subjects, or doing only autobiography. What it means is changing the



*nature* of the relationship between filmmaker/subject – viewer/subject – by changing the way in which that relationship is constructed on-screen. To describe this change, Ruby makes the distinction between speaking *for* or *about* – and speaking *with* or *alongside*. A film that attempts to speak with or alongside will be one that attempts to situate the filmmaker's perspective in relation to the subject's own, lived experience. It will be one that attempts to allow subjects to present their own view of themselves along with that of the filmmaker's. In short, the filmmaker will accept the limited role of representing one's relationship *to* his or her subjects, rather than masking that relationship behind a dubious authority to speak *for/about* them. This move, Ruby argues, "represents a major shift in attitude about where one looks for authority and authenticity" in nonfiction film of any kind (204).

It is just such a "shift in attitude" that Patricia Zimmerman finds in "on-the-ground" political documentaries. In these works, she argues, documentarians "jettiso[n] the privileged position of observer and assum[e] the subject position of collaborator," (93). Considering the critical work on Moore discussed in the literature review, it is not without interest to note that one of the filmmakers Zimmerman singles out as an exemplar of this style of filmmaking is none other than Barbara Kopple; the very filmmaker Orvell sets up as a straw man, against which to construct his unequivocal support of *Roger & Me*. "Although structured within the classical narrative arc of cinema verite," Zimmerman argues:

[Kopple's] films are remarkable for the complexity, nuances, and depth of representation of working-class people. *Harlan County U.S.A.* and *American Dream* depend upon capturing the emotions and thoughts of the participants in crisis during strikes against coal mines and meatpacking

plants in order to produce an emotional and affective warrant for social justice, rather than an argument based exclusively on evidence.

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In Zimmerman's reading, Kopple's work is reflexive in the way that the filmmaker openly situates herself within the social milieu she is trying to represent, and casts herself less as an advocate and more as a political collaborator, speaking with and alongside the striking miners and plant workers, rather than for or on their behalf.

Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of *American Dream*, the film that Orvell criticizes for its "essentializing" depiction of the working class, is the wide disparity of working class viewpoints and understandings that get articulated throughout the course of the film. Subjects argue and contradict one another, as well as Kopple's presumed political sympathies, creating a much richer understanding of the social complexities involved in this specific event. While Kopple never disguises her own perspective, which is clearly in support of the strike, she relinquishes the authority to impose that perspective upon her subjects, who complicate that viewpoint in any number of ways. The result is a film that works with its subjects in an effort to reconfigure the way in which "we" understand and negotiate the world of labor relations, rather than a film that seeks to "educate" an audience about the plight of an essentialized working class.

Thus, I return to Nichols, who argues that if reflexivity is to be a progressive, political tool, then we must broaden the way in which we conceptualize it. "We must," he argues, "attend to formal reflexivity since the content of the form, in Hayden White's phrase, is indeed decisive, but we must also attend to political reflexivity since the form of the content is equally critical" (67). I would argue that this is precisely what scholars like Orvell have not done in their considerations of Moore. As such, in the next section I

will focus on the way in which Moore's mode of address (his "form") works in relation to the subjects he seeks to represent (his "content").

Before I do so, however, it is important to place Moore's work within its proper context. For, up until now I have been talking about "documentary" in rather broad terms. But Moore's work is situated much more specifically within the realm of *political* documentary. As such, his stylistic strategies and mode of address both stem from, and are reactions to, that tradition in particular. How does the concept of reflexivity work in regards to films that are political in nature and, more often than not, "subjective" (in one way or another) by design? As I will argue, the problem is that "political documentary," as a genre, has never actually been politically reflexive in the fashion that I have described; and in many ways, Moore's own films bear the burden of that tradition.

### **Political Documentary and the Question of Advocacy: The "Duty Genre"**

It must be said that the concept of reflexivity is a particularly vexing one when it comes to the tradition of political documentary. For, in many ways, inherent to the very notion of political documentary is the invocation to speak "for and about," as Ruby puts it. Traditionally, the role of the political documentarian has been that of the "advocate."<sup>22</sup> Paula Rabinowitz makes this point in her analyses of radical documentaries. While documentary, as a form, is often associated with the concepts of neutrality and objectivity – standing outside history and apart from the world to passively "record" its goings-on for an audience of observers – political documentaries, she argues, "construct a spectator whose position is located within history, essentially remaking the relationship of truth and ideology by insisting on advocacy rather than objectivity" (7).

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in his classic taxonomical history of the documentary tradition, Erik Barnouw assigns the social-problem documentary, as originally developed by Grierson, the descriptor, "Advocate" (87-139).

This idea is nothing new. The notion of the documentarian as political advocate, rather than dispassionate observer, has been around since the inception of the form itself and, indeed, may well define much of the accepted “canon” that make up the form’s history, whether it be the agitprop of Dziga Vertov in revolutionary Russia, the cinema of social concern constructed by John Grierson in 1930s Britain, the muckraking exposes of Edward R. Murrow in the 1960s, or the anti-war films of Peter Davis and Emile DeAntonio in the 1970s (the list, of course, goes on). “Clearly,” Rabinowitz argues, “political documentary has seen its mission to point out ‘problems’ within the social fabric of a nation with the aim of changing them ...” (11). As discussed above, however, critics such as Trinh and Ruby argue that it is precisely this perceived “right” – to point out social problems and speak on behalf of others – that demands reconsideration. Thus, with this admonition in mind, it makes sense to briefly consider the way in which scholars and practitioners alike have historically understood the political documentary as a mode of social advocacy.<sup>23</sup>

As Brian Winston argues, the tradition of documentary and, indeed, political documentary – at least in the British/North American context – stems, by in large, from the pioneering work of John Grierson.<sup>24</sup> Grierson’s main contribution to the documentary form was his virtual invention of the social problem documentary, which was characterized by the sympathetic depiction of suffering victims by a filmmaker who took on the role of social advocate: “The victim documentary is the Griersonians’ most potent

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<sup>23</sup> It seems pertinent to mention that this section will leave aside the debate over whether or not documentaries can – or should – be political. This is a question which often frames debates over documentary in the public sphere and thus will be a crucial aspect of my analysis in Chapter Four. However, as the previous section has shown, at least within the scholarly community, the notion that any documentary can be politically “neutral” has been rejected, and hence the question itself is moot.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Winston goes so far as to dub Grierson “documentary’s Adam” (*Claiming* 8).

legacy. Social victims are the realist documentary's staple subject into the present" (40). For Winston, the problem is the power relationship such a formula constructs between filmmaker and subject –the way in which such films "... plac[ed] social victims in the power of the 'creative' documentarist" (46).

In this way, Grierson provided political documentary with its most essential function: social advocacy. Indeed, this is the term used by Eric Barnouw to describe Grierson in his famous history of the form, and his description of that role is telling. Early on in his career, Barnouw argues, Grierson saw a newly formed mass public in desperate need of leadership: "... he began to feel – with Walter Lippmann – that expectations once held for democracy were proving illusory. Problems facing society had grown beyond the comprehension of most citizens; their participation had become perfunctory, apathetic, meaningless, often nonexistent." Thus, Barnouw argues that the patronizing relationship at the heart of social advocacy was built into Grierson's initial conception of the form. Whether journalistic or artistic, sobering or entertaining, documentary's primary purpose was that of education and enlightenment:

While Lippmann was pessimistic about all this Grierson was not: he saw a solution. The documentary film maker, dramatizing issues and their implications in a meaningful way, could lead the citizen through the wilderness. This became the Griersonian mission. That this implied an assumption of leadership, of an elitist role, did not trouble Grierson. He believed in "the elect having their duty." (85).

This notion of the "elect having their duty" is an important one, for it speaks to the way in which political documentary has often been conceived ever since.

Winston argues that during Grierson's heyday, documentary increasingly became a crucial part of "public service broadcasting," turning what was for many filmmakers a poetic and sometimes even "populist" form into what Winston calls an elite, "duty genre" (45). This ethos is perhaps best exemplified by the BBC's first managing director, John Reith, who Winston argues "hijacked" the term public service, "to mean not simply a service used by the public however owned or funded," but rather a paternalistic form of public education that sought to mold and shape citizens from an apathetic and uniformed mass audience (41). Thus, documentary in the Griersonian mold became a cornerstone of the BBC Documentary Department in the 1950s, linking "Reith's public-service broadcasting remit as well as Griersonian film-making values" (*Lies* 44).

This formative context established a rigid distinction between public/popular that would, Winston argues, carry over into the American scene. Indeed, he argues that "the Americans are heirs ... to a tradition of state-funded 'public-education' documentary production even though their sense of 'public service' absorbed commercialism, in effect rejecting Reith's anti-commercial spin" (*Lies* 45). He locates the in-house documentary units developed by NBC and CBS in the 1950s (including Murrow and Friendly's *See It Now* series) within this tradition, as well as the development of the historical compilation series, exemplified at the time by Solomon's *Victory at Sea* (NBC 1952-3) (46). As the work of Laurie Ouellette shows, however, Grierson's legacy perhaps had its most lasting effect on America's Public Broadcasting System. Her analysis of the "discourse of public television" serves as a pertinent illustration of the ethical problems inherent to contemporary understandings of political documentary.

The founders of public television, Ouellette argues, sought to construct a television network that was based upon principles similar in kind to Grierson's belief in an "elect that has their duty": "Public television professed a commitment to pluralism, equality, and democratic participation but conceptualized those goals within an overall mission to cultivate an 'enlightened' culture" (221). While this mission to educate often focused on the issue of cultural "taste," it also had an explicitly political mission, usually attached to its political and public affairs programming – especially documentary. This mission was specifically geared towards educating the public on how to perform what Ouellette defines as "enlightened citizenship":

Public television addressed the viewer at home as a citizen. The paradox was that the expansion of democracy was presumed to require professional experts who could guide decision making and orchestrate consensus. ... becoming a 'good citizen' also meant acquiescing to the expertise, cultural capital, and behavioral proscriptions of a higher authority.

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Thus, despite its sometimes subjective-bent and activist-stance, the basic mission of political documentary throughout the years has remained one geared towards reinforcing the basic power-relations inherent to contemporary society. Even as "problem" subjects are being advocated for they are also, always, being put in their "place."

### **Political Documentary and Formal Reflexivity**

It is at this point that our assessment of Moore becomes complicated, because it is *precisely* this kind of authoritative ethos that his films – and especially his persona – seem to rail against. Ouellette argues that the notion of "enlightened citizenship" led to a conception of political dialogue and debate that worked to silence largely disenfranchised

sectors of the mass public, “such as feminist consciousness-raising groups, boisterous union meetings and barroom debates, consumer boycotts and mass protests” (TV Viewing” 76). This conception of civil discourse, of course, went hand-in-hand with the Griersonian/Feithian notions of public service discussed above:

Public television’s purpose was to combat audience demands for emotion, triviality, distortion, and conflict. Accordingly, its public affairs tended to emphasize reason over passion, tedium over drama, expert over personality, civility over rudeness, seriousness over human interest, and officialdom over dramatic events.

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Thus, in many ways, PBS documentaries based upon this version of civility and elite acquiescence are virtually antithetical to the confrontational stunts and calculated amateur-style that characterize Moore’s work. Whether it be Moore’s rabid attempts to force his way into GM headquarters, his blatant attempt to delegitimize a seated-president, or (perhaps most infamously) his face-to-face confrontation with Charlton Heston – as he, himself, consistently points out – represents anything but the staid, authoritarian discourse of a PBS-style documentary.

But in making such an argument, once again, there is a tendency to conflate *style* with *politics*, and Ouellette’s argument helps us to parse the difference. For Ouellette, the real problem with PBS is not the distinction it makes between tedium/drama or civility/rudeness, but the way in which these distinctions work to reinforce a hierarchical system of power relations. Ultimately, like the Griersonians, PBS constructed itself primarily as a vehicle for social advocacy, one that shared Grierson’s belief that the mass



public was in need of education and transformation if it was to participate fully in democracy.

Thus, even when its *style* changed, Ouellette argues, PBS still maintained its ruthless positioning-strategies. Its counter-culture programming during the 1960s-70s serves as a pertinent example, as it often espoused a reflexive style similar to that of Moore's. In 1968, then FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnston suggested that PBS attempt to tackle, head-on, the controversies of the day, including Civil Rights and the war in Viet Nam. Within the auspices of NET (National Educational Television), PBS began in the late 60s and early 70s, to produce some of its most "courageous" programming geared specifically towards "radicalizing Middle America" (*Viewers* 186-195). These films tended to be not only politically committed, but stylistically innovative. Ouellette offers the NET program, *Great American Dream Machine* as an example, a series which she describes as a mix of "documentary, commentary, satire, and cultural performances at an unusually (for public television) swift pace, calculated to hold the attention of modern television viewers" (195).

Despite their stylistic innovations and commitment to progressive causes, programs like *Dream Machine* were nonetheless beholden to the same ethos of enlightened citizenship as PBS's more staid programming. The only difference was that now the apathetic, uninformed public of the "vast wasteland" had been endowed with a political character: conservative. These documentary programs still "imagin[ed] Middle America in essentialist and passive terms, as a perpetually regressive 'mass' to be socialized in accordance with progressive values" (187). Thus, even when PBS eschewed the discourses of civility, rationality, objectivity and neutrality that characterize the

traditional documentary project, it did nothing to challenge the power-relations and oppressive positioning that are inherent to a tradition of social advocacy.

As this chapter will argue, Moore's work can be described in similar fashion. In fact, it is illustrative that Ouellette offers *Great American Dream Machine* up as an example of a kind of anti-documentary style that is nonetheless beholden to the elitism of the documentary tradition, because Moore himself has referenced that very program as an important early influence on his work (Georgakas and Saltz). What Moore, and his supporters, miss when they overvalue his irreverent, reflexive style is that while he may, indeed, have changed the look and feel of traditional, political documentary, in the end he hasn't done all that much to change its overall *mission*: namely, that of social advocacy.

### **Michael Moore and the "Fantasy of Advocacy"**

#### **Mixing Modes, but Maintaining Mission**

It bears repeating at this point that my critique of Moore's reflexive style may seem a bit contradictory at first blush. For, in many ways, Moore's films represent a radical shift from the staid format of Griersonian or PBS-style public-service documentaries. If anything, Moore's embrace of a reflexive and, above all, *entertaining* style of documentary is meant to combat some of the problems associated with those forms. As John Corner argues, Moore's "strategic personalization of the issues" reveals Moore to be "acutely aware of the difficulties of holding a popular audience" (*The Art* 159).

Here, Corner has an important point. Despite critics' focus on Moore's "reflexive" strategy, Moore himself has never described his filmmaking style in this way

at all. As Moore has always maintained, his documentary mode of address is geared towards reeling in a popular audience, not critiquing the ethical/ideological functions of the documentary form. As he told Harlan Jacobsen in 1989:

I tried to tell a documentary in a way they don't usually get told. The reason people don't watch documentaries is they are too bogged down with "Now, in 1980 ... then in '82 five thousand were called back ... then in '84, ten thousand were laid-off ... but then in '86 three thousand were called back ... but later in '86 ten thousand more were laid off." If you want to tell the Flint story, there's the Flint story. ... I think of [*Roger & Me*] as a movie, an entertaining movie. ... An entertaining movie like any Charlie Chaplin film that dealt with social commentary, the problems of the day, but also [let] a lot of people laugh a little bit, [and did] not numb them, [did] not depress them.

"Michael" 23-4

Once again, Brian Winston has laid the blame for documentary's inherent dreariness on the pioneering work of John Grierson. "Audiences," he argues, "know full well that Grierson's public education purpose, however much glossed and disguised, is a virtual guarantee of boredom. For sixty years documentaries have gained nothing from being a 'discourse of sobriety' except marginalization" (*Claiming* 254). To be sure, Michael Moore would agree.

From the very moment that *Roger & Me* caused a sensation in 1989, Michael Moore has defined himself as a reformer of the documentary form. Indeed, in many ways, he has defined himself as an anti-documentarian. "Generally speaking," he told the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1990, "I don't like documentaries. I don't like PBS. I think that stuff is pretty boring. We should have more documentaries made by people who don't like them. They might be a little more interesting" (Sterritt 10). Indeed, when Moore describes his style of filmmaking, he often seems to be specifically referencing the

kind of social-problem documentary pioneered by Grierson in the 1930s. In a 1990 interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* he defined *Roger & Me* as, "a cross between "‘The Grapes of Wrath’ and ‘Pee Wee's Big Adventure.’ ... Notice that this is not your typical dying-steel-town film featuring interviews with a lot of labor activists. No welfare lines, no unemployment offices, no bag ladies, none of the usual images" (Stanley 19). In statements like this Moore seems all too cognizant of the Griersonian tradition and its popular limitations, whether he mentions Grierson by name or not.

But there is also something deeply troubling about this line of reasoning, which betrays the shortfalls of Moore's strategy. The secret to his success, he argues, is that he makes films without labor activists and welfare lines; without unemployment offices and bag ladies. In short, that he makes films without subjects. On its face this is, of course, not true at all. Moore's films are filled with working class subjects of all kinds, from the "Bunny Lady" in *Roger & Me* to the American soldiers in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. But this statement *is* true in terms of the relationship Moore constructs between himself and these subjects; he does not make films *with* labor activists or welfare recipients, he makes films *about* them and the problems that beset them. Despite the irreverent tone and satirical veneer, Moore's films are works of political advocacy, pure and simple, geared towards "educating" the public about the plight of the working class in contemporary America.

Moore's beef with the documentary tradition is not with its *mission* but with its *style*. His films may be satiric, irreverent, and comic, and they may be up front and honest about their political commitments, but they still lay claim to the kind of cultural authority vested in any of Grierson's work. As such, while Moore's stylistic revisions may indeed work to solve one problem inherent to the tradition of political documentary – its historic

failures at reaching a popular audience – I would argue they fail to address the other, perhaps more pertinent critique – its patronizing mode of address.

Moore's central conceit is that of a journey into the real-world of living people. We watch as he interviews, ambushes, and eavesdrops his way into the hearts and minds of "everyday Americans" to show us what life is like for the workers in Flint, MI, the residents of Littleton, CO, and the American soldiers in Iraq. By "journeying into" various milieus in order to show us what life is like there, Moore constructs a specific relationship with his subjects – and, in a different way, with his viewers. Moore adopts the pose of "speaking for," in the terms of Ruby and Waugh, and as such, relies upon the presumption of authority that Trinh T. Minh-ha argues characterizes the traditional documentary form. The fact that his films are entertainingly "reflexive" does nothing to challenge this fact. Instead, Moore's reflexive-style constitutes what I call a "fantasy of advocacy," in which viewers are invited to ride along with the filmmaker as he shows us the underside of the American dream and those who are forced to live there. As such, Moore's films serve as calls to duty for this very same audience who, following the adventures of their activist hero, can live out the thrill of speaking truth to power and picking up the "little guy." Thus, far from relinquishing the relationship of cultural authority that traditional documentary often constructs between filmmaker/viewer and subject, Moore's films *fetishize* it, making the point that not only do "the elect have their duty," but that this duty can be *fun*.

In the next section, I will discuss two ways in which Moore constructs this kind of relationship. First, I will offer a general analysis of the way in which Moore's trademark style works to construct social subjects. Specifically, I will look closely at the functions

these subjects typically perform in terms of Moore's narrative strategies, outlining four specific categories that subjects fall into: Experts, Informants, Exemplars, and Interlocutors. Secondly, I will discuss the way in which Moore inscribes himself, as narrator and character, within his own films, and discuss the consequences this strategy bears towards his representation of documentary subjects and his mode of address.

### **Speaking For and About**

#### **Interview vs. Testimony**

As argued previously, the concept of "authority" is crucial when considering the way in which documentaries work as ideological forms. By speaking "for and about," rather than "with and alongside" the subjects we see on-screen, political documentaries often maintain social hierarchies by placing the filmmaker in a position of power over and above the "problem" subjects we see on-screen. This is certainly the case with the films of Michael Moore. Indeed, despite the reflexive stylistics that saturate his films, Moore's films actually maintain a close relationship to the expository mode, as defined by Nichols; a mode that is predicated upon the construction of a strong sense of textual authority (*Representing* 38). This authoritative mode of address raises ethical problems where human subjects are concerned, since the subjects we see on screen are denied any agency of their own. As Nichols puts it, in the expository mode, "the voice of authority resides with the text itself rather than with those recruited to it" (37).

Mathew Bernstein argues that there can be "little argument that *Roger & Me* functions primarily in the expository mode." Bernstein highlights Moore's deployment of what Nichols calls "rhetorical continuity," in which the images we see on-screen work to corroborate the statements we hear off-screen. This mode is in play both when Moore

makes a straight-forward, serious argument, and when he adopts a more reflexively ironic tone. In both cases, everything we see and hear on-screen is subordinated to the unifying argument of Moore's own voice-over.

Importantly, Moore maintains this expository mode not only when describing historical situations, but when representing the issues and concerns of actual human subjects. An interview-sequence from *Roger & Me*, with Moore's personal friend, Ben Hamper, serves as a good example. In this sequence, Moore makes the case that GM's decision to close down local factories was having a detrimental effect on the people of Flint. His voice-over explains:

More factories had closed and I was beginning to see the effect this was having on my friends. Ben was the autoworker I'd put on the cover of that magazine in San Francisco. He'd been laid off five times in five years from GM. Expecting to be laid off again, he cracked one night while working on the assembly line. He was now shooting hoop at the local mental health center.

Moore's voice-over is positioned between two image-sequences. The first is a montage of edited clips from local TV news reports, in which the effects of the plant-closings are discussed. The clips are edited down to sound-bites: "Tonight 3,000 people are now trying to figure out what to do with their lives"; "Nobody was ready for the announced plant shutdowns today, least of all the 1350 workers"; etc. The clips are so fast and seamlessly edited together that it is impossible to tell whether or not the images we see – workers leaving the plant, a woman holding up a home-made sign reading "The End," etc. – were actually part of the original news segments or placed there by Moore.

As the voice-over above begins, Moore cuts to a shot of Ben Hamper shooting hoop by himself; then to an interview sequence in which Hamper, leaning up against the basketball hoop, tells Moore:

I just couldn't take it. I told the guy next to me: "Tell the foreman I'm sick, I'm sick to my stomach – I don't give a shit what you tell him." I grabbed my coat, flew out the door, passed the guards, jumped into my car, got onto Bristol Road, and was flying toward my apartment. And I turned on the radio, hoping that might cheer me up – you know, I got like tears coming out of my eyes – and I strike right into the middle of 'Wouldn't It Be Nice' by the Beach Boys, and I'm thinking: "What a horrible, horrible song to have to hear in the midst of this panic attack." A song that I'd usually get a good groove going with. So I'm trying to sing the lyrics, and I've got like an apple in my throat, you know – "Maybe if we wish and hope and think and pray it might come true," you know and I'm trying to rationalize with those lyrics, trying to think, "Wouldn't it be nice?" And it just wasn't working.

As Hamper speaks the lyrics, the music to "Wouldn't It Be Nice?" by the Beach Boys fades in on the soundtrack, and comes up full with a direct cut to a series of tracking shots depicting abandoned, crumbling homes.

Everything we see and hear in this segment bears an illustrative relationship to the argument, made in voice-over, situated at its center: "More factories had closed and I was beginning to see the effect this was having on my friends." In the first instance, the news montage corroborates Moore's argument by offering an "official" version of events that appears to be identical to his own. Secondly, the lonely images of Hamper shooting around and his story of emotional break-down serve as literal proof of Moore's general argument. Finally, use of the Beach Boys on the soundtrack not only bears an indexical relationship to Hamper's monologue, but also serves to put an ironic exclamation point



on the argument in total, as the shots of crumbling homes obviously illustrate Moore's overall point that the plant closings have been anything but "nice."

The point here is that the relationship Moore constructs between himself, as narrator, and the images we see on-screen is one of perfect "rhetorical continuity," in which everything we bear witness to serves the function of corroborating what Moore has said. As Bernstein argues, despite his comic persona, Moore assumes the authoritative position of the classic-documentary mode, ironically producing the very kind of "illustrated lecture" he purports to abhor (410).

More to the point, however, is that this authoritative mode of address has consequences in terms of the relationship Moore constructs between himself, his viewers, and the subjects we see on-screen – such as Ben Hamper. The interview is entirely dependent upon Moore's clever use of cutting and soundtrack to sculpt Hamper's words in specific ways. For one thing, Moore does not start at the beginning of the interview but, instead, at a point *mid-interview*. Thus, we are not made privy to any questions being asked by Moore to provoke Hamper's statement; we simply hear him say: "I just couldn't take it." This statement comes directly after Moore has described Hamper as having "cracked" as a result of the plant-closings. As such, Hamper's statement serves as evidentiary proof of Moore's argument that the plant closings are having a detrimental effect on the local community.

Moore then cuts away from Hamper to the images of burned-out buildings just as Hamper starts to recite the lyrics to the Beach Boys song. By cutting away here, and melding this very song into his own ironic argument about GM's malfeasance, Moore cleverly makes Hamper's statement his own. Thus, in this sequence, we are not made

privity to the entire interview itself – or even parts of it – as an *interaction*. All we get is a very carefully clipped piece of the interview, shaven clean of any possible ambiguity or contradiction, and inserted into the narrative flow, along with the news clips and imagery that make up the entire segment. In this way, Hamper himself serves the same function that the buildings and news reports do – he is an evidentiary piece of a rhetorical argument that Moore puts together. As such, Moore’s interview-technique here works as a form of authorization, endowing Moore with the same kind of cultural authority that Trinh T. Minh-ha and others have argued is the *raison d’être* of classical documentary form.

While Moore’s films maintain the manner in which the documentary form has traditionally represented human subjects, many scholars have argued that there are methods for filmmakers to construct a different, less-authoritative relationship with their subjects. Specifically, the notion of “testimony” has become an important concept for theorizing a way in which filmmakers might relinquish a bit of their own textual authority. In the testimony, subjects are empowered to speak openly about their own understandings and their own perspectives. They engage with the filmmaker, and sometimes even against, adding, changing, and shaping whatever argument is being made. In the testimonial, the process of “telling” – of speaking remembering, etc. – is just as important, if not more important, than the argument of which they are part. As such, testimonials work against the authoritative stance of the text. The filmmaker is no longer able to “speak for” anyone; instead, the audience becomes radically aware that only an individual subject can speak for him/herself.

Holocaust scholar James Young makes this point in his discussion of testimonials in Claude Lanzmann's landmark documentary, *Shoah* (1985). The emphasis is placed not on discovering the "true" meaning of the Holocaust – as if such a thing could exist – but in focusing on the act of interpretation, the way in which various subjects come to remember, understand, and interpret such an event. Lanzmann leaves most aspects of his interviews on-screen, including his constant prodding and pushing survivors to remember even the most painful of memories. In so doing, Lanzmann invites his audience to bear witness to the act of interpretation, itself, as subjects struggle to put words to memories and meaning to events. It is worth quoting Young at length:

It is not merely a story or narrative being recorded in cinemagraphic and video testimony, but the literal making of it: the painful and deliberate choice of words, selection of details and memories, the effect of these details on the speaker, and then the effect of these details on the narrative itself. ... we quite literally watch the narrator organize his testimony, edit it, and retell it until he is satisfied. We are able to see the telling act itself, its starts and stops, its essential provisionality. ... In all of this, we remain excruciatingly aware of the ontology of testimony, that witness is quite literally being made before our eyes.

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Similarly, for Zimmerman, the testimonials in *Shoah* become a way for subjects who had previously been silenced to take control of their stories by utilizing their own interpretive powers – “they show how testimony is actually a form of action, a speech act that releases trauma from silence and repression into one of historical liberation” (63). Referencing the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Zimmerman argues that testimonials empower subjects in a way that traditional interviews do not:

Unlike the filmmakers of [Grierson's] *Housing Problems* or the network crews interviewing hurricane victims, the witnesses take responsibility, according to Feldman and Laub, for the speech act embodied in the testimony, for the history it rewrites, and for moving beyond the personal: "To testify is thus, not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others."

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Their use of the word "commitment" here is important. The testimonial is a method by which documentarians might engage in the kind of committed work that Waugh describes in his concept of the political documentary. In these films, subjects do not function as pieces of evidence for an expository argument made by the filmmaker, but instead, are participants who share in the making, and remaking, of that argument. The subjects of testimony literally "take responsibility" for the arguments being made, and thereby *share* in their authorship. This is cinema that speaks with/alongside, not for and about.

Of course, *Shoah*, a 9 1/2 hour documentary, is also, an ideal example.

Lanzmann's commitment to the reflexive depiction of subject-witnesses is intense, to say the least, and perhaps not so conducive as a working guide for political documentarians, in general. But that does not mean documentaries cannot lean in this direction. For instance, John Corner has argued that Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980) makes use of what he calls "the mode of interview testimony."<sup>25</sup> The film is largely made up of five "women 'interviewees who become central characters in an act of combined remembering and reflection and are in no way placed as secondary to another discourse'" (126). According to Corner, this testimonial mode endows Fields'

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<sup>25</sup> Fields' film investigates dominant understandings of femininity and women's place in society by interviewing five real-life "Rosies" – women who stepped into the industrial workforce while men were shipped overseas during World War II.

subjects with a kind of interpretive power that is absent from more traditional documentaries:

... the stories of the five women have an intensive, subjective dimension and a more objective expositional function through which they become indicative of a general process. Unlike conventional documentary practice, however, in which interview testimony becomes necessarily subordinate to an expository discourse sustained by other means ... the interviews in *Rosie* constitute the principal discursive element.

*The Art* 128

Importantly, Corner makes the case that one way in which Fields transforms these sequences from evidentiary interviews into interpretive testimonies is by providing the women with enough time to “develop reflection.” Here, he contrasts *Rosie* with what Nichols calls the “string of interviews” format so typical of the expository mode. The danger involved with this format, Corner argues, is the construction of “a self-confirmatory circle in which interviewees are shown lending experiential support to an emerging, general version of the truth which they have been precisely chosen to overwrite” – a perfect description of Moore’s interview technique, as discussed above (*The Art* 130). In contrast, *Rosie*

attempts to avoid this charge ... not only by the counterpointing of testimony with ‘official’ archive film, but by the degree of personal ‘space’ which its participants occupy. This space gives an integrity to the testimony which renders it less appropriable by external intentions than might be the case with a more urgent treatment of the issues.

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It is just this kind of “space” that allows for the “activity of witness” as described by Young and Zimmerman – that allows the subject to take on the role of participant and co-

collaborator in the argument being constructed.<sup>26</sup> However, in Moore's work, subjects are never allowed to inhabit this kind of "personal space," but instead, are constantly positioned and repositioned, edited and undermined, as Moore incorporates their words and images into his own rhetorical narrative. The function of each subject is always subordinate to Moore, as central authority. When subjects speak, they do so only to corroborate what Moore says about them. Like his clever use of news clips, old movie footage and ironic musical accompaniment, Moore's subjects simply serve as rhetorical evidence – illustrative sound-bites for a filmmaker who ventriloquizes their pain and anguish for us.

Of course, not *all* the subjects we meet in Michael Moore's films are from victimized populations, experiencing various forms of pain and anguish. Moore's films also include a variety of subjects who maintain quite a bit of social power – and are, indeed, "authoritative" in their own right. His interviews with various local officials, such as Deputy Fred Ross in *Roger & Me* and Arthur Busch in *Bowling for Columbine*; his formal interviews with academics and journalists, such as Barry Glassner in *Bowling* or Craig Unger in *Fahrenheit 9/11*; and of course his confrontations with corporate officers such as G.M. spokesman Tom Kaye in *Roger & Me* or Nike head Phil Knight in *The Big One*, are all examples. In these segments Moore's presence is felt less as traditional "documentarian," and more as crusading journalist. We watch as Moore interrogates these subjects to get the answers he seeks. However, as with his treatment of social

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, this is not to argue that Fields gives "space" to *all* "Rosies" or *all* women. The film does not interview any women who had negative experiences with factory work or who, in any way, contradict the political sensibilities of the film. However, the "objectivity" of Fields' film is not the point. The point is that audiences are invited to hear the way in which particular subjects construct their own, radical interpretations of their own experiences, rather than to listen to a *diagnosis* of those experiences by an authoritative filmmaker.

“victims” like Ben Hamper, these interviews also perform an *authorizing* function. As I shall show, they also work to buttress an argument that Moore makes *about* a particular group of people, be it the displaced workers of Flint or the American soldiers being sent to Iraq.

Thus, crucial to Moore’s construction of subjects is not only the relationship they have with Moore, but with *each other*. In Moore’s films, people from the working class, African Americans, or any community Moore purports to speak *for* are almost never allowed to speak for themselves; while well-placed subjects, such as academics, welfare officers, corporate executives and law enforcement officers, are often times allowed to speak *with* Moore, about these “others.” As such, an analysis of Moore’s overall mode of address must encompass the wide variety of subjects that people his films and the complicated web of relationships they bear to Moore, to themselves, and to the audience. In the next section, I will discuss four different functions interview-subjects serve in Moore’s work: that of Expert, Informant, Exemplar and Interlocutor.

### **Experts**

While in *Roger & Me* and *The Big One* Moore eschews the use of traditional “experts” to buttress his arguments, in his later films, *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, he does employ expert opinions to great effect. The main function experts serve in Moore’s work is the same function they serve in most expository-style documentaries; they provide the filmmaker with credible support for his/her arguments, and endow the filmmaker, by proxy, with the authority of their expertise. Importantly, the emphasis in these segments is always on Moore’s *use* of these experts for his own

argument. Moore does not offer experts a “platform” from which to espouse their views, rather these views are presented as something Moore has dug up and discovered for us.

A good example of this comes towards the beginning of *Fahrenheit 9/11* as Moore lays out his case that the Bush administration allowed the bin Laden family to leave the country unquestioned following the attacks of 9/11. In this sequence, Moore relies upon the expert opinions of Democratic Senator Byron Dorgan, author and political analyst Craig Unger, and retired FBI agent Jack Cloonan. The sequence goes as follows:<sup>27</sup>

Segment One:

VO: In the days following September 11<sup>th</sup> all commercial and private airline traffic was grounded. Not even Ricky Martin could fly. But really, who wanted to fly? No one, except the bin Ladens.

VIS: Clips of news reports depicting the government’s decision to ground aircraft.

Segment Two:

MUS: “We Gotta Get Outta this Place”

VIS: Shot from ground of what looks to be a 747 taking off.

Segment Three:

VIS: Senator Byron Dorgan (BD) in medium close-up (MCU), sitting in his office.

Title card: “Senator Byron Dorgan (D-North Dakota) Senate Subcommittee on Aviation.”

DIA:

BD: We had some airlines authorized at the highest levels to fly, to pick up Osama bin Laden’s family members and others from Saudi Arabia and transport them out of this country.

Segment Four:

VO: It turns out that the White House approved planes to pick up the bin

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<sup>27</sup> For a key to transcript abbreviations, see Appendix B on page 543.



Ladens and numerous other Saudis. At least six private jets and nearly two dozen commercial planes carried the Saudis and the bin Ladens out of the U.S. after September 13<sup>th</sup>. In all, 142 Saudis, including 24 members of the bin Laden family were allowed to leave the country.

VIS: Edited montage of flight reports depicting flights to Saudi Arabia on 9/13.

Segment Five:

VIS: Footage of Osama bin Laden sitting cross-legged in front of a large map; Craig Unger (CU) in medium close-up.

Titles card: "Craig Unger Author, *House of Bush, House of Saud*"

DIA:

CU: Osama's always been portrayed as the bad apple, the black sheep in the family and that they cut off all relationship with him around 1994. In fact things are much more complicated than that.

MM: You mean Osama has had contact with other family members?

CU: That's right. In the summer of 2001, just before 9/11, one of Osama's sons got married in Afghanistan and several family members showed up at the wedding.

MM: The bin Ladens?

CU: That's right. So they're not cut off completely. That's really an exaggeration.

Segment Six:

VIS: Clip from an episode of Larry King. Guest Prince Bandar tells King that 24 members of bin Laden's family had been living in the US at the time of the attacks and that the Saudi royal family coordinated with the FBI to get them out following the attacks.

Segment Seven:

VO: This is retired FBI agent Jack Cloonan. Before 9/11 he was a senior agent on the joint FBI-CIA al Qaeda task force.

VIS: Close-up of Jack Cloonan (JC) in his office; cut to medium shot of Cloonan, with Moore visible in over-the-shoulder shot; footage of FBI agents placing someone in a car.

DIA:

JC: I, as an investigator, would not want these people to have left. I think in the case of the bin Laden family, it would have been prudent to hand the subpoenas out, have them come in, get on-the-

record, you know, get on the record.

MM: That's the proper procedure?

JC: Yeah. How many people were pulled off airlines after that coming into the country who were what? They were from the Middle East or they fit a very general picture.

MM: We held hundreds of people ...

JC: We held hundreds. And I ...

MM: ... for weeks and months at a time.

Segment Eight:

VIS: Craig Unger in Medium close-up.

DIA:

MM: Did the authorities do anything when the bin Ladens tried to leave the country?

CU: No. They were identified at the airport. They looked at their passports, and they were identified.

MM: Well that's what would happen to you or I, if we left the country.

CU: Exactly, exactly.

MM: So, a little interview, check the passport ... What else?

CU: Nothing.

Segment Nine:

VO: I don't know about you, but usually when the police can't find a murderer, don't they usually want to talk to the family members to find out where they think he might be? Yeah. That's how cops do it! What was going on here?

VIS: Clips from an old *Dragnet* episode.

Segment Ten:

VIS: Medium close-up of Sen. Byron Dorgan.

DIA:

BD: I think we need to know a lot more about that. That needs to be the subject of a significant subject of an investigation. What happened? How did it happen? Why? And who authorized it?

MUS: *Fahrenheit* theme music fades in during Dorgan's comments and continues on throughout following segments.

Segment Eleven:

VIS: Coonan in medium over-the-shoulder shot with Moore's head/shoulder in foreground.

Title reads: Jack Cloonan Senior FBI agent (retired) Al Qaeda Task Force.

DIA:

JC: Imagine what those poor bastards were feeling when they were jumping out of that building to their death – those young guys and cops and firemen that ran into that building never asked a question. And their dead. And families lives are ruined. And they'll never have peace.

MM: That's right.

JC: And if I had to inconvenience a, a member of the bin Laden family with a subpoena or a grand jury do you think I'd lose any sleep over it? Not for a minute, Mike.

MM: No one would question it.

JC: No, it's ...

MM: Not even the biggest civil libertarian.

JC: No, no, it's just-

MM: No one would question it.

JC: You know, you got a lawyer? Fine. Counsel? Fine. Mr. bin Laden, this is why I'm asking. It isn't because I think you did anything. Its just because I want to ask you the questions that I would anybody.

MM: Right.

JC: And that's all.

Segment Twelve:

VO: None of this made any sense. Can you imagine in the days after the Oklahoma City terrorist bombing, President Clinton helping to arrange a

trip out of the country for the McVeigh family? What do you think would have happened to Clinton if that had been revealed?

Unlike the testimonials of *Rosie the Riveter*, in this sequence the subjects are not “responsible” for making their own argument, but serve to corroborate Moore’s. The comments are highly edited and grouped into a thematic strand involving the Bush Administration’s faulty handling of the bin Laden family. Their comments come to us *after* Moore has essentially laid out his thesis (“But really, who wanted to fly? No one, except the bin Ladens” – buttressed by the ironic use of “We Gotta Get Outta This Place”). And they are strung together via Moore’s controlling voice-over, which serves to tie them together into a singular grouping of evidentiary “snippets.”

Furthermore, it is important to note that the experts never speak to the camera directly. That right is reserved for Moore, alone, who’s voice-over “interprets” expert commentary for us. Thus, Dorgan’s opening comments are interrupted by Moore: “It turns out that the White House approved planes to pick up the bin Ladens ...” And his voice-over focuses our attention during Unger’s comments: “I don’t know about you, but usually when the police can’t find a murderer, don’t they ...” Finally, his voice-over comes in at the end to sum everything up: “None of this made any sense. Can you imagine in the days after the Oklahoma City terrorist bombing, President Clinton helping to arrange a trip out of the country for the McVeigh family?” By editing these interviews into a series of short clips, and employing a guiding voice-over that addresses the viewer directly, Moore’s narration literally takes control, allowing us to see and hear experts speaking, but reserving the right to tell us what they said and why it is important. In this way, Moore reproduces the expository mode of address as defined by Nichols.

However, there is also a crucial difference between Moore's expert-interviews and those typical of the expository mode: the presence of on-screen repartee. In the case of Unger and Cloonan, we hear Moore's voice asking questions and making comments, while in the Cloonan excerpts we actually see Moore in a conversational, over-the-shoulder shot. For Nichols, this can sometimes serve to focus viewer-attention on the process of information-gathering itself. And in radical instances, such as Lanzmann's *Shoah*, this can serve to focus viewer attention upon the ambiguities and polyvalence of interpretation within the social world. But this is hardly the case here. In these excerpts, Moore is shown agreeing with experts, and in some cases even beating them to their own conclusion. Thus, when Jack Cloonan asks the rhetorical question, "How many people were pulled off airlines after that coming into the country who were – what? – they were from the Middle East or they fit a very general picture?" Moore jumps in with a pointed answer, "We held hundreds of people, for weeks and months at a time!" And when Craig Unger tells us that the bin Ladens were "identified at the airport. They looked at their passports, and they were identified," Moore pushes him to towards the pertinent point: "Well, that's what would happen if you or I left the country ..." Indeed, in the final segment with Jack Cloonan, Moore appears to have relinquished the role of "investigator" entirely, as he constantly beats Cloonan to the punch, filling in his own conclusions for him: "No one would question it ... Not even the biggest civil libertarian ... no one would question it!"

In these sequences, Moore not only plays the role of investigator, but *mediator*, between expert and audience. Not only are the experts subordinated to the controlling logic of his narration, but we, as viewers, are literally dependent upon it to understand

what they are saying and why it matters. This establishes Moore as a kind of co-equal with his experts. In many instances, Moore is depicted as working alongside experts to come to the “right” conclusions. This is not their argument, he seems to be saying, but *my* argument, that these experts also happen to agree with.

We can see this perhaps most clearly in *Bowling For Columbine*. One of the center pieces of that film is sociologist Barry Glassner’s argument that the media’s overblown depictions of crime and violence, and their repeated connection to the African American community, constructs a “culture of fear” in which even the most exaggerated claims about impending doom seem to make sense to the average citizen.<sup>28</sup> But, once again, as with the experts in the previous segment, Glassner’s argument (upon which Moore seems to have based most of his film) is couched within the framework of Moore’s own narrative thread, appearing not as the *basis for* his thesis, but as *evidence of* its inherent correctness.

For instance, Glassner’s first appearance in the film, in which he explains his “culture of fear” thesis, is sandwiched between two montage-segments in which Moore humorously catalogues a variety news reports exaggerating the prevalence of violence and linking it to inner-city black men. As such, Glassner’s comments serve more of an illustrative function – living, expert proof of the argument Moore, himself, constructs through fast-paced editing and ironic voice-over. True to form, then, when Moore cuts *back* to his “interview” with Glassner, it is *Moore’s* voice we hear. The filmmaker now seems to be laying out the argument, not Glassner:

MM: Susan Smith drowns her 2 children and she tells people, a black guy stole

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<sup>28</sup> See Glassner.

the car  
and stole the kids.

BG: Right.

MM: And everyone, at first, bought it.

BG: The anonymous, urban – which means, usually, “Black” – male comes by and does this, is the excuse for all kinds of things.

MM: Charles Stuart – the lawyer in Boston.

BG: Right, exactly

MM: He kills his pregnant wife, says a black guy did it. Everybody buys it.

And as with the sequence from *Fahrenheit*, it is Moore’s voice-over that sums things up for us. We cut from Moore’s statement, “Everybody buys it,” to yet another illustrative montage of news clips reporting on the death of Charles Stuart (proof that “everybody bought it”), and then to a concluding voice-over: “You know, the thing I love about this country of mine is that, whether you’re a psychotic killer or running for president of the United States, the one thing you can always count on is white America’s fear of the Black man.”

Thus, one of the crucial aspects to note in regards to Moore’s depiction of expert subjects is the relationship he constructs between these experts and himself. It is specifically one of “collegiality,” rather than one of dependence. By depicting himself *in conversation* with any number of experts, as they both appear to work together to explain something to the audience, Moore manages to both obtain the credibility that these subjects can provide by dint of their expertise, while at the same time holding onto the ultimate authority that he claims as author of the text, and final arbiter of truth.

This strategy follows, in many ways, the format Richard Campbell has observed in the television news magazine, *60 Minutes*. In *60 Minutes*, Campbell argues that Mike Wallace and his colleagues invest themselves with authority by continuously striking the

pose of the “well-informed citizen” (14).<sup>29</sup> This pose positions the reporter between the citizen and the expert; while the reporter might not have the specialized knowledge of the expert: “... with privileged access to experts ... the well-informed command a critical, mediating symbolic station in modern cultures – a station located on the vistas between ‘expertness and the lack of it,’ between primary definitions and conventional wisdom” (14) The primary purpose of the reporter as well-informed citizen is to act as an “agent” for the mass audience by “tak[ing] specialized knowledge and transform[ing] it into common sense” (14). This is precisely the relationship Moore constructs between himself and these experts, as his casual voice-over transforms official opinion into a common-sense argument put forth by Moore, himself.

The notion of “access” is important here. The casual nature of many of these interviews works to construct a sense, not only of agreement, but of *camaraderie* between Moore and the expert. In this way, Moore further reinforces his own authority to be interpreting the world for an audience of mass viewers. For instance, the casual nature of his relationship with Jack Cloonan comes through in the way in which they converse with each other, rather than engage in the typical question-answer style interview that we’d see in a more traditional journalistic documentary; a sense of camaraderie that is further signaled when Cloonan refers to Moore as “Mike” towards the end of the interview. Scenes like this appear through *Fahrenheit 9/11*, as when Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin laughs warmly at Moore’s interjection during their interview that *he* could be considered a terrorist according to the Patriot Act’s definition, or when Congressman John Conyers says to Moore, in colloquial fashion, “Sit down my son.” Moore’s casual stroll with Barry Glassner, and further conversation with him over what

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<sup>29</sup> Campbell borrows this concept from Alfred Schulz and Thomas Luckmann (Cambell 14).



looks to be a meal in a local diner, serve this function as well. Moore may not be an FBI agent, congressman or sociologist, but he hangs out with them, laughs with them – in many cases, appears to *know* them on some personal level. As such, we can be assured that Moore’s power to interpret the world and events is not only sanctioned by official sources – Moore himself seems to *become* one of these sources.

### **Informants**

Informants are documentary subjects who, in some respects, function as “local experts” for Moore. These people are representatives from the communities about which Moore speaks; however, they are frequently “well-placed” members of these communities (relatively speaking) and their job is to tell Moore *about* these communities and the folks that people them. As such, these subjects work less as “witnesses,” as in *Rosie* or *Shoah* – speaking about their personal experiences and understandings – and more as “informants,” supplying Moore with an “insider’s view” of marginalized communities. Thus, as with the experts above, these subjects endow Moore with a specific kind of authority – this time stemming from the subjects’ intimate knowledge of the topic at hand, as opposed to the specialized knowledge of experts.

Deputy Fred Ross, the “little evictor” of *Roger & Me*, is probably the most famous informant in Moore’s oeuvre. Ross serves as Moore’s – and our – escort into the underside of Flint’s troubled economy. Moore’s cameras literally follow along after Ross as he brings us from one evictee’s house to the next. However, Ross’s authority to take us into the homes of Flint’s underclass is the only kind of agency he is allowed. As with the expert sequences, Moore’s voice-over controls the show, interpreting Ross’s words and actions for us. Despite the fact that Ross often provides us with his “spin” on what’s

going on, Moore's voice-over provides an expository explanation of everything we see. As such, Ross serves less as a full-blown character-witness, and more as an authenticating type of "access," endowing Moore with the ability and authority to enter communities and homes and tell us what is going on there.

This move is ethically troubling, given Ross's dual-role as both evictor *and* member of this very community, who has, as he tells us, "put out some of [his] best friends." Some of the evictees talk to Fred in a familiar manner, such as a woman who takes him around to the front of her house to show him her new siding. As such, it would seem that Ross would have a unique perspective on the current condition of Flint and its people. However, Moore never asks Ross about himself or his experiences. We know nothing about Ross's background, how he came to the position he's in now, his take on the plant closings, or their effects on the community, etc. Instead, Moore sticks to asking Ross "who, what, and when" questions, such as, "What's going to happen to this woman," and "Why are all the trucks being rented here?" In this way, Ross's commentary simply serves as exposition-by-proxy, in which Moore solicits explanations from a "legitimate" local source.

The most crucial aspect of Informant-sequences lies not only with their relationship to Moore – their role as evidentiary functionaries – but with their relationship to the communities they purportedly represent. For, despite Ross's clearly subordinate role, the Deputy *does* retain a certain level of "power." He is elevated to the status of truth-teller, over and above the evictees about whom he speaks. Whereas Ross is authorized by Moore to tell us something about the folks we see on screen, those folks themselves are radically silenced. When they do speak, it is either in purely illustrative

fashion, as when an African American woman tells them about her housing situation – “It had leaked so much this whole area here was bulging down” – or it exists as “overheard” dialogue, just part of the “scene” to which Deputy Ross has provided us access – such as when an angry resident slams around her house declaring, “This bitch got his money and sent my motherfucking shit out!” In these sequences, Ross acts as a kind of intermediary, allowing us to eavesdrop on the goings-on of those less fortunate. Thus, Ross’s real purpose is to authorize Moore, himself, as crusading advocate with an insider’s knowledge on what is “really going on.”

Although Deputy Ross is the most involved informant in Moore’s oeuvre, we see similar characters throughout his films. In *Bowling For Columbine*, for instance, Flint County prosecutor, Arthur Busch serves a similar function. Busch first appears in *Bowling* directly after the sequence involving Barry Glassner described above. In it, Busch describes the relationship between the urban, African American communities and suburban, white communities that make up the Detroit area:

VIS: Arthur Busch (AB) in close-up, sitting in his office.  
Title card: “Arthur Busch, County Prosecutor – Flint, Michigan

DIA:

AB: “Frankly, the Black community has become entertainment for the rest of the community.”

MM: Meaning what?

AB: The entertainment being that the crime of the day – you know, “If it Bleeds, It Leads,” – gets to be the front story and then that becomes the perception and the image of an entire people – which couldn’t be further from the truth, in my opinion. In fact, you’ll find, I think, that most African Americans are quite adverse to gun possession.

VIS: Montage: B&W footage of an “angry” public demonstration by a group of African Americans; footage from an old, B&W zombie movie; cars Moving through the gates of a private community.

DIA:

AB: In suburbia I think there’s some notion that there’s going to be an Invading horde come from either the city or from some place unknown to savage their suburban community. To me, not only is it bizarre, um, but its totally unfounded.

VIS: Medium shot of Arthur Busch

AB: And these pistols, curiously enough, weren’t being taken off kids in the city of Flint but were being taken off of kids out in the out-county area, in the suburban communities. And, ahhh ...

MM: (Off camera) I didn’t think you’d say that. I thought you were gonna say it’s all these black kids in inner-city schools that had these guns.

AB: No, I – we’ve never really had many problems with the guns in the city. I mean, not to say that we haven’t – we’ve had some. But that’s never been the biggest problem – the biggest problem has been the gun possession by these adolescents in suburbia.

Here, Busch functions as a kind of local expert, authorized to tell us about the community within which he works. As with Deputy Ross, Busch enjoys a kind of “limited authority” not granted to the actual *subjects* of this sequence; namely, members of the African American community. Thus, while Busch is allowed to pontificate on broad, structural questions such as the consequences of a media-fed racist panic, no member of the Black community, itself, is authorized to speak in any way. In Michael Moore’s films, the various “victimized” populations he documents are usually spoken for, rather than spoken with. Their experience is always mediated, in some way, via Experts or Informants and – in every case, ultimately via Moore, himself.

### **Exemplars**

Thus, Arthur Busch's position of limited authority vis-à-vis the communities about which he speaks can be seen most powerfully in the relationship he bears to a third type of subject; the "exemplar." These are subjects who do not, in any way, participate in the rhetorical function of the film, although they are often shown engaging with Moore, onscreen. Moore maintains full interpretive authority over these subjects, who are constantly relegated to a purely descriptive function – demonstrating social types, rather than, as Corner puts it, interpreting their experience in a process of "reflection-as-self-awareness." Indeed, it is specifically this absence of self-awareness that separates exemplars out from the other types of subjects in Moore's films. While experts and informants both retain a limited authority to "interpret" the topic at-hand, exemplars hold no such power, serving merely as living bits of "evidence" for the argument being constructed.

For instance, in the sequence discussed above, Arthur Busch is not only "informing" Moore about the plight of the African American community in the city of Detroit, he is also describing the situation of the white, often working class, population that make up its surrounding suburbs. While no one from the black community is interviewed, Moore does actually speak to a representative of these white suburbs. He cuts directly from Busch's comment about "these adolescents in suburbia" to a barroom in Oscoda, MI, where we meet one such adolescent; Brent, one of the troubled, working class kids who has been in frequent trouble with the law for gun possession. We get the following exchange:

MM: How'd you get a gun?

B: I stole mine.

MM: Where'd you steal it from?

B: I stole it from a friend of mine. His dad owns a bunch of guns.

MM: What were you doing with the stolen guns?

B: We went down to Detroit to sell them because I can get \$150 a pop for a 9mm.

MM: Really? Who were you trying to sell them to?

B: Anybody that would really want them. Mostly gangs and stuff like that.

MM: Gangs in the city of Detroit? Black?

B: Um, predominantly.

MM: Yeah.

JUMP CUT

MM: So, now you're OK?

B: Yeah, I'm free now. I'm completely clear.

MM: You can keep selling guns?

B: Well, I can't really keep selling guns now. It's getting too risky. Everybody knows me up here. You know, people want guns or drugs or alcohol they come to my house. And that's just too much.

MM: Too much hassle.

B: Yeah.

Comparing this exchange to the proceeding exchange between Moore and Busch, as described above, we see the relationship Moore sketches out between informants and the communities about which they speak. Despite playing an obviously subordinate role to Moore's rhetorical authority, there is nothing that appears hidden from Busch concerning Moore's agenda. Both he and Moore work together to explicate a broad, social problem

that has beset the community of Flint. Busch, as local expert, is made *privy to* the argument that Moore is constructing. Brent, on the other hand, is not. While Busch is asked to pontificate on the reasons for social inequality and its connections to gun violence, Brent is merely asked to describe his experience as a gun-seller. He's not "in" on the argument – a point made explicit by Moore's ironic jab at the end – "Too much hassle" – which Brent appears to take literally, while the audience is invited to shake its collective heads with shocked sympathy.

Thus, a pattern is revealed here, in which a kind of *hierarchy of subjects* might be discerned. While experts and informants are endowed with the authority to interpret the lives of the subjects they speak about, those subjects, themselves – the evictees in *Roger*, or Brent in *Bowling* – aren't ever asked to *interpret* their lives, but merely to *describe*. In this way, subjects like Brent are reduced to a highly objectified status in Moore's narratives, robbed even of the ability to explain their own actions in anything other than the most descriptive of terms.

There are at least three ways in which Moore constructs subjects as "exemplars." First, through what I call his "interview montage" technique. Second, through what I call the "covert interview." And third, through what Bill Nichols has called the "fishbowl effect."

### **The Interview Montage**

In the interview montage, Moore edits together a number of short, interview-snippets – sound-bites from various subjects, rather than full-blown exchanges – in which the subjects themselves (through their comments) serve as living, breathing illustrations of their own plight. Thus, an interview montage is often book-ended by expository

sequences that work to endow the words of interviewees with meaning. Usually some kind of thesis is laid out in the first sequence, and reiterated or concluded in the final one, while the interview-snippets that are sandwiched in between serve as proof of this overall argument. The snippets are edited in a way that robs the subjects, themselves, of any real interpretive power. Often, their statements – likely part of a longer interview – are cut down to a sentence or two per snippet, and cut together with similar snippets from other interviews, usually according to some kind of theme. In so doing, Moore harnesses these statements to his own rhetorical gesture. In a sense, their statements become his statements – their voice a part of his.

*Roger & Me* is literally filled with these moments. In an early segment, Moore makes the case that GM workers are disgruntled about the lay-offs. This segment begins with a hand-held shot of a man in medium close-up speaking in the direction of the camera: “The best thing Michigan and GM can do is get rid of Roger Smith and them other son of a bitches!” he yells. Moore’s voice-over concurs, telling us, “That seemed to be the general consensus, as I talked to many GM workers about their chairman, Roger Smith.” Here, Moore cuts to a shot of three female workers sitting around a table in what could be a break-room, with Moore seated in the foreground in an over-the-shoulder shot. As Moore’s voice-over finishes, the diegetic sound of the shot fades-in. Moore asks, “What would you tell Roger Smith if you could talk to him?”

“Oh, replies one of the women, “Roger Smith? I’d tell him to retire!” From here we cut to what looks like some sort of outdoor gathering – a picnic, perhaps, in which a hand-held shot zooms in on a woman who says, “He can’t look an auto worker in the eye, because, you know, because he should be feeling guilty.” From here Moore makes a



direct cut to a man in sunglasses and a Flint Sit-down Strike 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary hat, who says: “Most people are hungry. He’s not.” Moore then cuts directly to three people standing in a non-descript hallway. One of the women says:

I’d tell Roger Smith to get off his big bucks and start giving some of it back to its workers. I’m sick and tired of these damn fat cats. I could say a few choice words, but I’m a lady and I was raised a lady so, I won’t say what I really feel, but um, I could use some unsavory language as far as the fat cats.

From here, Moore sums things up with a direct cut to hand-held footage of auto-workers picketing outside the plant, chanting “Fire Roger Smith!”

What is important to note here is the way in which these interview snippets are chopped up and edited together thematically in a way that subordinates each individual’s comments to the rhetorical purpose of Moore’s argument – in a fashion very similar to Moore’s handling of Ben Hamper, as described above. Equally important to the editing is the manner in which each of these subjects are filmed. When experts and informants are interviewed, Moore often gives them the full, professional, “talking head” treatment. They are filmed seated, in medium close-ups, often times in what appear to be their offices; and they are clearly engaged in a serious conversation with Moore, who – again, while retaining ultimate authority – authorizes them to engage thoughtfully with Moore and the overall rhetorical thrust of the film.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the subjects we meet in this worker-sequence are all shot with a hand-held camera, in “natural” settings, answering “impromptu” questions. This man-on-the-street aesthetic endows these subjects with a

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<sup>30</sup> An obvious exception is Deputy Ross, who is not filmed at a desk or in his office. But he *is* of course filmed in his “professional setting” and, as discussed, is invited on occasion to offer an interpretation of the situation that is denied the evictees we watch scurrying back and forth between home and sidewalk.

descriptive character that experts and informants clearly rise above. Exemplars show, while experts/informants tell. Whereas experts stand *outside* a particular social milieu, and informants invite us *into* that milieu, exemplars are simply *a part* of that milieu, serving as representatives for an entire community.

Brian Winston has described this style of filmmaking as “verité,” a “bastardized” form of direct-cinema that melds the “use [of] commentary, interviews, graphics, reconstruction and the rest of the realist documentary repertoire” with segments of direct cinema-style sequences, which he describes as “an easy amalgam of handheld available-light synch shooting” (*Claiming* 210). As Bill Nichols, among many others, has pointed out, techniques such as the handheld camera and synch-sound provide the documentary with an exaggerated sense of reality – these techniques serve to “anchor speech to images of observation that locate dialogue, and sound, in a specific moment and historical place” (39). As such, they construct scenes that are supposed to feel as though they were “carved from the historical world.” Thus, Moore’s use of vérité-techniques to film exemplary-subjects only heightens their evidential status and legitimacy by adding a sense of “reality” and “spontaneity” to what are, in fact, carefully selected and edited statements. We look on as “real workers” speak – usually in ways that serve to corroborate Moore’s arguments about them.

For example, in one sequence towards the end of the *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore actually manages to construct a kind of interview-montage on the fly, literally getting a bunch of military recruits together and asking them to raise their hands in response to simple questions. In the midst of a larger segment arguing that the American military preys on the poor, Moore cuts to a shot of about ten African American army recruits

standing in a group, facing (we assume) Moore, who stands just off camera. We witness the following exchange:

DIA:

MM: How many of you have a friend or a family member in the service?

VIS: All of the recruits raise their hands.

MM: Anybody currently serving overseas?

[Assorted answers]:

R1: A brother of mine.

R2: My cousin.

R3: Yeah, cousin.

etc.

MM: (addressing each of the recruits who spoke) Where's your brother?

R1: Iraq.

R2: Germany.

R3: My cousin got shipped off to Iraq, like, three days ago.

R4: Dang.

JUMPCUT

R4: There's like a, ah, Army or Navy recruiter or a Marines recruiter up there almost every week. He's in the lunchroom recruiting students from, ah, out the lunchroom.

Here, once again, we get subjects who are treated in a fashion similar to the auto workers we "meet" in *Roger*. They are asked a series of simple questions requiring descriptive answers that work towards forwarding Moore's argument about military recruitment.

Significantly, in a film that spends much time demonstrating sympathy for the plight of African Americans, this sequence is the only time this group is represented specifically as *speaking subjects*. But despite their speaking-role, as with all of Moore's exemplars, we never get their take on the situation, how they feel about military recruitment, etc. Instead, Moore adopts a "just the facts" approach, like a detective putting together a hypothesis.

Thus, with his interview montage technique Moore, once again, manages to reinforce the authoritative relationship so central to the traditional documentary form. Indeed, this technique can be seen as descended directly from Grierson, himself, who often times used short, edited interview segments with working-class subjects to illustrate his own political arguments. The result are films about the working class, depicting the working class, but within which the working class is granted no authority to speak for itself. Instead, as Corner puts it, subjects were there simply to "add 'subjective experience' to 'objective conditions'" (*The Art* 69). Hardly a better phrase could be found to describe the main function of Moore's interview montage technique.

### **The Covert Interview**

At the beginning of *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore constructs an extended interview montage sequence involving members of the Michigan Militia. This sequence is a bit more complex than those discussed above, and showcases more of Moore's trademark, "reflexive" stylistics. However, as with the sequences described above, despite its reflexive flourishes, this sequence is predicated upon the maintenance of an authoritative relationship between Moore and his subjects. Specifically, this sequence

combines Moore's man-on-the-street, verite-aesthetic with another important technique often used in his depiction of exemplars – the “covert interview.”

It is worth describing the scene in detail:

VIS: Montage: bowling pins being shot; militia men in full-combat gear \ shooting target practice; Moore, in wide shot, wearing fatigues shooting at target; matching visuals of first Militia Member (Mil 1) gesturing to show “vital” area.

VO: Not far from where Charlton Heston and I grew up is a training ground for the Michigan Militia.

CUT TO:

VIS: Close-up of militia men firing guns.

DIA:

MM: Why do you use the bowling pins?

Mil 1: From a self-defense or technical standpoint, it's a small target that closely represents the vitals on a, on a human being should you ever need to shoot at one.

CUT TO:

VIS: Montage: Moore walking with gun; Moore checking gun; matching shots of photo-stills depicting McVeigh and Nichols; close-up on Moore firing gun; medium shot of Moore firing gun; close-up on Moore firing gun; wide of Moore standing behind Militia Member flat on ground, firing gun.

MUS: Drums performing a military cadence

VO: The Michigan Militia became known around the world when on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1995, two guys living in Michigan who had attended Militia Meetings, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, blew up the Federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. The Michigan Militia wanted everyone to know that they were nothing like McVeigh and Nichols.

CUT TO:

VIS: Medium shot of second Militia Member (Mil 2) talking to Moore off screen.

DIA:

Mil 2: This is an American tradition. Its an American responsibility to be armed. If you're not armed, you're not responsible. Who's going to defend your kids? The cops? The Federal Government?

MM: Nope. None of them.

Mil 2: 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.

VIS: Close-up on third Militia Member (Mil 3)

DIA:

Mil 3: And we're just here to let them know that – hey – we're here to help, we're not the bogeymen we're made out to be. We're here to help and defend the people of this country.

VIS: Shots of Militia Members at target practice, with Moore in background watching.

DIA: (in VO)

MM: I'm sure you guys are the kind of people that people would like to have as their neighbors. If somebody's in need you're there to help them.

Mil 3: Yeah pretty much. We're normal people, have regular jobs and professions. And this is what we do on our own time.

MM: What kind of job do you have?

CUT TO:

VIS: Militia Men in circle, camera swings to each one as they answer Moore's Questions.

DIA:

Mil 3: I'm a draftsman.

MM: How about you?

Mil 4: Unemployed, right now.

JUMP CUT

MM: Frank, what do you do for a living?

Mil 1: I work for a heat-treating company. I drive a truck for them.

MM: A-ha. OK. How about you?

Mil 2: I'm a real-estate negotiator.

MM: (chuckling) Real-estate negotiator? (camera pans to reveal Moore laughing)

Mil 2: White-collar, all the way.

MM: You don't bring that with you, when you're negotiating real estate?

Mil 2: No.

MM: Alright.

JUMP CUT

DIA:

MM: So what do you have in your home?

Mil 1: Smith & Wesson, 9mm.

MM: Mm-hm. How about you?

Mil 1: With hollow points.

Mil 4: 12-gauge.

MM: At home?

Mil 4: Yep.

MM: How about you?

Mil 3: M-16.

MM: At home?

Mil 3: Yep.

MM: Yeah?

Mil 3: At the ready.

Unidentified voice: I don't agree with that because you have to know where your rounds are going. Do you have frangibles?

Mil 3: Well, I know where they're going to go when I aim to shoot.

CUT TO:

VIS: Moore standing with Frank (Mil 1) in medium shot; matching shots of a calendar depicting scantily-clad women holding guns; MS of Moore and Mil 2.

DIA:

MM: Who's idea was the calendar?

Mil 2: Well, that would probably be Kristen.

Unidentified: A picture's worth a 1000 words, I mean, A – it demonstrates a level of sophistication you wouldn't expect out of a militia. B – you know, we're people too.

MM: Right.

Mil 2: And, and we have a lot of fun with it.

Mil 1: It was a fundraiser, and it showed that we're not so serious. Um, You know, we're not these conspiracy nuts who wouldn't want our pictures to get out. You know, and it was a fun fundraiser

CUT TO:

VIS: Picture from the calendar of Militia Woman (MW), naked wrapped in flag

CUT TO:

VIS: Militia Woman, in full army fatigue, kneels in a tent with other fully-armed Militia Members. Her young daughter wanders around the tent, wearing a diaper.

DIA:

MW: I've had guns pretty much since I was old enough to have them.

MM: Yeah.



MW: And I learned how to use them, um – (reacting to child) You’re silly! – because being a female, number one, I felt it was important to be able to protect myself with the best means possible. And one of those means is having a gun.

CUT TO:

VIS: Fifth Militia Member (Mil 5) with gun and arm around child; Militia Woman standing with her daughter who mugs for the camera.

DIA:

MW: When a criminal breaks into your house, who’s the first person you’re gonna call? Most people will call the police, because they have guns. Cut out the middleman. Take care of your own family, yourself. If you’re not going to protect your family, who is?

CUT TO:

VIS: Night training. Moore following along behind Militia members on some kind of training mission, hands in pocket.

MUS: Old recording of “I Wish I Was in Michigan” plays lightly, then fades in after dialogue

DIA:

Mil 1: We’re not racists. We’re not extremist. We’re not fundamentalists. We’re not terrorists or militants, or other such nonsense.

Mil 2: We’re citizens.

Mil 1: We’re just concerned citizens, we have a desire to fulfill our responsibilities and duties as Americans and an armed citizenry is part of that.

To begin with, this sequence is another good example of Moore’s man-on-the-street aesthetic. As with the previous sequences, Moore asks the militia members short, simple questions that demand descriptive answers (“What do you do for a living?”; “What kind of gun do you own?”), often having them go around in a circle to answer. The interviews are shot verite-style, Moore on-screen, with an emphasis on shots of him trying out their

guns and following them on “training missions.” All of this works to establish their credibility as real subjects from an “actual” militia. The importance of milieu here is crucial, lending the scene an aura of *infiltration*.

More than this, however, is the way in which Moore invokes an intrusive “collagist’s voice” to subtly comment on the members’ statements. In these instances, Moore simultaneously utilizes the role of on-screen *character* and off-screen *narrator*, commenting on and undermining subject’s statements, even as he speaks with them in “real-time.” For instance, when Moore says to the men, “I’m sure you guys are the kind of guys that people would like to have as their neighbor” (to which they agree saying, “We’re all normal people”), Moore cuts to footage of them in full army-fatigues, firing M-16s – the very antithesis of the image of a “good neighbor.” During the calendar discussion, Moore cuts to images of the calendar itself, producing more undermining juxtapositions, such as the image of a blonde militia woman wearing fatigues revealingly opened at the chest matched to the comment that the calendar “demonstrates a level of sophistication you wouldn’t expect out of militia.” This juxtaposition is played for laughs; but then Moore cuts from a photo-still of a naked woman wrapped in an American flag to a close-up of the model’s daughter, surrounded by gun-wielding militia. This cut subtly suggests not only the “lack of sophistication” implied by the previous juxtaposition, but the assault on innocence and “sanity” that Moore has been developing into a theme during this and previous segments. In this scene, the “voice” of Moore-as-collagist takes obvious precedence over the voice of Moore-as-character. This further serves to objectify subjects in a way that destroys any sense of participation or collaboration between Moore and subject.

What is so striking about this scene, however, is the fact that the Michigan Militia members seem to *think* they are willing participants in Moore's project. Members constantly speak "through" Moore's camera, as though they believe Moore is offering them a medium through which to speak to the American public. Thus, we get statements like: "We just want them to know we're here to help – we're not the bogeymen we're made out to be"; "We're all normal people, have regular jobs and professions"; "We're not racists. We're not extremist. We're not fundamentalists. We're not terrorists or militants"; and, "Were just concerned citizens." However, the cruel joke on display here, emphasized by Moore's playful, clever editing, is that they aren't "participating" in this project at all, but rather serving as exemplars of the very stereotype they are trying to defend against. As such, Moore not only objectifies his exemplars in this scene, but he turns that process of objectification into a source of *pleasure* for the audience. As such, exemplars not only act as pieces of rhetorical evidence – they become unwitting participants in Moore's *entertaining* mode of address.<sup>31</sup>

As such, this scene represents a staple of Moore's work, the "covert interview." In this mode, Moore solicits the willing participation of subjects through on-screen interviews which have a double-meaning that is only known to the viewer and Moore, himself. Here I am drawing, in part, from Bill Nichol's notion of the "masked interview," although Moore alters this form in important ways. The "masked interview," as Nichols

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<sup>31</sup> This effect is often achieved not only via undermining editing strategies, but by the "rhetorical positioning" of interviews within the overall flow of the film. For instance, the militia sequence is sandwiched between footage from a Chris Rock stand-up performance in which he makes fun of Americans' crazed obsession with guns, and a later interview with James Nichols, brother of Terry Nichols, who reveals himself to be mentally unhinged. As such, the militia members' words have, in a sense, already been "interpreted" for us. They do not add to Moore's argument, nor engage with it, but simply become spectacular "proof" of Moore's overall point. Indeed, the direct cut Moore employs at the end of the sequence to a shot of himself standing next to James Nichols works in tandem with his opening voice-over – "The Michigan Militia wanted everyone to know that they were nothing like McVeigh and Nichols" – to sum this argument up, and shut down any possibility of taking these subjects at their word.

describes it, constitutes a kind of “implanted conversation.” The filmmaker remains off-screen and unheard while the “interviewee” engages in a conversation with another social actor, while the camera records the dialogue in observational-fashion. The resulting impression is that of “ordinary conversation,” but the reality is that the “topic the social actors address and the general drift of what they say has been prearranged” (*Representing* 51-2). In this way, the filmmaker works to “mask” the interview structure itself, creating the impression of naturalness. In relation to the masked interview, Nichols also describes a technique he calls “pseudo-dialogue,” in which the interviewer works to create the impression that he or she is “at the service of the interviewee whose speech [the interviewer] actually controls” (52). He references the documentary work of Jean Rouch and Michael Rubbo, as well as the journalistic work of Barbara Walters and Bill Moyers, as examples of pseudo-dialogue. Again, the point is to create the impression of natural dialogue in a way that “disguises the degree to which such exchanges are, in fact, as highly formalized as they are in other institutional contexts” (52).

To some extent, Moore incorporates both of these techniques during sequences like the one involving the Michigan Militia. These are not subjects he has just “run across” in the course of his travels, but are obviously encounters that have been prearranged and managed in specific ways that Moore does not include as part of the narrative. Furthermore, the exchanges we see could not be described as anything other than “pseudo-dialogues,” as every question Moore asks has a pointed, double meaning. But it is just this double-meaning that makes these interviews different from the masked interview. The point here is not to put one over on the viewer, but rather, to *include* the

viewer in on the act of Moore putting one over on his subjects. *We* remain privy to knowledge that *they* do not.

Thus, Moore constructs not a masked interview, but a “covert” interview; one in which we are included in on the deception. As such, his mode of address not only positions Moore in a position of authority over his subjects, but it invites the viewer to do the same. The result is that Moore’s films actually work *against* the kind of committed relationship that scholars like Thomas Waugh have argued is crucial to any political documentary. Whereas a truly committed film will work to construct a sense of solidarity between subjects and audience, Moore’s films work instead to reproduce a critical *distance* between subjects and audience, one that is endemic to more traditional documentary fare.

### **The “Fishbowl Effect”**

Moore’s mode of address not only positions viewers over and above the subjects we see on screen, but imagines a crucial *difference* between viewer and subject as well – a move that works to further the “distance” between them. Here it is helpful to reiterate the similarity between documentary’s traditional mode of address and that of ethnography. Nichols argues that ethnography’s mode of address is structurally similar to that of pornography, in that it is an address based upon the act of “observation”; one in which the viewer is invited to gaze upon an “other” from a position specifically *outside* their own world.<sup>32</sup> This “observational gaze” works to construct what Nichols calls the “fishbowl effect”:

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<sup>32</sup> However, “whereas pornography addresses the domain of sexuality, ethnography addresses the domain of knowledge” (*Representing* 217). Ethnography, Nichols argues, “is a world in which *We know* them, a world of wisdom triumphant” (218).

The objects of both pornography and ethnography are constituted as if in a fishbowl; and the coherence, 'naturalness,' and realism of this fishbowl is guaranteed through distance. The fishbowl effect allows us to experience the thrill of strangeness and the apprehension of an Other while also providing the distance from the other that assures safety.

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This fishbowl effect is undergirded by an explicitly expository mode of address:

"Argumentation, rhetoric, science, exposition, and narrative are the explanatory net around those strange and mysterious acts to which image and its synchronous sound bear witness" (Nichols 223). In this way, the expository mode combines with an observational gaze to construct a radical distance between the subjects of political documentary and the audience it imagines.

One of the most talked-about scenes in *Fahrenheit 9/11* serves as a telling example of the way in which the fishbowl effect works. In this scene, Moore couples found footage of a group of American soldiers mocking and torturing Iraqi captives with a patronizing voice-over: "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." The point here is not to challenge Moore's interpretation, but to emphasize the way in which Moore goes about *constructing* it. In this scene his use of found footage creates an "observational gaze," inviting the audience to gaze upon a group of subjects, literally, without their knowledge. Meanwhile, his expositional voice-over single-handedly defines this footage for us, endowing it with a specific interpretation. In so doing, this scene employs a kind of ethnographic mode of address that might be described as a kind of cultural tourism. In this scene and others like it, Moore peels the lid back, so to speak, to give us a glimpse behind the scenes at how soldiers do their

work. And, as such, he assumes that we aren't soldiers, or from military families, or, indeed, have any real understanding about the experiences of soldiers on-the-ground. The assumption here is that we need to be educated, and the implication is that we will be shocked by what we see.

Of course, this feeling of shock is a valid one when dealing with the issue of torture, given the vast cover-up of such activities engineered by the Bush administration. However, in the context of Moore's work, these scenes aren't geared *just* to expose torture, but to expose the inner-psyches of working-class kids duped by the powers-that-be. And more to the point, they are indicative of a broader representational pattern that colors virtually every depiction of victimized-subjects within Moore's body of work. As viewers, we are always addressed as *outsiders*, who are invited to look in and see – hopefully with shocked and sympathetic eyes – how the “other half lives.”

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Moore's various depictions of Flint and its residents throughout his body of work. For instance, during the recruiting sequence of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, in which he makes the case that the military feeds upon the poor, Moore operationalizes what might be called a tourist's-eye point of view. In this sequence, Moore's voice-over performs the role of tour guide, inviting us into an exoticized world of poverty. “With the war not going as planned, and the military in need of many more troops, where would they find the new recruits?” his voice-over asks. “They would find them all across America in the places that had been destroyed by the economy. Places where one of the only jobs available was to join the army. Places like my hometown of Flint, Michigan.” Here, Moore's voice-over is accompanied by shots of burned-out buildings taken from a moving vehicle which moves slowly down the street, creating the

feeling that we are viewing these scenes of urban devastation from the window of a car. By employing this visual technique, along with commentary that literally invites us into an “unknown realm,” Moore creates the effect of an experience that is most likely familiar to many middle class viewers – the experience of driving through the “wrong part of town.”

Of course, these tourist-eye-shots of burned out buildings will be familiar to any Michael Moore fan, for they have become nothing short of a visual trope characterizing Moore’s work as a whole. For instance, shots of similar burned-out Flint buildings accompany the Ben Hamper sequence discussed above (paired with “Wouldn’t it Be Nice), while a similar observational style is utilized during the Flint parade sequence later in the film to record the passive, victimized denizens of Flint as they stand spellbound by the proceedings, in front of the closed down, boarded up shops behind them. And a similar expository montage of burned-out buildings reemerges during *Bowling For Columbine*’s most powerful sequence, in which Moore describes the plight of Welfare-to-Work victim, Tamarla Owens. He constructs the same fishbowl effect during many of eviction scenes in *Roger & Me*, as well, such as one scene in which his camera strays to focus on a young African American boy running about as his family removes their possessions to the street; all while Deputy Ross describes the plight of Flint’s have-nots.

In this way, Moore’s purportedly “populist” discourse ironically works against his own pretensions of encouraging cross-class solidarity. All of these sequences work to convey the experience of “revelation” for an audience that will clearly be surprised by what they see. We are meant not only to be *angered* by the realities of Flint, MI, but *shocked* as well. The effect is to constitute a viewing position outside that of the subjects



we see on screen. In scenes like this, Moore adopts the language of “discovery,” which serves not only to distance viewer from subject, but to *differentiate* them as well, often along class lines. Perhaps no where is this more apparent than during the final moments of *Fahrenheit*, in which Moore provides us with a summation of the film’s “lesson”:

Of course, not a single member of Congress wanted to sacrifice their child for the war in Iraq. And who could blame them? Who would want to give up their child? Would you? I’ve always been amazed that the very people forced to live in the worst parts of town, go to the worst schools, and who have it the hardest, are always the first to step up to defend that very system. They serve so that we don’t have to. They offer to give up their lives so that we can be free. It is remarkable, their gift to us. ...”

In moments like this, Moore’s mode of address becomes explicit. In the quote above, Moore’s emphatic “would you” is clearly addressed to someone who *wouldn’t* send their kids off to war – or, in other words, someone who wouldn’t *need* to. The soldiers, the poor, everyday Americans – these are not “one of us,” and nor is Moore “one of them.” They are those who serve so that *we* don’t have to; those who provide *us* with a precious gift. By asking leading questions like this, followed up with an edited montage of definitive “answers,” Moore implicitly addresses a viewer who would not have answers to these questions. And this, of course, is the crux of the problem. For the people who would not have answers to these questions comprises a fairly specific group; namely, people who don’t live in a towns like Flint, who didn’t grow up poor or working class, and who have never really known anyone obliged to enlist. In short, the very audience constructed by documentaries in the Griersonian mold: middle-upper-class, white, educated professionals addressed as potential social-advocates.

### **Interlocutors**

Of course, there is one important group of subjects missing from the picture thus far. While I have been describing at length the way in which Moore depicts subjects who, in one way or another, support his rhetorical arguments, the most memorable moments of any Michael Moore film are the verite-style ambush-sequences, in which Moore confronts and surprises subjects who pointedly *disagree* with his arguments. His ambushing of Dick Clark in *Bowling for Columbine*, or his contentious interviews with GM spokesman Tom Kaye in *Roger* or Phil Knight in *The Big One*, all exemplify this type of “interview “sequence. What is different about these interviews, apart from their hostile nature, is that fact, unlike the sequences involving experts, informants and exemplars, in these sequences the emphasis is clearly on the *interaction* itself. The conversation had between Moore and what I am calling his “interlocutors” becomes the focus, as we are allowed to see sometimes long-take depictions (at least for Moore) of back-and-forth exchanges in which Moore and subject haggle over the interpretation of whatever topic or event might be at stake.

In all of these sequences it is tempting to argue – and, indeed, has been frequently – that Moore is “speaking truth to power.” And this is true, as far as it goes, but it is important to pay attention to how, exactly, the act of speaking truth to power is represented. As we have been arguing, a committed documentary practice will situate itself within a social milieu, amongst a social movement, working with and alongside those social subjects to achieve certain goals. However, what we witness in Moore’s ambush sequences is the individual confrontation of an advocate, heroically speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. As such, the purpose and focus of these segments has less to do with interpreting the social scene or developing social solidarity

as it does with constructing the image of heroic advocacy-in-action. In these sequences, the focus of the dialogue we witness lies in the spectacle of *confrontation*, itself.

The typical pattern that Moore lays out is the exposition of a “problem,” which is then followed by a confrontational interview. The Dick Clark sequence in *Bowling for Columbine* serves as a perfect example. In this segment, Moore describes the manner in which the national Welfare-to-Work program, rather than help the unemployed “back on their feet,” often serves to take already over-worked parents further away from their children for longer periods of time. As such, Moore argues, the program only serves to reinforce many of the social “problems” the program is meant to alleviate. He uses the example of Tamarla Owens, whose 6-year-old son shot and killed a classmate in Flint, MI, as an illustrative example of how the program victimizes those it is meant to aid. Her son, we are told, obtained the gun from his uncle’s house, where he had been staying, unsupervised, while Owens was bused sixty miles everyday to work at Dick Clark’s American Bandstand Grille in an up-scale mall.

In this sequence, as in others, Moore provides us with a series of experts, informants and exemplars who tell us about the plight of Tamarla Owens. Thus, for instance, Sheriff Robert Pickell, of Flint, MI, appears in expert-guise to explain the Welfare-to-Work program and the way in which it exacerbates social problems by taking parents away from their children for extended periods of time to perform work for less-than-adequate wages. An African American man riding Owen’s bus serves a dual-role as both informant and exemplar, authorized by Moore to tell us about Owens and her difficulties, while also serving as an illustrative example of the typical Welfare-to-Work victim, as described by Pickell. Meanwhile, Owens, herself – the actual “subject” of this

sequence – remains absent from the proceedings, only appearing in news footage and photo-stills depicting the court hearings surrounding her son. From here, Moore cuts to footage of Dick Clark's American Bandstand Grill. The theme song to *American Bandstand* starts up on the soundtrack, as Moore tells us in voice-over that Clark's restaurant received special tax breaks for "us[ing] welfare people as employees."

Here we get a very typical example of Moore's expositional style. His voice-over and "collagist's voice" drive the entire sequence, as an expert is called upon to support Moore's claims and a African American, working-class man is used to grant us access to the Welfare-to-Work bus as well as to provide living illustration of Owen's plight. As Moore supplies us with more and more evidence about the dire situation with which Owens was faced, the sequence builds to a climactic point. The impression Moore creates is that of a problem in need of solving – what is to be done?

Having brought us to this point, Moore then provides us with an answer. A direct cut, from Owen's darkened bus route to an overhead shot of a sunny, tree-lined, California street, creates a jarring juxtaposition, while Moore's voice-over tells us: "I decided to fly out to California to ask Dick Clark what he thought about a system that forces poor, single mothers to work two low-wage jobs to survive." What follows is a typical ambush sequence. Moore is shown, in a medium long shot, filmed from below, standing outside Dick Clark's van, the door of which is opened to reveal Clark, himself, sitting inside. Moore tells Clark in hurried tones that he's "doing a documentary on these school shootings and guns and all that." Clark tries his best to ignore him, saying he's really late, while Moore quickly explains that the mother of the boy who performed the shooting worked at his restaurant. Once Clark hears this, he instructs his driver to leave.

The van speeds off as Moore yells “I want you to help me convince the Governor of Michigan – It’s a Welfare-to-Work – These women are forced to work – They’ve got kids at home! Dick! Aw jeez!”

The point I would like to make here is that the Dick Clark ambush is clearly the climax of the sequence – the point towards which it is driving. And yet it is, in many ways, a relatively useless confrontation; it serves no real purpose as far as furthering Moore’s explanation of the problems with Welfare-to-Work, nor does it accomplish any immediate social “goals.” However, it *does* serve a specific narrative function; that of solidifying Moore’s role as crusading advocate. Sequences like this serve to justify Moore’s authority to speak for marginalized populations by portraying his unyielding “courage” to challenge those in power, and his dogged perseverance in a world where no one else seems to care. Like Moore’s exemplars, Clark’s interlocutor works as a synecdoche – this time for the indifference of corporate America. At the same time, Moore offers himself as another kind of symbol: the caring social advocate willing to stand up and say enough’s enough. As such, the “subjects” of this argument are shunted off to the side, while the confrontation between Moore and Clark becomes the real emphasis of the scene: once again, the relationship Moore constructs between himself and his subjects works to shut down the kind of political commitment that Waugh and others argue for.

Patricia Zimmerman has described a similar tactic at play in some radical documentary work – a tactic that in many ways undermines its own presumption of political solidarity:

The Pacific Street Film Collective's *Red Squad* interrogates camera surveillance by New York City police of antiwar demonstrations protesting the Vietnam War by using its own cameras to provoke a reaction to expose the questionably legal intelligence-gathering teams. The camera impels action or reaction but not interaction as officers harass the filmmakers. *Red Square*'s structure traces the panoptical relationship between camera and subjects where the camera is the center of knowledge. Conversely, in on-the-ground films, the camera is not the center of knowledge, but merely one of many dispersed centers of knowledge production.

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Here, Zimmerman's makes a distinction between the different kind of goals filmed-confrontations can have. She juxtaposes the *Red Squad* provocation to those in a film such as *Take Over*, where the goal is to depict marginalized groups in-action, working to change social conditions. Sometimes, as in a film like *Take Over*, this means "riding along" with activists as they physically break locks and stage demonstrations.<sup>33</sup> Other times, as in *Rosie*, it means listening to marginalized voices as they work with each other and the filmmaker to rework our understandings of the past in an effort to change understandings in the present. But in confrontations such as that shown in *Red Squad*, the goal is to *film the confrontation*, itself. In sequences like this, the camera literally becomes the center of our attention, and the emotional charge we get from the film stems from the very bravery of those intrepid filmmakers who challenge the police right before our eyes!

This is why it is so important for Moore to build *up* to the Clark confrontation, rather than *from* it, for instance (or leaving it out, altogether). The real point of the sequence is not to illicit any kind of informative – or practical – exchange with Clark, but simply to provoke a *reaction*; the kind of reaction that creates a visceral tension, and

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<sup>33</sup> *Take Over* (1991) "chronicles eight different groups of homeless activists in cities across the country ... as they engage in direct action by breaking the locks on HUD-owned housing (Zimmerman 93).

leaves us stunned and, yes, impressed that Moore had the *hutzpah* to even challenge him at all. From this perspective, Arthur's contention that Moore employs an "aesthetics of failure" couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, Moore employs what we might call an "aesthetics of hubris." Sure, he may "fail" in his efforts to make Clark see the error of his ways, but he has succeeded wildly in constructing an image of heroic advocacy for viewers who want to see a fellow advocate "speak truth to power."

This strategy is, of course, most spectacularly on display during the scenes in which Moore attempts to get himself and his camera crews into the office buildings of corporate officials such as Roger Smith – a preposterous ploy on its face, as Moore – and we – well know. The emphasis in these scenes is on the stunt, itself, and the hubris with which Moore casually proceeds on such a preposterous mission. As with Zimmerman's analysis of *Red Square*, the focus here is not on the interaction between Moore and his interlocutors, but the camera itself (and by proxy, Moore) and its presence within a forbidden space. The question in these scenes – the thrill we get from them – is in wondering how long Moore can possibly keep up the act before being tossed out. And, indeed, the scenes are cut precisely to heighten this tension.

For instance, in his first visit to GM headquarters in *Roger & Me*, Moore sets the scene up as a kind of "mano-a-mano" confrontation between himself and Smith, albeit in a humorously sarcastic tone:

I wrote, I phoned, I faxed. I tried every means of communication available, but nothing seemed to get me any closer to Roger. I was left with no choice. I got in the car and drove about an hour south of Flint to Detroit, to the world headquarters of GM. 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.

From here, Moore cuts to a verite-style sequence to in which we follow him into the GM building, then into an elevator. However, despite his use of a hand-held camera and synch-sound, like every other scene in Moore's films, this "real-time" action is highly edited. When he gets into the elevator, he is stopped by a security officer who asks him where he's going and then tells him he needs an appointment. Moore then cuts to a mini-interview montage. We get a quick over-the-shoulder shot, Moore in foreground, of a security person telling Moore that "anything above the first floor is private property." He then cuts to a different security officer, presumably in another part of the building, who tells Moore, "This is all off limits. It's a security area." Finally, he cuts to a close-up of a Public Relations official who asks Moore what kind of film he is making and assures him that GM will have someone "get back in contact" with him. While the conversation continues, Moore cuts to a close-up of a security officer on the phone. He then cuts to some kind of corporate official standing in the lobby, folding his arms in what appears to be pensive impatience. Finally, the man asks Moore for identification, and as the camera pans back to show Moore digging through his wallet, his voice-over intervenes on the proceedings to tell us: "Of course I was having a hard time finding my business card, because I don't have any business cards. So I gave Mr. Slaughter my discount pass to Chuck E. Cheese."

In this sequence, the emphasis is clearly on Moore's hubris, itself, rather than any kind of information-gathering, exposition, etc. Moore spends less time on his interactions with subjects – many of whom, as numerous critics have pointed out, are the working class folks Moore sides with – and more time building the tension such a confrontation is



geared towards provoking. The short clips of security officers denying him access and holding up hands to the camera; the cut-away shots to anxious personnel; the final act of humorous disrespect when Moore whips out his Chuck E. Cheese card – all of this is geared towards creating a thrilling depiction of advocacy-in-action.

The end result is the production of films about working class issues in which the working class, themselves, hardly speak at all, while the people above them are allotted all sorts of screen-time, all in service to Moore's construction of thrilling confrontations. Thus, for instance, GM Spokesman Tom Kaye appears on-screen in *Roger & Me* three different times, while not one laid-off worker is allotted a prominent role in the film (not even Moore's personal friend and former colleague, Ben Hamper). Indeed, it is important to note that, more often than not, it is Moore's *villains* who get the most extended interviews (such as Phil Knight in *The Big One* and Charlton Heston in *Bowling for Columbine*), not his working-class subjects.

The main purpose of these segments is not only to symbolize corporate indifference but to play a variety of corporate villains off as fools in specific relation to Moore's savvy advocate-persona. This is the very essence of what Zimmerman might describe as a cinema of "reaction." The purpose of these scenes is not necessarily to make us understand, but to make us laugh – and, often – squirm. We look on as Moore gains the upper-hand with those who have had it for so long, on behalf of those who have not.

Ultimately, every subject we see on screen in Moore's films – whether Expert, Informant, Exemplar or Interlocutor – serves one main function; namely, that of performing a subordinate role to Moore, who assumes the ultimate authority by virtue of

these relationships. This, of course, leaves us with one “subject” yet to be analyzed: the figure of Michael Moore, himself.

### **Speaking With Style: Formal Reflexivity and the Fantasy of Advocacy**

John Corner has argued that Moore’s reflexive inscription of himself as on-screen protagonist (what he calls a strategy of “strategic personalization”) works towards two main goals. First, it serves the purpose of making his films more entertaining by providing his argument with a narrative frame – namely, that of the “reportorial quest” (*The Art* 159). Secondly, Corner argues, Moore’s depiction of himself as working-class “Joe” and amateur filmmaker, as opposed to professional journalist or documentarian, make his films politically viable. “It is Moore’s *non-professional* relationship to the topic, his *affiliation* with Flint and his *personal* disposition towards the questioning of Roger,” he argues, that set Moore’s film apart from the typical social cause documentary. “Such factors,” he continues, “have a bearing on the kind of relationship which several of the interviewees have with him, treating the presence of his crew as an opportunity for self-expression and for candour” (*The Art* 159).

However, while Moore’s personal relationship to Flint and its residents may well have enabled him to get different kinds of information and “performances” from his subjects (many of whom, such as Ben Hamper, seen in *Roger*, or Arthur Busch, seen in *Bowling*, are personal acquaintances),<sup>34</sup> this says absolutely nothing about the way in which those subjects – and Moore’s relationship to them – is portrayed on-screen. As should be clear by now, I would argue that Moore’s depiction of subjects is much more in line with that of the traditional social-advocacy documentary than his personal, “amateur” style might imply.

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<sup>34</sup> For a detailed description of Moore’s relationship to Hamper, see Lerner (39-45).

Nevertheless, Corner's initial points are worth taking seriously: Moore's personal style *is* geared more towards the construction of entertaining narratives centering around the image of himself both as savvy documentarian and as heroic social advocate. As such, this style is not necessarily geared towards questioning – or, indeed, shifting – the relationship between filmmaker/subject, or spectator/subject, at least in the way that committed political documentaries are supposed to do. In fact, I would like to argue in this section that Moore's reflexive inscription of himself constitutes a perfect example of "formal reflexivity," as defined in the first section of this chapter. Rather than encourage viewers to listen to and engage with the working class subjects about which his films purport to speak, Moore's reflexive mode of address constructs and reinforces lines of identification between viewer and filmmaker, while further distancing the audience from the films' subjects.

To recap briefly, I have defined formal reflexivity as an aesthetic move, only. Documentaries that are formally reflexive openly "show their seams," so to speak, emphasizing the filmmaker's role in constructing interpretations of the world, and reveling in the texts' ability to create, distort, and manipulate "reality." The problem, however, is that these reflexive gestures never go beyond the pleasures of textuality. They invite viewers to contemplate the film-as-text and the filmmaker-as-author, but without any overtly *critical* stance. Formally reflexive texts *celebrate* textuality, rather than questioning its role in representing "reality" or challenging the authority of the filmmaker to engage in such an act. As such, the power and privilege of the filmmaker to represent subjects, cultures, etc., is never questioned, much less relinquished.

A politically reflexive documentary, on the other hand, foregrounds textuality and the filmmaker's role as meaning-maker for an explicitly political purpose. In this mode, the documentary is understood to be one attempt, among many, to make sense of the world. Textuality is not celebrated so much as it is *implicated* in its ability to make and remake the world. As such, the responsibility the filmmaker bares to his or her subjects is front and center. The filmmaker acknowledges his or her considerable power to represent others and thus attempts to collaborate with subjects, inviting them to participate in the text's construction – perhaps even challenge to the filmmaker's own interpretation of the world.

The key here, as has previously been discussed, is the question of proximity. Formally reflexive texts emphasize the relationship between filmmaker and viewer, thus de-emphasizing, if not discouraging, any potential relationship between viewer and *subject*. To examine how this formally-reflexive strategy works, I will discuss two main aspects of Moore's reflexive self-inscription: the foregrounding of himself as mischievous-collagist and his explicit positioning of himself as narrative-protagonist.

### **Moore as Collagist**<sup>35</sup>

As argued, texts that emphasize formal reflexivity at the expense of political engagement work to reconstitute the hierarchical distance inherent to traditional documentary forms. In politically reflexive films, such as *Harlan County* and *Rosie*, we are positioned *with the subjects* who communicate a sense of their own, lived experience; but in formally reflexive films we are always *with the filmmaker*, who invites us to share his/her distanced – and hence, privileged – position of observation.

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<sup>35</sup> I borrow this term from Catherine Russell. See: Russell 277.

In the work of Michael Moore, what I have described as his “collagist’s voice” constructs a similar kind of aesthetic distance. In Moore’s films, we see Moore on-screen engaged in the social world, but as viewers we are always positioned *with him, off-screen*. Moore may show us his daring attempts to break into GM headquarters, his thrilling confrontation with Dick Clark, his emotional strolls through the homes of evicted Flint residents, or his conversations with military men and women, but we are never situated *with* these characters, *in* these scenes. Instead, we are always “with” Moore – in the editing booth, so to speak – his controlling narration, playful editing, and ironic juxtapositions forever calling us back, out of the recent past depicted on-screen, and into the “fictional present” of the filmmaker.

For instance, the driving force of every Michael Moore film is never the events or people we see on-screen, but Moore’s clever presentation *of* them. Even in his most “verite” moments, when Moore ostensibly lets the words and images of subjects speak for themselves, everything we see and hear is filtered through Moore’s controlling presence. We are never invited to engage with subjects who speak to us in their own words, nor are we allowed the pretense of “judging for ourselves” what these others have to say. The purpose – and, indeed, pleasure – behind any Michael Moore film is always the act of watching a masterful, cinematic artist ply his trade.

A perfect example of this comes during one of the most infamous sequences in *Fahrenheit 9/11*: Moore’s spectacular footage, obtained from the school at which it was shot, of George W. Bush reading “My Pet Goat” to a classroom of young students just after being informed of the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11. Many reviewers praised the sequence as “smoking gun” evidence of the president’s inability to lead during a crisis

(a difficult claim to disprove). However, it also serves as a useful example of Moore's inscription of himself as mischievous collagist. Even when handling a sequence that, it would seem, requires no additional "mediation" on the part of the filmmaker whatsoever, Moore's narration and collagist's voice mark the sequence from beginning to end, pulling us out of that Florida classroom and into the present-tense world of Michael Moore. As such, the sequence serves a double purpose and function: not only does it support Moore's rhetorical point, but it invites us to identify with *Moore* as savvy documentarian.

Moore strategically begins the sequence by allowing the footage to roll in "real time." We hear the sound of cameras flashing, the teacher introducing the president, and Bush saying "Good morning." But as the footage rolls on, Moore's voice suddenly intrudes, explaining what is happening as soft piano music wells up: "Not knowing what to do, with no one telling him what to do, and no secret service rushing in to take him to safety, Mr. Bush just sat there and continued to read *My Pet Goat* with the children." A clock appears in the left hand corner of the screen, as Moore's voice emphasizes the folly of the situation: "Nearly seven minutes passed with nobody doing anything." While the viewer sits, transfixed, Moore endows the sequence with meaning: "As Bush sat in that Florida classroom, was he wondering if maybe he should have shown up to work more often? Should he have held at least one meeting since taking office to discuss the threat of terrorism?" Here, Moore employs a series of cuts to emphasize his words. A document authorizing grant cuts for counterterrorism equipment accompanies, "Or maybe Mr. Bush was wondering why he had cut terrorism funding from the FBI"; a still photo of Scott McClellan holding documents which are singled out by flashing arrows accompanies, "Or perhaps he should have read the security briefing that was given to him on August

6<sup>th</sup>, 2001 which said Osama bin Laden was planning to attack America;” a clip of Condoleeza Rice stating the title of the report in question – “I believe the title of the report was Bin Laden Determined to Attack Inside the United States” – accompanies the sarcastic quip that, “perhaps the title of the report was too vague.”

In this sequence, it is Moore’s commentary and editing that remain the focus – not the figures of Rice, McClellan, or even Bush. These subjects, and the events of which they are a part, are relegated to a past that is separate from the present-tense narrative of the film. As viewers, we are never down, on-the-ground, with the subjects Moore displays, but instead occupy the fictional, narrative space of Moore, himself, with most of his rhetorical jabs taking place off-screen, post-edited, and for “our” enjoyment only. The real thrill, in all these sequences, lies in the way Moore whisks us into and out of various social scenes; the way in which we *see* Moore-the-character, among the Michigan Militia or inside the offices of GM, but are simultaneously *with* Moore-the-filmmaker, chuckling and gasping as he includes us in on the joke with which his subjects will never quite catch up.

Of course, while many would be willing to give Moore the benefit of the doubt here in regards to his treatment of powerful social figures, such as George W. Bush, Phil Knight or Dick Clark, this is a mode that Moore deploys with *all* his subjects, especially those with whom his films are meant to sympathize. Take, for example, Janet, “The Amway Lady” of *Roger & Me*. Janet works as an exemplar of Flint’s duped working class; folks who have bought into any number of false solutions to the economic crisis visited upon them by the GM layoffs. In this scene, Moore gives us what is, perhaps, the longest piece of unedited, unmediated footage in the entire film. However, this un-

characteristic abundance of screen-time is not devoted to Janet's own thoughts and understandings about her situation – what Corner might call enough “personal space” for Janet to participate in her own representation. Instead, it is devoted to verite-style footage of her performing a color-consulting demo for potential customers – footage that is heavily ironized, given its contextualization within the film. In fact, this sequence works as a covert interview; it is framed within a larger segment depicting the lack of real, alternative job options in Flint. Thus, situated within such a rhetorical progression, we can only view Janet's color-demo from the perspective of Moore, himself, who turns this rather mundane footage into a humorous piece of irony.

Indeed, it is the way in which Moore's presence as mischievous collagist creates a heavily *ironized* mode of address that constitutes the most troubling aspect of his reflexive style. Here, it is useful to consider Kimberly Chabot Davis' analysis of the ironic mode in the documentaries, *Hoop Dreams* and *Paris is Burning*. Davis notes that many critics understand the use of irony as inherently *transgressive*. Because ironic texts demand an active form of engagement on the part of the viewer, who must put various juxtapositions together in order to come to meaningful conclusions, they are understood to undermine the hierarchical relationship between text and audience that is often constructed by films that employ an authoritative, didactic mode of address (29-31). However, Davis points out, while the ironic mode may shift the relationship between filmmaker and viewer in a “progressive” fashion, it has problematic consequences for the relationship constructed between filmmaker/viewer and subject.

Davis employs the work of Linda Hutcheon, who argues that irony works by including both ironist and audience in on a joke from which the intended target is



excluded. Or, as Hutcheon explains: “irony is a relational strategy in the sense that it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets)” (quoted in Davis 36). Such a mode, Davis argues, when employed within a documentary format, can create a “troubling distance” between filmmaker/viewer and subject: “[the] troubling effect of the use of irony is the hierarchical relationship that it may construct between the filmed subject and the filmmaker allied with an audience privy to the irony” (36). Ultimately, she argues, the use of such an ironic mode can work against the progressive aspirations of documentarians speaking on behalf of oppressed subjects. By transforming their subjects into the targets of irony they also “mak[e] it more difficult to see things from their perspective and to empathize with them” (36). We can see this very process at work in the scene involving “Janet the Amway Lady.”

Of course, Moore’s collagist’s voice controls the scene, which begins with a shot of Janet, standing before a group of women in what we assume is her living room, saying: “If you have a dream, and you go after your dream, you can do it. If you do it full time, you can really make good money. You can make a lot of money off these ...” But, as with the Bush sequence described above, Janet’s voice fades out as Moore’s fades in. While Janet continues her demo, Moore pulls us out of her living room and into her past. He flashes from a shot of her husband watching the demo from the kitchen to a black & white still of Janet sitting in front of microphones in a radio booth. As this cut transpires, Moore’s voice fades in, providing us with the relevant details of Janet’s situation: “Although her husband was still working at GM, she had seen many of her friends laid off, and didn’t want to take any chances. She had been the founder and host of Flint’s

feminist radio show. But now she was a distributor for Amway.” From here, he cuts back to the demo, as Janet’s voice fades back in: “Color is my main love. ...”

In this sequence Moore’s collagist’s voice is in full-control, shifting our focus and soliciting different forms of engagement at will. At first, we are meant to laugh at Janet’s naivete, as Moore cuts from his interview with a pathetically out-of-touch Pat Boone to a resident who seems to have bought into his “can-do” attitude. But as Janet speaks, Moore’s voice-over intervenes to provide us with the tragic undertones to this sadly humorous display. Then, we shift back to comedy, as Moore finishes up the sequence by responding to a surprise request from Janet that she be allowed to update her own interview. Moore tells us: “Three days after we attended Janet’s Amway meeting, she phoned me in a panic and asked that we please come back as she’d made a terrible mistake.” We cut to a standard talking-head shot of Janet, who says: “I recently discovered that I am not an autumn.” From here, we cut to a shot of Janet “doing” Moore’s colors, while Moore hams it up for the camera, clearly pretending to be invested in the process.

This sequence is perhaps more revealing of the power dynamics that undergird Moore’s mode of address than any other in his oeuvre. Moore employs a heavily ironized mode of address that singles Janet out as its target. The humor implicit in this scene stems from the fact that Janet doesn’t “get it.” Not only has she bought into the “can-do” rhetoric peddled by Pat Boone and GM, but she doesn’t even seem to get that Moore’s purpose is to debunk such rhetoric. Of course, there is a political purpose behind Moore’s decision to target Janet; she stands as an exemplar of all that is wrong with the corporate ethos as expressed by GM. However, by including Janet’s decision to “call Moore back,”

it is Janet's very naiveté that becomes the focus of this scene, as well as Moore's mischievous ability to exploit her misunderstanding – all, of course, for our enjoyment. Thus, as Davis argues, Moore's ironic mode of address works to further reinforce the hierarchical relationship between filmmaker/audience and subject by including “us” in on a joke that Moore's subject doesn't get.

This formally-reflexive mode has remained a staple of all Moore's work, from *Roger & Me* on. For instance, it is again on dramatic display in *Bowling For Columbine*, when Moore interviews Home Security Consultant, Denny Fennell. Moore's depiction of Fennell is strikingly similar to that of Janet, the Amway Lady. As with Janet, Fennell is meant to play the role of exemplar in a covert interview used to buttress Moore's larger point about America's “culture of fear” and the obsession with guns and violence it cultivates. However, like Janet, Fennell doesn't appear to “get” Moore's argument and, instead, seems to believe that Moore is actually there to find out more about home security.

In this sequence, Moore reveals himself to be even more adept at undermining the credibility and interpretive power of his subjects than he was in *Roger & Me*. Rather than relying solely on a post-edited collagist's voice to undermine Fennell's words, Moore also utilizes his own, on-screen performance to poke fun at Fennell. It's an understated performance that Fennell clearly misses; but the viewer can't help but comprehend Moore's subtle, sarcastic asides, given our intimate knowledge of Moore's basic argument. The scene looks like this:

VIS: Denny Ferrell (DF) and Moore stand outside Fennell's suburban home.  
Title card: Denny Ferrell Home Security Consultant

DIA:

DF: We're, ah, south of Denver, in a community called Littleton. And, um, this house is pretty much your average, middle-class suburban home.

JUMP CUT

DF: The burglar or the rapist is still somewhere here in the neighborhood somewhere. And so citizens sometimes think that I have people here all the time.

MM: Where exactly is the burglar or rapist right now? (Looking around in mock-tension).

JUMP CUT

grating on MM: If I were to try and stab you through this, here (fake-poking at door) that – you're going to have to be really close.

DF: Right. And here's the bottom line on this.

MM: What if I had a spear?

JUMP CUT

VIS: Camera points down basement stairwell of home in POV fashion

DIA:

DF: Now, downstairs is where the safe room is constructed

JUMP CUT

VIS: Moore and Ferrell standing at safe room door.

DF: (Knocking on door): And this is a solid core door, a very heavy door. And now the criminal has to break through this door. So you've created another barrier.

MM: An axe would do it.

DF: An ax would do it.

JUMP CUT

VIS: Back outside home

DIA:

DF: I think Columbine did a couple of things. One is it changed, it changed how we talk. That's the first thing.

MM: How's that?

DF: Well, for instance, if I say 'Columbine,' everybody knows what it means. I don't have to explain to you that Columbine ... umm ... (starts to tear up).

VIS: Camera pulls in tighter, a medium-close-up

MM: What's wrong?

DF: Nothing, I just ... (voice cracking a bit) sometimes Columbine bothers me. I – I'll be fine. Just a minute.

MM: No, that's OK. That's OK, that's OK.

JUMP CUT (Moore steps into shot)

VIS: An over-the-shoulder shot from Moore's POV, then Moore steps out

DIA:

DF: There's something overwhelming about that kind of um, viciousness, that kind of predatory action, that kind of indiscriminate, umm, killing.

CUT TO:

VIS: Lockheed Martin. Title reads: "World's Largest Weapons Maker"

In this sequence, Moore begins, once again, by making light of Fennell's naiveté – not just his overly-exaggerated fear of suburban violence, but also his inability to pick up on Moore's ironic-performance. In the first three conversational-snippets, Moore performs a kind of hyper-serious focus on what Fennell is saying, feigning curiosity by asking him clearly ridiculous questions such as whether or not a spear would be able to break through the protective screen covering the front door. Of course, as viewers, we are

not allowed to see what Fennell actually thinks Moore is up to, because most of the humor derives from the way in which Moore has chopped up the sequence. He employs a series of jump-cuts that stop these scenes on Fennell's somewhat baffled expressions as he attempts to answer Moore's silly questions. Thus, when Moore asks, "Where exactly is the burglar or rapist now?" Fennell follows Moore's gaze and the camera cuts away, giving the comedic sense that Fennell is looking around to see. Similarly, when Moore says, "An axe would do it," Fennell seems to be trying to humor Moore by agreeing – "An axe would do it," but Moore cuts away, encouraging us to laugh at Fennell's seemingly inflated sense of impending danger.

The way in which Moore combines ironic performance with playful editing here, once again, works to draw us *out* of Fennell's own, personal experience and into the fictional realm of Moore as mischievous collagist. We are invited to laugh at Moore's clever editing skills and marvel at his ability to make people look like fools. In fact, so focused is the sequence on Moore's collagist-persona, that in many ways it becomes difficult to discern the role Fennell plays in the overall argument of the film. Like Moore's "follow-up interview" with Janet in *Roger & Me*, these scenes play like a kind of comic-relief sideshow, working more to shore up Moore's role as savvy documentarian than to provide any insight as to the thoughts and experiences of Littleton's residents.

Ultimately, it is the ironic-knowledge shared between Moore and his audience that remains the focal point of this scene. Thus, even when the emotional tone of the scene abruptly changes towards the end, as Fennell breaks into tears, our privileged position "over" Fennell remains intact. For, Fennell's burst of emotion only serves the

purpose of making Moore's point. His breakdown at this point in the conversation justifies Moore's ironic performance moments before – the upshot of this entire sequence is that Littleton's residents and, by proxy, Americans in general, are victims of their own naive understandings of guns and violence.

### **Moore as Protagonist**

While certainly a "reflexive" device, Moore's use of an ironic, collagists' voice is hardly "progressive" in the sense that many scholars have understood irony to be.

Moore's subjective style may overturn the hierarchical relationship between filmmaker and audience often constructed by the traditional documentary mode of address, it does not relinquish the *authority* of the filmmaker to interpret the world as he or she sees fit. Instead, Moore's ironic mode of address explicitly invites the audience to occupy Moore's privileged position. Rather than *submit to* the filmmaker's authority we are invited to *share in it*, as we ride along on an investigative adventure, identifying with a savvy documentarian who seems to have all the angles. Moore further solidifies such a move by wrapping his entire films within the form of a narrative quest in which he, himself, is the protagonist. In so doing, Moore, once again, positions himself as the focal point for audience identification, inviting audiences to engage less with the personal stories of his subjects, and more with the heroic quest of Moore, himself.

Moore's inscription of himself as heroic protagonist is nothing new. In fact, it bears a striking resemblance to the manner in which *60 Minutes* reimagined the investigative report format. As with Moore, *60 Minutes* operates in a mildly reflexive mode, jettisoning the journalist's traditional adherence to the tenets of objectivity and

adopting an openly subjective, even “committed,” stance towards the people and stories it covers. However, Campbell argues, while *60 Minutes* may reject the tenets of objectivity for an explicitly subjective style, it does *not* relinquish its authority to tell the truth. Far from it. Instead, the *60 Minutes* reporters simply invite their audience to share *in* that authority (rather than submit to it), by constructing themselves as protagonists with which we are invited to identify. Campbell explains:

Through narration and voice-overs, *60 Minutes* attempts to locate a common ground through first-person point-of-view. These masterful reporter-narrators often include viewers as colleagues; we share in their authority as well-informed citizens. The “we” point-of-view personalizes the reporters and creates a sense of intimacy absent in the detached third-person point-of-view of most corporate journalism. The “we” point-of-view creates one side of a conversation which implicitly includes “us” – the implied viewers – as the other side.

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As should be clear by now, the one part left out of this equations is the *subjects* of the program, themselves. *60 Minutes* takes the traditional structure of the classic documentary mode of address – Trinh T. Minh-ha’s conversation “of Us about Them” – and transforms it into a narrative-adventure. The “thrill” we get in watching *60 Minutes* stems from the excitement of identifying with powerful heroes vested with the authority to topple villains and save victims. Social advocacy is transformed from a civic “duty” into a thrilling narrative: “The first-person accounts ultimately mediate the distance between viewer and reporter and include us as characters in the adventure” (40).

Ultimately, this is the main purpose and function of Moore’s formally reflexive stylistic; to transform the typical “social problem” documentary into a thrilling adventure



story. Every one of Moore's films constitutes not a reflexive critique of the power-relationship inherent to the social problem documentary, but instead its very its reconstitution as a "fantasy of advocacy." Whereas traditional social problem documentaries sought to either "enlighten" audiences, or to "guilt" them into action, Moore's films persuade by offering them the fantasy of becoming social heroes in their own right. You, too, can speak for and about the disenfranchised and dispossessed, they seem to say; you, too, can stand up for the little guy and make things right.

This is, of course, the impetus behind his mano-a-mano framing device. In each of his first four full-length documentaries, Moore creates personal struggles from social dilemmas, centering his films around a villain against which he constructs himself as dogged protagonist. In so doing, the structuring of the "plot" – the narrative *drive* – becomes the central focus of the film, obscuring the social world it is meant to illuminate. Indeed, the resolution Moore provides at the end of these films is not a social or political resolution (such as the decision to stand together in solidarity that committed films like *Harlan County* depict), but rather a purely *narrative* resolution in which Moore is, at long last, proven right. As such, the focus of these films is similar to that of the formally-reflexive film, as defined by Nichols; they are focused inwards, on the films themselves, and the heroic stories they spin, rather than "returning" the viewer to the social world – and the social subjects – of which they are about.

In fact, Nichols invokes *Roger & Me* to illustrate this very problem when discussing the difference between formal and political reflexivity. It is worth quoting his analysis of the film at length:

The use of stylistic devices to achieve a reflexive end runs the risk of manipulating social actors for textual effect rather than provoking a reflexive consideration of how texts are constructed. When the filmmaker moves to center stage – as in Michael Moore’s *Roger & Me* ... the risk is that ...[s]ocial actors (people) will be subordinated to the narrative trajectory of the filmmaker as protagonist. As the filmmaker moves further from diaristic or participatory mode of self-representation as one among many, and closer to hero or protagonist of the drama – its center and propelling force – the greater the risk becomes. ... *Roger & Me*, praised by many for its attack on General Motor’s indifference to the individual suffering it causes, reduces most of the individuals it portrays to victims and dupes. In order to tell his story of coming to the rescue by confronting the elusive CEO of General Motors, Michael Moore renders others as helpless, indifferent, or ignorant in contrast to his heroic and determined if also somewhat nebbish-like persona. ... as a character, “Michael Moore” seems as distant from the now redundant auto workers (of whom we actually meet very few) as he is from the inaccessible Roger Smith.

The ending of *Roger & Me* serves to illustrate Nichols’ point.

The climactic moment in the film does not deal with visions of unionization, workers mobilizing for struggle, or even with images of workers, at all. Instead, Moore ends *Roger & Me* with his most elaborate “gotcha!” ambush of all; Roger Smith delivering a speech about the “Holiday Spirit” at GM’s annual Christmas Eve party while, only a few miles away, Flint families are being evicted from their homes. As such, the focus of the film is revealed to be on Moore, himself, and the fantasy of advocacy it constructs. The narrative satisfaction we are offered during this final scene comes in the form of Moore’s clever cross-cutting, in which Smith’s hollow, yuletide address to GM stockholders is juxtaposed to the end-results of his own corporate malfeasance – the evictions we see on-screen. We marvel at Moore’s ability to sneak his cameras into GM’s Christmas celebration, and thrill to the way in which Moore effortlessly undermines Smith’s calculated compassion. Thus, while the workers may have experienced a decided defeat at the hands of corporate America, for viewers, the end of *Roger & Me* can’t help

but feel more like a victory: the villain has received his just desserts while the hero – and by proxy “we” – have had the last word. This is a narrative structure that emphasizes advocacy over understanding – and cultural authority over social solidarity.

This is a narrative structure that Moore has repeated in his subsequent films. For instance, in *The Big One*, Moore’s “investigation” of downsized-America is trumped by his infamous confrontation with Phil Knight, during which Moore’s radical corporate critique devolves into a benign plea for charity when Moore begs, then challenges, Knight to build a shoe factory in Flint. Similarly, Moore frames the entire narrative of *Bowling for Columbine* as a mano-a-mano stand-off between himself and Charlton Heston. While Heston, himself, actually has little to do with Moore’s broader thesis about the “culture of fear,” his callous decision to lead an NRA rally in Littleton, CO just days after the Columbine shootings, provides Moore with a convenient villain around which to stage his narrative quest. As such, Moore chooses a curious ending for his film. It might have made sense to end *Bowling* on the victorious note struck when Moore and a couple of high school students injured in the Columbine shootings win a political battle over K-Mart, shaming them into ceasing the sale of ammunition. Instead, Moore ends the film with a trip to Heston’s home for one of Moore’s patented ambush-interviews. Like Moore’s interview with Dick Clark, his interview with Heston is tangential, at best. Heston’s insensitive comments about America’s racial history do more to reveal his own, personal prejudices than to buttress any aspect of Moore’s overall argument. As such, the scene serves no real purpose other than to reinforce Moore’s contrasting image of the heroic, social advocate. Once again, the real purpose of this sequence is to provide Moore

and his audience of would-be advocates a satisfying ending – giving us the feeling that we were “right,” yet again.

A good counter-example of Moore’s formally-reflexive technique can, I would argue, be found in the work of Barbara Kopple, a committed filmmaker who, like Moore, is noted for her ability to construct compelling narratives out of actual events. However, as E. Ann Kaplan argues in her review of *Harlan County, USA*, while narrative structuring is a key component of Kopple’s work, as is Kopple’s own presence *within* that narrative, the narrative-drive never overpowers Kopple’s invitation to engage with the real, social subjects who populate the film. Kaplan argues that by situating herself in and amongst the subjects of her film (who participate in its making as much as they are subject to it) Kopple invites the audience to focus less on her own authorial presence – which is marked nonetheless – and more on the social world of which her camera seems merely a part. Kaplan explains:

Kopple’s use of the camera is remarkable for conveying a sense of the here and now, especially in the scenes of women’s meetings or in those of the picket lines when the miners were under attack and in danger. Instead of creating a barrier between subject and audience, of somehow ‘tampering with life itself,’ ... at these moments the camera plunges us into the midst of the *actuality* of the event.

It is important to be clear here. I am not arguing that Kopple’s film works because she espouses a kind of fly-on-the-wall, observational aesthetic that makes her film more “realistic.” In fact, I am arguing the opposite. There is nothing “observational” at all about *Harlan County, USA*. As both Kaplan and Zimmerman argue, Kopple employs an aesthetic strategy that is specifically “participatory.” The emotional power of her films

stem not from her heroic ability to stand up to the powers that be, but from the way in which they invite us to experience the heroic actions of social subjects, with and amongst whom Kopple stands. As Kaplan puts it:

The film workers in no way stand apart from events, observing and recording them. ... Kopple's is an obviously involved camera ... a camera that reflects her own commitment to the people, their suffering, and their struggle. Because she experiences the struggle as if it were her own, she enables us to experience it in an unusually direct and moving way.

Moore, on the other hand, allows us no such "direct" experience, or anything even approaching it. Because we are so beholden to his authorial presence, the *only* way we are invited to experience anything in Moore's work is through the heroic narrative to which everything – and everyone – is subordinated. As such, Moore actually recreates – albeit in an arguably much more entertaining and engaging fashion – the very "barrier between subject and audience" that classic cinema-verite does. Of course, Moore's films aren't "neutral" – he's just as committed as Kopple, in a political sense, to many of the subjects he films. But the relationship he constructs via his reflexive strategies is the same; we stand above and apart, observing the spectacularized images of subjects that Moore speaks for and about.

### **Conclusion**

In her book on political documentary, Patricia Zimmerman provides an illustration of what I would argue a politically-reflexive documentary might look like. She discusses two films made in the 1990s – *Take Over: Heroes of the New American Depression* (1991), which chronicles the political actions of eight different groups of homeless activists, and *When Billy Broke His Head ... and Other Tales of Wonder*

(1995), which chronicles the participation of disc jockey Billy Golfus in the disability-rights movement. The way in which Zimmerman describes these two films lays out a vision for political documentary that, I would argue, performs the very principles set out by Nichols, Waugh, Trinh, Ruby, et. al., as discussed throughout this chapter.

Both films – examples of what Zimmerman calls “on-the-ground documentaries” –employ a strategy of “proxemics,” that “jetties[ons] the privileged position of the observer and ass[umes] the subject position of collaborator” (93). Zimmerman’s notion of “on-the-ground” documentaries echoes Waugh’s notion of “commitment,” in that these films, she argues, position us with and alongside subjects who are actively working to remake the political world and their position within it.

For instance, *Take Over* focuses on homeless activists as they carry out a variety of political actions, such as breaking locks on HUD-owned buildings. In so doing, Zimmerman argues, *Take Over* transforms the traditional notion of political documentary as duty-genre:

In direct contrast to a film like *Housing Problems*, where the problem/solution structure of argument ends in resolution by the state, *Take Over* not only exposes the inadequacy of states’ policies on housing but remedies the problem through joint direct action between activists and camera crew. In most scenes, the camera is side by side with the participants, breaking into buildings with them, marching in demonstrations, sitting around a table at an organizational meeting ....

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Here, the fantasy of advocacy becomes a chronicle of activism, as subject and filmmaker alike take direct – and shared – action.

Similarly, Zimmerman argues that *When Billy Broke His Head* also eschews an advocacy narrative for one that is wholly participatory, endowing its subjects with agency rather than diagnosing them as problems to be solved. Indeed, *Billy* is perhaps most instructive here as, like Moore's work, it is an explicitly subjective film told from the first-person perspective of Billy Golfus, a former disc jockey who becomes a strident disability-rights activist after a terrible car crash. However, as Zimmerman argues: "Unlike *Roger & Me* (1989), the film to which journalists have most often compared *When Billy Broke His Head* ... *Billy* is never about the narrator, per se." (97). Instead, *Billy* focuses itself on the experiences of a host of disabled subjects, who are provided what Corner might call the "personal space" to elaborate upon their own understandings of their lives. In so doing, the film "forc[es] the spectator to engage with [these subjects] not as victims, but as analytic, strong, forceful presences" (*The Art* 97).

Thus, on-the-ground documentaries, as Zimmerman describes them, or committed documentaries as Waugh imagines them, work to transgress and undermine hegemonic power-relations in a way that traditional, advocacy-based political documentaries never do. They not only posit the *issue* of disability and homelessness, but they provide a space within which those subjects can take part in their own representation and speak to their own experiences. More than anything else, these documentaries re-claim the *right* for disabled and homeless subjects to speak *about* themselves, *for* themselves. As such, they help these subjects to reclaim a position of power and agency within a social realm that has relegated them to the second-class status of victim and dependent.

The problem with Moore's work, then, is that despite his self-deprecating, autobiographical inscription of himself – despite his "aesthetics of failure" and reflexive

stylistics – Moore’s texts never question his “right” to represent the people, places, or issues that he does, in the way that he does. Indeed, quite the opposite. If his cleverly ironic and bitingly satiric tone is meant to do anything at all, it is precisely to *celebrate* his ability – and, yes, *right* – to manipulate the experience of human subjects in such a way. Far from positioning himself as “powerless subject,” in Orwell’s words, Moore positions himself as the only power on-screen; capable of ferreting out the truth when no one else can; always getting the last word despite being tossed out of buildings; and stepping in to save the unfortunate even (and especially) when they can’t help themselves. Thus, while Moore may alter the way in which documentarians go about constructing “the truth,” he does not question their right – or, certainly, his – to do so unilaterally. In the end, Moore’s “fantasies of advocacy” work to reinforce the ideological bent of the traditional documentary form; they remain something the powerful “do” to the disempowered. In fact, as I will argue in the next chapter, Moore’s fantasy of advocacy not *only* reinforces some of the worst aspects of the traditional documentary; it reinvigorates a much broader “discourse of class” that has held sway in contemporary society for the better part of a century.



## CHAPTER 3

### ENLIGHTENED ACTIVISM: CLASS (AND CLASSED) IDENTITY IN THE FILMS OF MICHAEL MOORE

*“It makes me sore to hear or to see or to read  
How you big long-haired writers  
Whack away at my people  
Chew and cut and saw away at my people  
Grind and drill and whittle away at them  
Trying to make out like you are their Savior  
Or their way shower  
Or their finder  
Or their discoverer.”*<sup>36</sup>

– Woody Guthrie

#### **Introduction: Speaking of “Class” ...**

The audience, what seems to be a sold-out crowd of college students and professors, shifts abruptly from raucous laughter and wild applause to a collective groan. The scene is from Moore’s 1997 documentary, *The Big One*, and the setting is an unidentified university or college in the Minnesota area. Moore has been performing a live act reminiscent of a stand-up comedy routine, which his audience has clearly been enjoying. This shift, from applause to groans, is not hostile – they are playing along with Moore’s act. But the occasion for this shift in temperament is telling. Moore has just followed up a humorous anecdote about his days as a Catholic School boy with a reference to what is obviously considered a local mark of shame: “We were over at the Mall of America,” he says, attempting to transition from one anecdote to the next, when he is interrupted by a series of loud groans. Moore responds in a sarcastically chiding tone: “Ohhhh, no! We don’t go to the Mall of America!” he says, playfully sticking his

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Garman.

nose in the air and rising in mock-pretension to his tip-toes. “No, no. We’re going to the student union after this, to listen to multicultural folk music from Cuba, and eat tofu from Nicaragua!” The camera cuts to a shot of his audience, laughing loudly and gladly participating in his mock derision of their rarified snobbery. “Mall of America,” Moore continues with mock-disdain. “We don’t want to be there with *those people*.”

At this moment, it seems, the power relations inherent to the documentary form are suddenly illuminated for all to see. Here is Moore, on camera, speaking to an audience that could conceivably stand-in as an on-screen surrogate for the audience called forth by the “duty-genre.” *The Big One*, Moore’s critical look at corporate downsizing in the mid-1990s, is structured through a narrative which follows Moore on a cross-country promotional tour for his book on the same theme, *Downsize This!* As Moore makes his usual case against corporate greed and indifference, he periodically stops along the way to bring his message to various college crowds who seem excited to hear his message of advocacy. But here, Moore seems to turn the table on his audience of would-be advocates, calling them on the carpet for “looking down on” the denizens of Mall-culture. “We don’t go to Mall of America,” Moore scoffs sarcastically, clearly implying that they should. But what, exactly, does Moore think his audience would gain by going to the Mall of America? He quickly provides an answer:

“What a great place, man!” Moore exclaims, shifting abruptly from his mock-chiding tone to one of gleeful commiseration. “I wish we had spent the whole day there. We met- Ha! – we met some incredible people. We met this guy – and I said, you know – ‘Did you vote in the last election?’ And he’s probably in his early twenties. He said, ‘No, I was in prison.’” As Moore tells this story, we cut to a long-shot of Moore standing in

the Mall's Food Court, talking to a man seated at one of the tables. This is obviously the "guy" Moore is referencing. We then cut directly to a snippet of Moore's conversation.

The scene plays out, as follows:

VIS: MS on former inmate (FI), seated at table. FI looks up, off-screen, presumably at Moore, who stands to the right of the camera.

DIA:

FI: Yeah, I was in Ventura.

MM: You were in that prison?

FI: California Youth Authority. Yeah, I was.

MM: Where TWA has that reservation thing?

FI: Yeah.

CUT TO:

VIS: MS of Moore, on stage in front of the college audience.

DIA:

MM: If you call TWA at certain times of the day to make a plane reservation, you're talking to an inmate in Ventura, CA. He goes, "Yeah, that was us!"

Audience: [Laughter].

CUT TO:

VIS: MS on FI

MM: So you mean, you're in prison, and you're taking airline reservations. And you're sending people to the Bahamas and you can't even walk outside.

FI: [shaking head, "no"]: Mmm-mmm.

CUT TO:

VIS: CU on TWA logo, and then images of travelers in line at TWA ticket booths.

FI: [conversation continues in VO]: I think it's, like, a "corporate" thing, so TWA doesn't have to hire people and they can pay less.

CUT TO:

VIS: MS on FI; MS on TWA phone operators.

FI: Because if you go into a job at TWA, they're gonna pay you 7, 8, 9 bucks an hour.

MM: Any funny stories? People calling for reservations?

CUT TO:

VIS: MS on FI, camera pans up to reveal Moore asking him questions.

FI: OH yeah, there's all kinds. Like how people get like phone numbers and get hookups ...

CUT TO:

VIS: Montage of shots depicting "prison life": inmates walking in single-file; bare-chested inmates talk on pay-phones; then back to shot of FI and MM.

DIA:

FI: [in VO] ... and, you know, girls'll be calling and they'll be, like, 'Hey, what's your name?' You know, your normal stuff that would probably happen if you were working at TWA, you know. But they don't realize that what they're really talking to are rapists or murderers or, you know, people that are just like – they talk about how, like, they're supposed to change kids, and this and that?

MM: Yeah.

FI: I came out as a murderer. I don't give a fuck about you, you, you, you [gesturing with pointed finger]. Anybody in here, you know? Why should I?

MM: You don't give a shit?

FI: Nah. Nobody gives a shit in there.

MM: You don't give a shit? You don't give a shit about me?

FI: No. I don't care about— I do not care about nobody. And that is, that is your basic society nowadays.

MM: You could fuck me up right now if you wanted to?

FI: Yeah, I wouldn't care.

MM: You wouldn't care?

FI: No, I wouldn't.

CUT TO:

VIS: MM on stage.

DIA:

MM: So, next time you're, like, treating that person on the phone really shitty because they can't find your frequent flyer number, just remember, you could get a visit someday!

AUD: [laughter]

MM: Isn't that sick, though? I mean, corporations are using prison labor. We're not talking about China, here. We're talking about the U.S. of A. Spaulding packages their golf balls in prisons in Hawaii. Microsoft packages their software in prisons in Washington. Eddie Bauer has clothes made in prisons in Washington state. Are you aware of this?

CUT TO:

VIS: Montage of inmates working phones in unnamed prison.

MM: If you live in Colorado, and you're getting a call from AT&T. AT&T uses prisoners to do their telemarketing for them. They're calling people at 9 o'clock at night, asking them to switch from MCI, and they're doing 20 to life.

AUD: [laughter]

MM: And what do you think they're getting paid? Virtually nothing. Why don't we just close down all the factories, throw everyone out of work, right? A number of them will obviously turn to crime, because they'll be unemployed. We can then ship them back into the factory, which can now be a prison, and they can do their old

jobs, which they're already trained to do, and get paid two dollars an hour and the company can make a huge profit!

AUD: [laughter and applause]

MM: What a great idea! Huh? Then the Dow can hit 10,000!

CUT TO:

VIS: Panning shot of audience applauding wildly and laughing.

MM: YEAH!

In this sequence, we get all the hallmarks of Moore's typical mode of address. The former inmate clearly acts as an "exemplar," standing as evidence for an argument Moore has been making throughout the film about the way in which corporations put profits over people. Of course, what is intriguing about this sequence is that his exemplar seems to have a real understanding about what is going on, telling Moore that prison labor obviously saves companies like TWA a bundle, and that his situation is clearly indicative of a society that doesn't have its priorities straight. However, while Moore obviously agrees with his subject's argument, he doesn't really allow him to speak for himself. For the emphasis in this scene is not on what this former inmate has to say, but on Moore's *retelling* of the encounter.

The interview is spliced into sound-bites, as we continuously cut back to Moore telling the story to the audience. In this way, like most of Moore's subjects, the former inmate becomes less a person in his own right, and more the punch-line in a humorous anecdote about corporate greed and American indifference. Indeed, the highlight of this sequence is clearly *not* the inmate's angry assessment of prison labor exploitation, but his outrageously nihilistic behavior, exemplified by his assertion that he doesn't "give a fuck

about you, you, you, you” (a point made clear when Moore replays this clip during the end credits of the film, overlaid with a sarcastic title card reading: “To make a reservation on TWA call 1-800-221-2000”). In this way, the former inmate is objectified in traditional documentary fashion, offered up as spectacular evidence of Moore’s argument. The real conversation being had here is not between Moore and the inmate, but between Moore and his *audience* – both on screen in the university auditorium and, of course, by proxy, at home.

That conversation has much less to do with the “snobbery” of Moore’s college audience than it does with their apparent failure to act as concerned citizens. The upshot of the interview comes when Moore sums up the point of this anecdote: “So, next time you’re, like, treating that person on the phone really shitty because they can’t find your frequent flyer number, just remember, you could get a visit someday!” The real “subject” of this scene is not the inmate at all, but the *audience*, who, Moore is implying, in their cozy world of exotic food and foreign music, has forgotten to pay attention to the world around them. Thus, when he accuses the audience of not wanting to “be there with those people,” he is not accusing them of being snobs, per se, but of being poor advocates. What he’s really doing is chiding them for ignoring the tragedies of working-class life. “Look what we have let happen!” he seems to be saying. “Look at what this guy has been reduced to! Isn’t that sick?” Trinh T. Minh-ha’s “conversation by Us about Them” is literally performed before our very eyes, as Moore and his audience laugh in shocked dismay at the tragic consequences that “our” lack of awareness has wrought.

Thus, what is most important about this scene is the way in which Moore’s documentary mode of address gets mapped onto a broader discourse of class relations,

whereby an explicitly working-class subject becomes fodder for both derision *and* sympathy by a group of middle-upper-class observers, who are invited not only to look down on him in voyeuristic fashion, but to inspect and judge his behavior, as well. In fact, this narrative of working-class inspection by middle-class observers is nothing new to political documentary, or to “Left” discourse in general. As Paula Rabinowitz has argued, the “history of middle-class inspection of the poor” is a tradition that goes back a long way and continues on in the present, exemplifying the “quandary middle-class intellectuals in America find themselves in today” (58). Rabinowitz uses a colloquial term to define this relationship: “slumming.” Hardly a better term could be found to describe the manner in which Moore invites his audience to journey along with him down into the consumerist depths of the Mall of America.

In her analysis of left/liberal documentaries in the 1930s, Rabinowitz argues left-leaning filmmakers often utilized a distinctly middle-class mode of address. Specifically, she argues that the privileges of writing and looking associated with the documentary project not only worked to objectify its subjects, but reenacted and reinscribed the privileges of control and supervision enjoyed by the middle and upper classes over those below them. In this way, the work of both liberal reformers *and* radical, Leftist documentarians became imbricated in a classist mode of address that often worked to reinscribe the very class hierarchies they sought to reveal and overturn by inviting middle-class observers to cross over into an unfamiliar world offered up for their inspection:

These crossings occur tellingly at moments of *visual* encounters between those whose lives were privileged to observe and regulate and detail the



behavior of others – journalists, novelists, photographers, and social workers – and their subjects, usually, because this is the Depression decade, the poor. As vehicles of regulation, exposé, and reification, photography and fiction become central mechanisms of class representation.

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Importantly, for Rabinowitz, the authority to inspect and to judge is vested in the distance maintained between observer/observed. In this formulation, legitimate knowledge results from “observations of life, rather than from what one has known of it” (59).

This distinctly middle-class claim to authority has not only been a trademark of Left-leaning documentaries, but the Left, itself, broadly speaking. For instance, in her analysis of Left sociology, Valerie Walkerdine describes what she calls “the voyeurism of the (social) scientist” (201). For Walkerdine, “the *desire* to know the masses,” (201) serves a *productive* function, not a descriptive one: “Modern apparatuses of social regulation, along with other social and cultural practices, produce knowledges which claim to identify individuals” (199). What it means, for instance, to be a “good mother,” or a “class victim,” or for that matter, a nihilistic inmate, of course, depends upon the regulatory discourses within which those labels are constructed. To label someone in such a way is to produce the very subject such a discourse purports to describe. However, in the case of Left sociology, this process of classification not only produces a series of working-class identities, but middle-class identities, as well:

... “our” project of analyzing “them” is itself one of the regulative practices which produce *our* subjectivity as well as theirs. We are each Other’s Other – but not on equal terms. Our fantasy investment often seems to consist in believing that we can “make them see” or that we can speak *for* them.

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Here, Walkerdine's description of Left sociology as a "fantasy investment" in middle-class desires dovetails with my description of Moore's work as constructing a "fantasy of advocacy." For Walkerdine, this fantasy is based upon that age-old Marxist trope of false consciousness and its concomitant belief that "the masses, trapped in false consciousness, [are] waiting to be led out of ideology by radical intellectuals" (199). Of course, the documentary tradition as a whole, and Moore's work specifically, could hardly be labeled "Marxist" in its classic sense, but the relationship it invites audiences to construct between themselves and the subjects we see on screen is very similar.

For, in the end, what is most striking about this scene from *The Big One* is not only the distance established between the audience and the inmate, at whose expense they share a sympathetic laugh, but the *camaraderie* that is produced between Moore and the audience *as a direct result of* this distance. The reason, of course, that "we" can all share a laugh when Moore chides us about our disdain for the Mall of America is that we all *know* what's really going on here – that the consumer culture enthusiastically celebrated by the mall and its frequenters is also the culprit behind the inmate's plight. Seen in this light, "we" know that Moore's gentle chiding is, in fact, a friendly call to action; a plea for us to take our responsibilities as knowledgeable, middle-class citizens more seriously. It's a plea for advocacy. And, by invoking our authority as knowledgeable advocates, Moore simultaneously exonerates us from the system of class differences which produce inequality in the first place. In this mode, our difference from the working-class is a legitimate one, based upon a knowledge and understanding of the world that we share, and they do not. The problem, then, is not one of "difference," but simply *indifference*.

“Look who you’ve forgotten,” Moore exclaims, in the same breadth reminding us of our own power and authority to rectify the situation.

To analyze Moore’s films in such a fashion is to re-think the way in which “class” itself is understood – and, specifically, the way it has been understood historically by many middle-class analysts and activists on the Left. As many scholars have argued, we live in a culture built around a myth of classlessness.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Michael Moore’s most progressive move is to put *class* and, specifically, the working class, back on the agenda; to make visible the structural constraints and economic limitations that work to keep a vast majority of the population down. However, Moore’s effort to put class on screen begs the question: is mere visibility enough? For, despite the Left’s continued efforts to emphasize the centrality of class oppression, the reality on the ground is that, by and large, the working class has not seen fit to join the Left.

Certainly, this has been the case for, at least, the last fifty years. As David Croteau argues, while much of Left politics in the U.S. was “once primarily the domain of the working class ... the situation has changed dramatically over the last half century” (x). In fact, Croteau argues, the Left has largely become a *middle class* entity:

Many left movements are now middle class, and the working class in this country is no longer seen as a key source of left support. Instead, it is viewed as apparently conservative and largely quiescent.

x-xi

The question, of course, is begged; why is this the case? The answer may have less to do with whether or not we speak about class and more to do with *how*, in fact, we “speak it.”

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<sup>37</sup> See: Demott; Aronwitz; Kumar.

Here, it is helpful to turn to the work of Michel Foucault. In his analysis of sexual discourse, Foucault turns the tables on what he calls the “repression hypothesis,” arguing that the emerging “proliferation of discourses” surrounding sexuality – meant to combat its purported repression – actually served to regulate and police the boundaries of sexuality by defining what is permissible and unpermissible, what is normal and what is abject (*History* 11-13). Recently, scholars have begun to make a similar claim in regards to Left class analysis.

In this argument, Left class analysis is understood to be a discursive structure in its own right; regulating class identity by rigidly defining what is and is not an “appropriate” class subject. As Croteau argues, this “reified notion of the working class tend(s) to fall at extreme poles: either workers [are] the gloriously idyllic proletariat (who one day [will] smarten up and start doing their revolutionary duty) or they [are] stupid, fascistic hard hats for whom there [is] no hope (and who [are] the easy target of ridicule)” (xxvii). Such a discourse of class is essentializing in nature, and leaves very little with which “actual” working class subjects might identify. They must either live up to an impossible ideal, or be relegated to the status of victims-of-history and/or conservative dupes. In either case, the Left short-circuits its own political intentions. Rather than bestow a revolutionary agency upon the working class such a discourse constitutes the working class as entirely devoid of any agency whatsoever.

In the following chapter, I analyze the ways in which Moore’s “Fantasy of Advocacy” is articulated within this broader discourse of class; a discourse that works, paradoxically, to reinscribe the cultural authority of middle-class advocates, even as it speaks out in the name of working-class people. In so doing, his films work to reinforce

what Barbara Ehrenreich calls an “ancient” class antagonism, which posits the middle class as morally superior to a working class that is (at best) pathologized and (at worst) vilified as a class so duped by Capitalist logic and consumerist desires that it perpetuates its own victimization. As such, Moore’s “fantasy of advocacy” undermines his own aspirations of creating cross-class solidarity around a populist movement against class-oppression by, instead, reinvigorating an antagonistic discourse that has pitted the working class against the middle class for decades.

### **(Re)-Theorizing Class Analysis**

#### **From Class Consciousness to Class Discourse**

“When was the last time you were on strike here? ... Never had a strike? Never had a walkout?!?”

In this early scene from *The Big One*, Moore makes an impassioned argument for the plight of the working class and the importance of labor activism. But he makes this argument in a particular way. He is admonishing a group of recently laid-off factory workers for not organizing against their corporate bosses. As Moore peppers them with questions about the company’s profits and what they’ve done to save their jobs, the workers stand in a semi-circle around Moore, inert and helpless. They are filled with plenty of anger about the situation they’re in, but they don’t seem to know quite what to do about it. There is something sad – indeed, almost “shameful” – about these workers. Moore, of course, offers them a solution. In his blue jeans, flannel shirt and trademark baseball cap, Moore models for these workers a militant version of working-class agency. Striding valiantly into the factory office, castigating the manager, and staging a colorful protest outside the factory walls, Moore offers an image of himself as an heroic (if

slightly comic) version of the mythical proletarian: a 21<sup>st</sup> century update of those autoworkers who struck GM back in the 1930s.

Of course, what is radically absent from this sequence is any understanding of how the workers, themselves, understand the situation they are in. None of these workers – nor, indeed, *any* of the workers we see throughout *The Big One* – is a full-blown “character” in any sense of the word. As Moore blows breezily across the Midwest, visiting town after town disparaged by an unforgiving economy, the workers we see tend to blend into one another. Nameless, identity-less, they are nothing more than cogs, standing helplessly by while the capitalist machine chugs on. As such, Moore constructs his mission specifically as one of enlightenment. If only the working class *understood* their economic position, *The Big One* seems to imply, then the proverbial scales would fall from their eyes; labor action, “Solidarity Forever!” and all the rest would surely follow. *The Big One* is nothing more than a narrative of “false consciousness,” played for laughs.

As such, Moore’s depiction of the working class is drawn from the well of Leftist discourse; a stereotypical narrative of class subjectivity that (more often than not) obscures the ways in which class difference is lived, felt and understood. Sonya Rose has labeled this the “quintessential worker” narrative. In this traditional, leftist paradigm, working class subjects are defined “solely by their relations to the means of production alone; in short, by *work*, itself” (138). This overtly teleological framework leads to the misguided assumption that “people have common experiences in production relations and that these somehow induce social action” (238). However, as many scholars have pointed

out, such a nostalgic depiction of working class subjectivity doesn't, exactly, fit with contemporary class experience.

In fact, class is "lived" through a variety of discursive structures and within a variety of cultural spheres, beyond the economic and outside of (or adjacent to) the world of "work." Indeed, ethnographic studies of working class populations have solidified this notion. David Halle's 1984 study of New Jersey chemical workers found that people identified themselves differently according to different "spheres" of life: as working *men* on the job; as *middle-class* property-owners when at home; and as *Americans* when talking politics (quoted in Devine 144). Similarly, David Croteau's 1995 study of factory workers in a Massachusetts printing plant found that a deep-seated sense of cynicism towards – and estrangement from – the political process led workers to define themselves in relation to the private sphere as opposed to the political (135).<sup>38</sup>

As such, a new understanding of class has been pioneered by scholars influenced by the insights of poststructuralism, cultural studies, and feminist theory, as well as theories of race and ethnicity. Specifically, this new scholarship looks at class through what Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff call a "poststructuralist frame":

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<sup>38</sup> In a different but related vein, Feminist ethnographers have described the ways in which class relations are lived through gendered relations. Beverley Skegg's study of working class women found that most of her subjects "went to enormous effort to dis-identify themselves as working class," a move that was based, in large part, on the ways in which class representations often included negative gender biases ("Classifying" 127). "Class has a long history as an identity of heroism, rebellion and authenticity for working class men," she argues, but for working class women recognition is often based upon "pathologized and sexualized representations" (128). Similarly, in her study of working and middle class high school girls living on the US/Mexican border, Julie Bettie describes the ways in which class differences were interpreted through understandings of gender and race. Thus, for instance, the act of dressing "sexually" had any number of meanings: a way for working class white and Latina girls, left out of the college-prep track, to perform a type of "adult" femininity, and a way for middle-class Latina girls who were in the college track to defend against accusations of "acting white."

The nearly ubiquitous tendency to view economic activity as taking place in a separate and rarified social location – the so-called economy – signals the urgency of speaking the *language of economy* in unfamiliar ways. For to the extent that the economy has been taken from us – represented as removed from the forces of social and discursive construction – it becomes urgent to take it back, not as a homogenous and unified level, sphere, or system, but as a discursive terrain, a set of concepts, issues, contradictions, identities, and struggles that falls outside the purview of most contemporary social theory.

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For many poststructuralist scholars, what matters most is not simply the way in which economic relations structure the world, but the way in which human subjects interpret and understand those structural relations. As such, this new scholarship on class has focused on complicating the crucial notion of “class consciousness,” itself, by transposing it to a notion of class experience. It is the importance of *experience*, Rose argues, that “has been ignored by most class analysts” (142).

Cultural theorist and ethnographer Julie Bettie has made a particularly compelling case for the importance of theorizing class-as-experience:

... class identity comes to be known equally by markers that exist outside of discovering one’s position in paid labor, as an identity lived out in private life and personal relations – in short, class culture. One’s experience of class may be expressed not only in terms of work identity and income but also in terms of familial relations, social relations unrelated to those of employment (such as school and peer relations), and in leisure and consumption practices, including the “identity formation material” offered up by popular culture.

*Women 42*

Thus, in her introduction to *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, Sally Munt argues that cultural studies scholars need to “return to sites of class experience and theorize out



of them, as situated knowledges” (11).<sup>39</sup> As Andy Medhurst, (writing in the same volume), succinctly puts it: “class is not just an objective entity, but also (and mostly?) a question of identifications, perceptions, feelings” (20).

As such, scholars have begun to think about class not simply as a *structure*, but as a kind of cultural identity performance, akin to identity formations such as gender, sexuality and race.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Bettie makes a crucial distinction between class *identity*, in its “new” sense, and class *consciousness*, in the traditional sense:

Focusing on class identity distinguishes my project from other inquiries into the formation of class consciousness, which employ normative Marxist notions of what constitutes class consciousness, that is, that class belonging hinges on an understanding of one’s relationship to the means of production and the development of a political consciousness. Conceiving of class as an identity rather than as a consciousness reveals two important points: first, that such an identity may not necessarily be a politicized one, and second, that class is only one among many identities that might mobilize people.<sup>41</sup>

Women 43

This concept of class-as-identity – and class identity as performance – brings us, in round-about fashion, back to the notion of *discourse*. For, as Bettie points out,

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<sup>39</sup> This edited volume, published in 2000, called for a renewed attention by the left to representations of social class that moved beyond traditional ways of theorizing class relations.

<sup>40</sup> In fact, this concept has been at the forefront of Cultural Studies since its inception. For instance, Julie Bettie returns to Paul Willis’s classic work, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, which she argues moved beyond “the use of a normative concept of ‘class consciousness’ as defined by relations of production” to construct “a welcome improvement over structural determinist arguments” (38). By focusing on how “cultural resources are used to make sense of inherited structural and material conditions,” she points out, Willis helped change our conception of class from an economic situation to a lived and felt *identity*.

<sup>41</sup> It is important to point out here that by conceptualizing class as a culturally-performed identity, Bettie is not denying the material realities of economic structure: “To conceptualize class in this way is not to ignore its materiality. There is always the materiality of the body in thinking about race and gender (the continua of phenotype and of sex), whose meaning is negotiated and made more or less salient by culture (or, more strongly, whose materiality is created by culture). And with class there is the materiality of economic and cultural resources about which we make meaning” (51).

describing class as a kind of cultural identity does not mean that subjects are free to perform whatever class identity they choose.<sup>42</sup> For an identity to “make sense,” it must be constructed out of the available cultural resources; and such resources always exist within delimited discursive terrains:

By discourse, then, I mean constellations of “knowledge,” together with institutionalized social practices, which are politicized and result in an array of possible subjectivities. Discourses, or *public meaning systems* (political, social science, popular culture, etc.) are the material for identity formation. We deploy these discourses to construct our identities but from a limited range of options. Consequently, some identities are readily made possible while others are not, and in this way we are somewhat overdetermined by the meaning systems that preexist us as individuals.

*Women* 54 (my emphasis)

Thus, Bettie argues that while identity construction takes place at the level of “experience,” it does so within social contexts that are always discursively defined.

This poststructuralist understanding of class-as-identity is similar to the way in which Stuart Hall has defined cultural identity as a “process of articulation” (“Who Needs 3). As Hall puts it:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity ...

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<sup>42</sup> This notion belies a tendency to take the notion of “performativity” too far, a tendency that more often than not stems from a “widespread misreading of Judith Butler’s notion of performance” (Bettie 53). In this move, the realization that social identities are socially constructed leads to the utopian notion that all subjects are active agents, free to “perform” themselves however they choose. However, Bettie points out that in Butler’s poststructuralist framework, there is “no actor/agent who preexists the performance; rather the subject is constructed by the performance” (53). As such, subjects are not the result of individual performances, but rather the effects of social discourses.

A poststructuralist approach to identity, then, seeks to map out the relationship between discursive constructions of identity and broader structures of power operating within society. It seeks to map out the relationship between historical subjects and the discursive practices which “produce” those subjects. It seeks to analyze the ways in which identities are constructed, and the ways in which those particular constructions might influence people’s ideas about the world, and their place in it.

It is here that I return to Michael Moore and political documentary. It is within the notion of class discourse as (in Bettie’s words) a “public meaning system” that I locate my own critique of Moore’s work as a political documentarian. Documentary films – and Michael Moore’s very popular films, specifically – are an important part of this public meaning system within which contemporary class identities are forged. As such, we must consider the relationship between Moore’s construction of class identity and the readily-available, dominant discourses of class.

### **Knowledge and Understanding: an “Ancient Antagonism”**

A poststructuralist approach to identity has most often been employed to analyze issues of gender, race and ethnicity. As Bettie argues, it has only recently been employed to analyze class identities. But there is precedent for such a move. In their influential book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe critiqued the essentialist notion of class determination (the idea that class position determines class identity). Employing discourse as “the central category of our analysis” (“Post-Marxism” 100), Laclau and Mouffe argued that class cannot be determined by its structural components alone – in other words, by one’s position within the economic sphere. Instead, they

argued, class is constituted by the discursive systems which *give meaning* to the economic structure and one's position in it. Of course, the material realities of the economic are bound to have *some* effect on one's identity, but these material attributes alone are not enough. They must be *made meaningful* within a discursive system.<sup>43</sup>

In order to describe the way in which economic realities are “made to mean,” Laclau and Mouffe replace the concept of class “determination” with the much more fluid notion of class “antagonism.” Whereas the notion of determination implies an essential, material relationship between force (economy) and identity (class); “antagonism” implies a relationship that is more flexible, historically contingent and, hence, open to discourse. According this model, in order for the economic to shape one's class identity, it must become “antagonistic” in a certain way. It is worth quoting them at length:

According to the classical Marxist thesis, the basic antagonism of capitalist society is constituted around the extraction of surplus values by the capitalist from the worker. But it is important to see where the antagonism resides. A first possibility would be to affirm that the antagonism is inherent in the very form of the wage-labor/capital relation. ... However ... the capitalist/worker relation considered as form ... is not an antagonistic one. Only if the worker *resists* the extraction of his or her surplus-value by the capitalist does the relation become antagonistic, but such a resistance cannot be logically deduced from [this relationship alone]. ... Thus, there is only [one way to explain this antagonism]: the antagonism is not intrinsic to the capitalist relation of production as such, but rather, that it is established *between* the relation of production and something external to it – for instance, the fact that below a certain level

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<sup>43</sup> Laclau and Mouffe's analysis hinges upon an understanding of “the social space as discursive”; they highlight the role “meaning” plays in the construction and maintenance of all social acts and relations (100). Important for our discussion here is the way in which discursive systems not only constitute objects or events, but also the individuals involved with those objects and in those events. When a discursive system is in place, it sets out a series of “positions” into which individuals step. In this way, “it is the discourse which constitutes the subject position of the social agent, and not, therefore, the social agent which is the origin of discourse” (101).

of wages the worker cannot live in a decent way, send his/her children to school, have access to certain forms of recreation, etc.

“Post-Marxism” 126

Thus, in order to explain class identity, and the way in which it shapes an individual’s view of the world, it is not enough to simply elucidate that individual’s relationship to the economic system. We must also understand how that relationship is understood; how it is given meaning and value. This relationship, of course, will be determined in some ways by the economic, but not totally; other discursive systems can, and do, intervene. Thus, the point is to try and explain how class processes are understood and endowed with meaning within a given social sphere. Or, as Laclau and Mouffe put it, the point is to try and understand “where the antagonism resides” (126).

For many on the Left, the answer to this question has been an unsettling one. For much of the past fifty years, the working class (and, indeed, much of the burgeoning “lower middle class”), has defined itself not against a wealthy elite, but against an ambiguous, almost mythical “liberal elite.” This concept has been around for decades, implied for instance by Nixon’s deification of the “Silent Majority,” Reagan’s exhortations against the Liberal “special interests” (Kazin p#) and Newt Gingrich’s description of Left-leaning public television as a “sandbox for the rich” (Ouellette 7).

More recently, this trope has undergirded what Thomas Frank calls the fantasy of “the two Americas,” a narrative of political antagonism dividing the country into conservative Red States and Liberal Blues that became popularized after the divisive results of the 2000 election (13). While this narrative purports to describe a political divide, it is, as Frank argues, rhetorically mapped onto an implicit *class* divide, endowing it with a populist character when invoked by conservative pundits and politicians.

According to this logic, Blue-State liberals are a constituency made up of “a wealthy, pampered, arrogant elite that lives as far as it can from real Americans,” while Red-state conservatives are “the hard working common people of the heartland” (20).<sup>44</sup> In this discursive universe the Left, despite its historical ties to working-class issues, is paradoxically understood to be somehow “against” the working class. And, indeed, this is precisely the paradox Michael Moore has found himself in more often than not: a working class guy, talking working class issues, being painted as a “liberal elitist.”

But despite its very *strategic* deployment by conservatives of all stripes, this accusation appears to be more than “mere rhetoric.” While it is certainly not universally the case, the (white) working class and, indeed, a large segment of the white working middle class, seems to define itself according to this antagonistic scheme. For instance, it is this very antagonism that lies at the heart of David Croteau’s 1995 study, *Politics and the Class Divide: Working People and the Middle-Class Left*. Croteau’s study is specifically about “the relative absence of white working-class participation in many liberal and left social movements” (x). This is a contradiction, Croteau argues, not only because the Left, and the Democratic party in particular, have always defined themselves as supportive of working people, but precisely because “left politics in the United States was once primarily the domain of the working class” (x). But the situation has clearly changed over the last half a century: “In the electoral realm, today’s workers often perceive a Democratic Party made up of an alliance between middle-class ‘limousine

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<sup>44</sup> This antagonism was, perhaps, best exemplified by a 2004 TV political attack-ad funded by the conservative Club for Growth in which then Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, former Governor of that Bluer-than-Blue state Vermont, was denounced as part of a “tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-drinking, *New York Times*-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, Left-wing freak show” (Frank 17). It was most-recently utilized by the Hilary Clinton campaign during the 2008 Democratic primaries when Clinton seized upon Barack Obama’s description of conservative, working class people in Pennsylvania as “bitter” in an attempt to paint him as “elitist and divisive” (“Clinton”).

liberals' and the traditionally disenfranchised – the poor, racial minorities, gays and lesbians" (ix). The question remains; why is this the case?

To answer this question, Croteau turns his attention away from the working class and back, as it were, to the Left, itself:

It is important not just to ask what's "wrong" with working class people for not participating in left politics, but to ask what might be "wrong" with the political system and with what [Left] movements are doing – or not doing – that makes democratic participation unattractive to working people.

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Specifically, Croteau argues that the middle-class Left often employs a language of class that is deeply flattering to itself, but offers no acceptable means of identification for working class people.

For instance, he makes the case that most workers are quite aware of broad social problems and economic issues. However, their awareness of these issues is understandably based upon their own, individual experience of economic conditions. For middle-class activists, on the other hand, awareness of economic issues is, more often than not, based upon "a different kind of knowledge: information and expertise" (151). As such, activists tend to emphasize what they perceive to be a "lack of [pertinent] information" on the part of working-class people. As a result:

they see "education" about political issues as perhaps their single most important task. ... The assumption behind the strategy of educating a "deluded" public is that "if people only knew" about an issue, they would act. As a result, activists often see themselves as educators providing information that will "raise consciousness" about an issue or that exposes what is "really" going on ...

This assumption – that working-class people are in need of “enlightenment” – can, and usually does, lead to the construction of a false divide between middle-class activists and working-class people that exacerbates class antagonisms, rather than encouraging solidarity.

Croteau uses the example of Lenin to define the ways in which Left activists’ efforts to “aid” the working class only succeed in driving them further apart:

Lenin argued that socialist consciousness had to be introduced to the working class from without by an intellectual vanguard. These activists would shudder at being labeled Leninists, but their approach is not that different from Lenin’s. The ideology they promote is no longer socialist, and their target population is not defined in class terms; but the role of a “vanguard” is maintained.

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Thus, what Croteau describes here is the way in which a particular Left discourse of class has worked to create a very different kind of “class antagonism” than activists intended.

This antagonism is expressed most succinctly by Frank. He argues that the problem most Red-State Americans have with Blue State liberals can be summed up pretty simply: “*They think they’re so damn smart*” (21). What this attitude implies is that there is, in fact, not much on offer in Left class discourse with which working class subjects can – or would want to – identify. As such, more often than not, working class subjects resist Left analyses.

It is precisely this tendency to *resist* that undergirds the work of Beverly Skeggs. While many Left academics, she argues, are committed to the goal of making working



class subjects understand their class positions – and indeed, to identify themselves precisely *as* “working class” (in the fullest, revolutionary sense of that term) – actual working-class subjects more often than not go to “enormous effort to dis-identify themselves as working class” (“Classifying” 127). Indeed, she argues, “class” is rarely claimed as a positive label of identity by anyone other than middle-class academics (127). And the reason for this, she argues, is a deeply felt resentment towards the identity positions made available to them by the discourses of class often deployed by middle-class analysts and advocates.<sup>45</sup>

In her important study of working-class women (1997), Skeggs found that, in fact, what her subjects resisted most was the very process of *classification*, itself:

Class operated in a dialogic manner: in every judgment of themselves a measurement was made against others. In this process the designated “other” (based on representations and imaginings of the respectable and judgmental middle class) was constructed as the standard to/from which they measured themselves. The classifying of themselves depended upon the classifying systems of others.

*Formations* 75

According to Skeggs, the very act of identifying oneself *as* “working class,” means defining oneself in a delegitimizing manner – as a subject in need of help, education, enlightenment – in short, as someone in a position to be *judged*. The women with whom she spoke constantly found themselves in the position of having to “produc[e] themselves through the experience of being classified by others and their knowledge of these

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<sup>45</sup> Skeggs adopts a poststructuralist understanding of identity similar to the one I have outlined above, in which subjects construct themselves in experience through available discourses: “I argue ... that we are produced as subjects through our experiences, that these experiences always involve interpretation and that the ability to interpret depends upon the discursive frameworks to which we have access” (131). This is what Bettie means when she argues that discourses act as “cultural resources” through which subjects come to understand, and give meaning to themselves as subjects.

classifications” (“Classifying” 129). As such, they quite understandably attempted to generate distance from these classifying systems by rejecting class labels and differentiating themselves from “others” who might bare the term “working class.”

Thus, the work of scholars like Croteau and Skeggs reveals the ways in which class antagonisms get articulated, not merely in economic terms, but in cultural terms as well – and, specifically, around the possession of *knowledge*. For, in order to classify, one must possess the legitimated knowledge to do so – and, conversely – to *be* classified is, specifically, to be without that knowledge. Relying upon Bourdieu’s notion of “cultural capital,” Skeggs argues that the distinction between the working class and middle-to-upper classes is not based upon money alone but upon cultural *authority* – specifically, the legitimated ability to *judge*: “What remains constant is that it is middle-class standards and members of the middle-class who instigate judgments” (135). The middle class, she argues, inhabits a “structure of feeling” that is

not based upon the emotional politics of anxiety and doubt, but on that of security and confidence. Middle class people are able to operate with a sense of entitlement to social space and economic rewards that would be beyond comprehension to those of the working class for whom limitation and constraint frame their social movement.

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Of course, it bears noting that Skeggs’ work is located specifically within the British context.<sup>46</sup> However, as Croteau and Frank make clear, similar class-relations enliven the American context, as well. And, as the work of American scholars Barbara Ehrenreich

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<sup>46</sup> Also, her analysis is specifically of working class *women* and the emphasis in much of her analysis is on illuminating the gendered attributes of these classifying practices (74).

and Richard Sennett and Jonathon Cobb show, these are class-relations with a long history.

In their famous sociological study of working Americans, Sennett and Cobb describe what they call the “hidden injuries of class,” which refers to the feelings of anxiety and resentment felt by the working class towards a middle-class that exerts a power over them that is cultural as well as economic: “people felt that an educated, upper-middle-class person was in a position to judge them, and that the judgment rendered would be that working-class people could not be respected as equals” (38). According to Sennett and Cobb, this culturally-sanctioned authority to judge constituted a “hidden agenda” in class relations:

... the “right things” to think are believed by a few, by a vocal minority, and these people stand socially higher than the silent majority. They think themselves “better” because they believe in what they consider universal values – peace, brotherhood, freedom, and so on. On that hidden agenda, the educated upper-middle class people who uphold the “right” values stand out from a mass whose understanding and sensitivity they believe inferior to their own: the hard hats ... don’t have the brains to realize they are being manipulated by those forces in power.

69

Thus, while Sennett and Cobb do not have the language of poststructuralism at their disposal, they describe the ways in which a (generally Left-leaning) discourse of class worked to demoralize those on whose behalf it purportedly spoke.

It was within this discursive frame that the “hard hat” stereotype of the late 60s and early 70s took form – “a racist, nationalistic soul opposed to any social change, who only wants more attention paid to his own problems” (68). In this logic, economic oppression resulted in an infantilized working class, not capable of seeing beyond their

own immediate and selfish needs. Indeed, so ingrained was this notion, that it was evident not only in popular beliefs, but much of the sociological literature. Sennett and Cobb use the work of S. M. Lipset as an example, whose theory of “working-class authoritarianism” posited a working-class whose narrow and delimited life-experience predisposed them to the simplicities of authoritarian rule, as opposed to the “complexities of democratic morality or of pluralistic politics” (70).

The purpose of such a logic, they argue – its “hidden agenda” – was not so much to diagnose the problems of the working class, but to shore up the authority of the middle class that sat in judgment upon them:

Hidden agendas like this connect working-class masses to “mass” in the scheme of individual, distinctive ability. Inability to live up to a standard of social justice, appears as a mass phenomenon, with the standard being determined by, and demonstrated in, the behavior of an elite minority. Nationalism and racism are not unknown among manual laborers, obviously; but when these things are spoken of as *their* problem, as attitudes characteristic of them as opposed to other Americans, the invitation becomes strong to set up a kind of moral individualism in which the educated few will stand out. It is at this point that an undeclared war over questions of dignity and genuine feeling breaks out.

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Thus, this “hidden agenda” of classification was one that served to “continue the iniquities of the world of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism – on new terrain” (76).

This, I would argue, is what Laclau and Mouffe mean when they suggest that it is crucial to understand “where the antagonism lies.” In Sennett and Cobb’s influential study, class

difference is not so much economically determined as it is the result of a kind of cultural authority, vested in one group of people and held over another.<sup>47</sup>

Building, in many ways, off the insights of Sennett and Cobb's work, Barbara Ehrenreich has spent a good portion of her career describing this antagonistic relationship between the working and middle classes. Her book, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (published in 1989, the same year *Roger & Me* made its theatrical debut) is, perhaps, the most detailed exposition of this antagonistic relationship. *Fear of Falling* charts the rise and consolidation of what Ehrenreich calls the "professional middle class"<sup>48</sup> over the last half of the twentieth century.

As with the work of Croteau, Frank, and others who would follow her, Ehrenreich is specifically interested in describing a general retreat from – and hostility towards – "liberalism," evident in contemporary American society: "Today, we seldom hear the word. In the sixties, liberalism – as defined by the intention to achieve a more egalitarian society – was an affiliation worn with pride. Today the term has degenerated into a slur, coyly designated as the 'L-Word'" (7-8). And, as with the scholars outlined above, she discovers that this antagonism stems from working-class resentment of the cultural authority that defines what she calls "middle-class liberalism":

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<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as Sennett and Cobb point out, economics did not play as crucial a role in the material *or* the cultural realm. At the time of their study, they argue, "in terms of income, amount of taxing physical exertion, and styles of living, the lines are not now sharp between many blue-collar and low-level office workers" (74). In fact, their study focuses mainly upon people who have moved from working class backgrounds into more middle class lifestyles and occupations.

<sup>48</sup> As Ehrenreich acknowledges, this term is an update of her earlier term, the "professional-managerial class." She adopts it here to encompass a broader class distinction than just that found within the realm of work (*Fear* 5).

I started out with the seemingly straightforward plan of tracing mainstream ideas about the “lower” classes – the poor and the working class – over the past three decades. In mainstream American culture the lower classes had dropped from view in the fifties, vanishing so completely that they had to be “discovered.” ... by mining this material I might gain some insights into our attitudes toward the less-well-off and why these views have seemed to sour. But in this project ... the question of *whose* ideas was inescapable. If the poor and the working class had to be discovered, from whose vantage point were they once hidden? And what *we* is implicit in any statement about *our* attitudes? ... I realized that *our* ideas could not be traced or even understood without clarifying the evasive *we* and introducing the middle class as an actor in the story.

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In short, Ehrenreich discovered what Sennet and Cobbs, Skeggs, Croteau, et. al., have been at pains to describe in their ethnographic work; namely, the authority vested in the middle class to “classify,” and the role this discursive function plays in the constitution of class antagonisms.

Ehrenreich argues that working-class hostility to the middle class stems from the economic and industrial changes that occurred at the turn of the last century – specifically, the development of the modern-day professions. The emerging professional middle class, she argues, developed in response to the growing antagonism between the working and capitalist classes, acting as “mediators” between the two through professional roles such as that of middle-management (*Fear* 135). What this development represented was the constitution of a particular form of authority stemming from specialized knowledge. Mental and manual labor were separated for the first time, literally “intellectualizing” the production process and, hence, placing its command solely within the hands of middle class managers.

The result of this development was to rearticulate the way in which class difference was experienced and understood in the American context. Now, the working class was not only differentiated from the capitalist class, but from this middle, “managerial” class, as well. Only, the difference in the latter relation had less to do with economic wealth than it did with cultural authority:

It is, more fundamentally, a difference defined by an inequality of power. Relative to the working class, the holders of middle class occupations are in positions of command or, at the very least, authority. ... The fact that this is a relationship of domination – and grudging submission – is usually invisible to the middle class but painfully apparent to the working class.<sup>49</sup>

*Fear* 133

However, the shop floor is not the only realm organized via middle-class “management.” In the social realm, all manner of social professions, such as teacher, doctor and social worker, arose to manage the lives of those beneath them (*Fear* 136). Thus, more often than not, this class antagonism is reconstituted and reinforced through various “liberal” professions and organizations. “How, after all,” she asks,

do working-class people ... encounter the professional middle class? Not, in most cases, as friends or co-workers but in the role of teachers, social workers, or physicians. All of these are “helping professions,” full of generous-spirited people, but they are also roles that confer authority and the power to make judgments about others. ... For working class people, relations with the middle class are usually a one-way dialogue. From above come commands, diagnoses, instructions, judgments, definitions – even, through the media, suggestions as to how to think, feel, spend money, and relax. Ideas seldom flow “upward” to the middle class, because there are simply no structures to channel the upward flow of thought from class to class.

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<sup>49</sup> Of course, Ehrenreich argues, there are few people today who “retain any active memory of these historical insights to the working class,” but the feelings of resentment persist.

In more colloquial terms, Ehrenreich describes this antagonism with stark simplicity: “the delusion of ‘knowing it all’” (140).

It is here that we can begin to see the connections between a middle-class Left discourse of class, as I have been defining it, and the political documentary’s traditional mode of address. As I have argued, the traditional documentary is based upon a relationship of *authority* in which the documentarian is vested with the ability and inclination to tell “us” about “them.” As such, both documentarian *and* audience are connected by an expository/observational mode of address that places us above and outside the subjects we see on screen, positioning us in a way that invites us to observe, judge, and, indeed, to *classify*. Thus, when deployed by the Left to analyze issues of class and class relations, specifically, the cultural authority constituted by the documentary modes of address becomes mapped onto broader discourses of class in such a way as to reinforce the very antagonism that has differentiated the working class from the professional middle class for decades.

As such, the “Fantasy of Advocacy” offered by Moore is revealed to be a mediated version of the “classifying” discourse described by Sennett and Cobbs, Croteau, Skeggs, et al. By defining the working class as a social “problem” in need of fixing, Moore’s documentaries become one more version of the “helping professions”: claiming to speak on behalf of the working class, while simultaneously working to shore up the cultural authority of an audience that is invited to classify, judge and sympathize with the behaviors of those they see on screen. The result is that, rather than challenge contemporary class-relations, Moore’s documentaries actually work to reinforce class-



distinctions. For, in the world of the advocacy documentary, class is defined not just in economic terms, but in knowledge-terms, as well. Those who possess the right kind of knowledge are empowered to classify those who do not.

### **The Good, the Bad and the Ugly – Classed Characters (and Class Character)**

#### **The Good: Working-Class Victims, False Advocates and “True” Advocacy**

#### **Addressing Class**

As I argued in the last chapter, the documentary’s main ethical problem is the way in which it denies agency to the subjects we see on-screen. The traditional documentary format – what Brian Winston calls the “social problem documentary” – is geared towards *telling* rather than *listening*. As viewers, we are told about a subject’s *conditions of experience* rather than invited to understand that subject’s *experience of* those “conditions.” In so doing, the way in which subjects understand and interpret their own position in the world is dismissed, while the authority of the filmmaker and audience to do so for them is reinforced. Social-problem documentaries are not *for* these victims at all, but for middle-class advocates in a position to “do something about it.”

This style of documentary has long framed issues of class and class difference in American documentary filmmaking – especially where poor populations are concerned. For instance, in his analysis of classic social-problem documentaries such as *Harvest of Shame* (1961) and *Hunger in America* (1968), Chad Raphael argues that, in these films: “the poor were limited to the role that they most often play in sympathetic mainstream treatments of poverty: as victims who testify about personal experience to illustrate or dramatize a larger point made by experts or journalists” (52). This strategy provided the filmmakers (and their sponsoring network, CBS), “a way of bringing viewers closer to

the poor without taking the politically riskier step of allowing the poor themselves to assume narrative power” (53). As such, these documentaries “positioned the poor as ‘passive client or consumer recipients and not as active co-participants involved in shaping their life conditions’” (53-5).

In Moore’s case, of course, he is certainly *not* taking up the “professional” stance of the CBS filmmakers, who were committed to defending the welfare system and the Kennedy Administration that ran it at the time. However, his mode of address works to construct a similar *delineation* between an imagined audience of middle-class advocates and the hapless working-class subjects we see on screen. Again, this is nothing new. As Laurie Ouellette has argued, even the much more radical documentaries produced by PBS’s NET in the 1960s and 70s constructed a “classed” mode of address that was very similar to that of mainstream films like *Harvest* and *Hunger*. For instance, she argues, in the film *Appalachia: Rich Land, Poor People* (1968): “Scenes of impoverished shacks filled with wide-eyed children in tattered clothes elicit sympathy, but they also presume that the victims are not ‘us,’ that is, the people watching the documentary on the noncommercial channel in their book-lined living room (193). PBS’s classed mode of address was not reserved for the poor alone, however. It was often deployed to analyze America’s working class, as well, such as in *Factory*:

Studying the “forgotten Americans for whom punch out and punch in are a way of life,” the documentary probes their psyches for puzzled liberals. Accepting the stereotype of bigoted blue-collar laborers ensconced in media-induced false consciousness, the documentary addresses ... why factory workers accept their lot in life.

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Thus, whether advocating from the standpoint of the federal government, or the “counter-culture,” social problem documentaries have often worked to keep society’s hierarchical class structure in place by imagining the “lower” classes as helpless victims.

As David Croteau points out, this is not only an old documentary trope, but has been a well-worn tradition of the middle-class Left in America, and can lead to dire consequences in terms of invoking working-class solidarity with liberal causes. Croteau argues that middle-class activists persist in a kind of class-consciousness reasoning in which “material constraint” single-handedly *prevents* the working class from understanding the plight of their situation. In this simplistic equation, lack of money demands longer work hours which results in less time to learn about – much less engage with – the political world:

[Most] common is the belief among middle class activists that their efforts are all the more important because workers and other groups facing constraints are unable to participate in politics. Thus, activists take on the role of working on behalf of those locked out of the political arena by material constraints.

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As such, middle-class advocates construct an image of the working class similar to that described by social problem documentaries: a victimized population so oppressed that they are, literally, incapable of becoming “politicized” on their own – a population in dire need of help.

The problem is that such a view actually misreads working-class “apathy” by ignoring working-class experience for an overly determinist explanation:

“... the mechanisms of nonparticipation are much more complex and subtle than can be described by simple material reductionism. ... In reality, a different dynamic is being played out. Workers see material conditions of home and family as demanding their immediate attention *and* see that the political arena does not provide relevant solutions to their immediate concerns ... What is fundamentally different here for the activists’ vision of economic constraint is the relative absence of desire or motivation for political participation on the part of working people. Such a desire is implied by the activists’ vision of economic constraint, which posits that working people are being *prevented* from participating by the material conditions in which they find themselves.

134-5

The problem, then, with the theory of material constraint is that it mistakes willful cynicism for a debilitating apathy. It transforms an active working class, who in many cases *choose* to reject the political realm, into passive victims, without the ability or inclination to take advantage of that realm. According to Croteau, this view is not only simplistic, but demoralizing: “Ironically, given that most activists spend their lives promoting human agency, this view relegates people to the status of objects of history” (134).

By constructing the working class in this way, middle-class activists reinforce the very kinds of class antagonisms they hope to eradicate. When the working class are defined simplistically as the social victims of material constraint, they are subjected to a discursive logic in which:

their ideas are not valued and ... action is carried out and authority held by people who are unlike themselves. ... Rather than affirming people’s life experiences, activists emphasize information and education and thus communicate the message that “you, too, can become a well-educated (read: middle class) citizen just like me.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This is why the notion of *political reflexivity* is so crucial to political documentary. By relinquishing the authority to define someone else’s experience, and by inviting subjects to engage audiences with their own experiences and their own understandings of the world – in short, by constructing documentaries that listen

Thus, the mode of address employed by Moore in his films often works to reconstitute a similar kind of “classifying” discourse. As argued in the last chapter, in all of Moore’s films we meet virtually no working class subjects who are endowed with any real sense of agency. Instead, the working class is relegated to the status of exemplar. By representing them in such a fashion, Moore works to reconstruct the very same victim-stereotype that, Croteau argues, undergirds a middle-class Left discourse, and that scholars such as Brian Winston argue, characterize most social problem documentaries: a working class “virtually without passion and anger, without unredressed grievance, almost without culture and institutions, and above all a worker without politics” (*Claiming* 80).

One way in which Moore produces such a representation is through a narrative strategy that juxtaposes “false advocacy” with “true advocacy.” Moore often positions his working-class subjects as being at the mercy of a false advocate who has done them wrong. In so doing, the central question of a typical Moore documentary becomes the issue of “treatment” – how are we to “treat” the working class? *Roger & Me* is the classic example. By structuring his film around a cause/effect narrative in which Roger Smith is positioned as a powerful entity who has betrayed his responsibility to the workers, Moore constructs an image of the working class as a “wronged community,” sold out by a false advocate. While this is, of course, an entirely fair accusation, what is important is the

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as well as speak – politically reflexive documentaries create a space in which the experience of political and social “others” is recognized, emphasized and valued.

relationship that Moore's "personalization strategy"<sup>51</sup> constructs between *himself* and this victimized community. For, while it is the relationship between Smith and the GM workers that Moore is at pains to reveal, the entire film actually depends upon a *different* relationship – that between Smith and Moore, himself. It is through the juxtaposition of Smith, as false advocate, and Moore as "true" advocate, that Moore reinforces the power relationship between middle-class advocates and working-class victims described by Croteau above.

It is thus crucial to note the way in which Moore begins *Roger & Me*: not with a description of Smith, GM and Flint's working-class population, but with an autobiographical depiction of *himself*. By focusing on his own professional journalistic background, this sequence functions specifically to establish Moore's status as a special kind of advocate; one who is *from* the working class, but not necessarily *of* it anymore. Indeed, while detailing his familial connections to Flint's working class and vibrant labor history, the focus of this sequence is not simply on Moore's working-class roots, but his *escape* from that milieu. As he tells us:

... the assembly line wasn't for me. My heroes were the Flint people who'd escaped the life in the factory and got out of Flint, like the guys in Grand Funk Railroad, Casey Kasam, the women who married Zubin Mehta and Don Knotts, and perhaps Flint's most famous native son, Bob Eubanks, host of TV's hit show, "The Newlywed Game." I figured if Bob Eubanks could make it out of here, so could I.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> This phrase is borrowed from: Corner, *The Art* 159.

<sup>52</sup> Of course, there is more than a touch of sarcasm here; we understand that Moore doesn't really emulate any one of these people. But that is just the point. Later on in the film, Eubanks will reappear in a role similar to that of Smith; the false advocate. For Moore, while agency is denied the workers of Flint who must bare the burden of GM's corporate malfeasance, it is assigned to those who "got out" of Flint and places like it. In Moore's films, it is the middle-class who are capable of political action, and no figure represents that power more valiantly than Moore, himself.

Moore then goes on to explain how he spent 10 years “editing my own paper in Flint” before “a California millionaire called and asked me to be the editor of his muckraking magazine in San Francisco” (the liberal political journal, *Mother Jones*). Thus, Moore establishes himself as a kind of “special case,” in the way that Eubanks, etc., were.

This opening segment in *Roger* may well be the most crucial of Moore’s career, for it constructs his class image in a very particular way; Moore may be working-class by “birth,” but he is not working-class in *essence*. In all of his films, Moore maintains a kind of insider/outsider position. He’s not just a son of the working class, but an *enlightened* son, who forsakes the assembly line to take up the noble calling of journalism; and who, after his short stay in California, returns home with the knowledge that will save those he left behind. Thus, rather than position himself as just another working-class “Joe,” Moore takes on a much different role; that of the middle-class advocate who hasn’t forgotten his working-class roots; a role he solidifies during this opening sequence by transforming his (in)famous battle with the board of *Mother Jones* into a mini-morality tale about “proper” advocacy.

Moore presents his time at *Mother Jones* as a humorous fish-out-of-water story, describing his exploits in hip, urbane San Francisco which, as Moore tells us, “seemed to be on the other side of the world from Flint.” Thus, he’s shocked to discover that the coffee shops don’t have creamer, and the logistics of ordering a cup of joe in the city’s many espresso bars becomes, for him, “a nightmare.” Ironically, in this brief segment, Moore seems to mimic the very discourse of “liberal elitism” that will be thrown back at him so often in the future. However, the point of this segment is not really to satirize “liberal culture” as much as it is to establish Moore as a true, social advocate by

transposing his own working-class commitments to the “false advocates” at *Mother Jones*.

Thus, Moore describes his eventual firing from the magazine as the result of a disagreement between himself and the owner over the proper treatment of working-class issues: “I went into work and announced I was going to give a monthly column to a Flint autoworker,” he says, but:

The owner instead told me to run an investigative report on herbal teas. I told him I had a better idea: lets put that autoworker on the cover. The owner wasn't amused and declared that California and I were a mismatch; just before he offered me my free U-Haul back to Michigan.

Of course, in reality, Moore's dismissal from *Mother Jones* was much more complicated than that and, in fact, Moore himself has offered a litany of reasons for his dismissal over the years that have nothing to do with his commitment to working class issues.<sup>53</sup>

However, the point here is not the “truth” of the telling, but the narrative function it serves in the film. This sequence allows Moore to construct himself as a proper, working-class advocate. And his “purity” is substantiated by the slew of false advocates he finds around him, whether it be the misguided liberals of *Mother Jones*, the hapless city officials of Flint, or the corporate villain, Roger Smith. As such, the true focus of *Roger & Me* – or, its “hidden agenda,” as Sennett and Cobb might put it – is not really economic oppression, but social advocacy. This is a narrative about how to be a “true” working-class hero.

Indeed, the rest of the film plays out in a fashion very similar to the mini-story surrounding Moore's *Mother Jones* misadventure. Moore watches as a variety of false

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<sup>53</sup> For an in-depth description of the affair and its aftermath, see: Larner (51-67).



advocates come to town – from Ronald Reagan, who suggests laid-off workers pick up their entire lives and move south to find work, to Reverend Schuller, who suggests Flint’s working class put their faith in God (and their remaining money in his coffers). Even the town officials, who use tax-dollars for hair-brained schemes to reconstitute Flint as a tourist destination, and the UAW leadership itself, all too-cushy with GM management to suggest any kind of labor action, abdicate their responsibilities to the working class, while Moore remains the lone voice of reason.

Again, the point here is not to criticize Moore’s arguments; in most cases, his accusations are fair and his analyses important. But by structuring the film in such a fashion, Moore also constructs a crucial relationship between his own version of middle-class advocacy and the victimized working class who depend upon it. By pitting himself against any number of false advocates, Moore makes class-advocacy, itself, the central trope of the film; what is the best way to treat the working class?

In such a narrative frame there isn’t much room for working-class agency of any kind. As such, the most positive portrayals of working-class people in *Roger & Me* are also debilitating ones. Like the middle-class activists described by Croteau, *Roger* defines the working class according to one, overriding characteristic: their position in an oppressive economic regime. Thus, when workers are shown at all, they are constantly framed in terms of their *inability* to act.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, our very first glimpse of Flint autoworkers is a shot implying what can only be described as political impotence: autoworkers stream out of a factory on the final day of the GM truck plant. “What do you

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<sup>54</sup> Indeed, it is important to note that we do not “meet” any actual Flint autoworkers – current or former – until eight minutes into the film. Both Moore and Smith are introduced, as are those mythical 1930s strikers, before a real, live, contemporary autoworker graces the screen. As such, we realize early on that the working class is not really going to be a “player” in this tale of social advocacy.

have to say to Roger Smith?” we hear Moore ask from behind the camera. “Boy it’s gonna be rough!” says one worker, while another says despondently, “I can’t mention it on television.” Here, the answers given by the workers are ambiguous at best, while the question posed by Moore is clearly rhetorical. As we know, these workers *couldn’t* say anything to Smith even if they wanted to. Their only option is the one they are performing before the camera; resigned submission – a “walk-out” on entirely different terms.

This image of impotent workers becomes a running motif: the town residents sitting apathetically on lawn chairs watching the annual parade while storefronts crumble behind them; the men lined up outside the Flint Plasma office to sell their blood; the forlorn James Bond (“I want a chance to have something of my own, which doesn’t look like it’s going to happen ever”); the poor and downtrodden evictees. Even Moore’s longtime collaborator, Ben Hamper, is reduced to the trope of victimhood. This sense of powerlessness is encapsulated by the film’s last image of Flint’s worker class: impotent workers looking forlornly out the windows of a GM plant on its last day while Moore creates a spectacle of advocacy outside, facing off with security guards and PR officials. This image works in concert with the first one (depicting laid-off workers streaming out of the factory) and together they bookend Moore’s tale of social advocacy perfectly. In the first sequence, Moore depicts their inability to speak out in their own defense, while this last scene depicts Moore doing just that in their stead.

Thus, I would complicate the readings of scholars who argue that Moore creates films that give the working class a voice.<sup>55</sup> Far from it. *Roger & Me* is a pertinent title not only for this film in particular, but for Moore’s work as a whole. While most critics point

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<sup>55</sup> See: Arthur, Dovey, Misiak, Orvell, Toplin.

out the reflexive gesture at its heart (a move they find subversive), there is also, I would argue, a claim to *authority* invoked here – the right of Moore, as middle-class advocate, to speak on behalf of those beneath him. And, indeed, as the title of this film implies, much of Moore’s documentary output takes the form of a conversation (or, more often, argument) – not between Moore and the working class (or in and amongst the working class, itself) but between Moore and other members of the professional middle class. Perhaps the most enduring trope of Moore’s oeuvre is that of an argument between advocates (both false and true).

Certainly, it is this trope which structures the entirety of Moore’s follow-up to *Roger & Me*, his 1997 feature, *The Big One*. Following on the heels of his break-through with *Roger* and two well-received seasons of *TV Nation*, Moore could no longer claim to be just another guy from Flint and, as such, he embraces his own star-image. *The Big One* follows Moore on a book-tour as he markets his bestselling book, *Downsize This!* However, this time he has given up the conceit which, for many, made his role in *Roger* so endearing. Far from being barred from the halls of power, Moore now invades them at will. In *The Big One* we get a series of set-pieces in which Moore castigates any number of false advocates in heroic style: he assails the manger of the Centralia Pay Day Candy Bar plant; he castigates upper-level executives at Johnson Controls; he storms the halls of the Wisconsin State Capitol to square off against then-Governor Tommy Thompson’s press secretary; he ambushes officials at the corporate offices of Proctor and Gamble; and finally, he infiltrates the private office of Nike-head Phil Knight.

As with *Roger*, the real focus of *The Big One* becomes not the “causes” Moore takes up, but the very act of *advocating* itself. Thus, the confrontations Moore stages with

various big shots are stitched together with depictions of Moore performing his role as public advocate. For instance, Moore's journey begins not by listening to downsized workers, but with images of Moore *spreading the message about* downsizing, presumably to those in a position to do something about it. We watch as Moore gives a phone interview to a reporter ("How many millions has Congress spent trying to find out why just seven people lost their jobs in the White House Travel Office – and not a dime has been spent investigating what happens to millions of Americans and their jobs!"), and then appears as a guest on a talk radio program ("Most of the welfare that we give corporations comes in the form of a million dollars to McDonald's to help them promote Chicken McNuggets in Singapore. That's our tax dollars!"). Scenes like this abound in *The Big One* as Moore addresses fans at book signings, sits for interviews with radio hosts, and lectures college students; transforming his marketing tour into an advocate's adventure.<sup>56</sup> Despite the few instances in which Moore talks to "the people," for the most part *The Big One* is structured around conversations between Moore and other members of the middle and upper classes. Moore spends most of his time engaged with other would-be advocates, trying to persuade them to "do the right thing."

Indeed, Moore, himself, actually cops to this classed strategy in an interview with *Filmmaker* magazine. Asked what kind of audience he has in mind when thinking about showing his films, Moore replies that there are really "two audiences" for his films:

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<sup>56</sup> Indeed, much of the humor in the film derives from the exasperation felt by his gaggle of handlers, who struggle to keep Moore focused on the task at hand: the promotion of his book. Thus, one of his press agents vents: "His is the most fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants book tour I've ever seen – and I've been doing this for seven years – where things are just sort of scratched and things are added and people want him constantly, to talk to him, to chat with him, and he obliges which is very nice, but it throws the schedule a curve." In this way, the humorous subplot involving the "curves" Moore's mission of advocacy throws his publishing company as it tries to promote his bestselling book, serves as yet one more means through which Moore constructs himself in the image of selfless, working-class advocate. Like the anecdote about his demand to place working-class issues above Herbal Tea at *Mother Jones*, Moore is at pains to juxtapose his sense of social responsibility to Random House's single-minded pursuit of profits.

One is the people where I come from. Basically I want to give people 90 minutes of cathartic experience where they can feel like there's a film that's on our side, a film that's an answer to the "economic miracle" we keep hearing about, and the film can act as a voice for them. And the humor in the film is part of that catharsis. And the second audience is that audience that comes from money or is relatively comfortable. For people who have money and a good heart, I want to encourage them to do the right thing and think about these issues so we don't leave behind a large segment of our population as we dance through this party Wall Street is having.

Berg

In this quote, we see what Croteau describes as all the hallmarks of the discourse of middle-class activism. First, there is a radical distinction constructed between the working class ("the people where I come from") and the professional middle class (the "people who have money and a good heart").<sup>57</sup> For all his talk of solidarity, Moore's bifurcation of his audience into two distinct realms is telling. Second is the way in which this distinction gets articulated in terms of power, authority, and the ability to act as agents in history. For the working class, Moore argues his film can only provide "catharsis" – a chance to blow off steam and relinquish some of that economic stress. For the working class, this is not a call to action, but a small measure of relief. However, for the "comfortable" classes, it is a call to action and even, in its own light-hearted and irreverent way, a good old-fashioned guilt-trip in the style of Grierson, himself. Finally, buried in this class-distinction is the assumption, as Croteau points out, that the working class actually *wants* this; that deep down, they believe in the political system and,

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<sup>57</sup> And here it seems important to point out Moore's choice of pronouns; "we" when discussing the folks who should not "leave a whole segment of our population behind, and "them" when referencing the people for whom his movies speak.

specifically, in the duty of (and, hence, authority of) the professional middle class to structure their world for them, and to do what is right.

In this way, Moore's "fantasy of advocacy" get mapped onto a broader discourse of class, in which the middle-class reserves the right and authority to decide how best to deal with the working class. In Moore's films, class is, as Barbara Ehrenreich describes it, a "one-way dialogue" in which "diagnoses, instructions, judgments, definitions" flow down from the professional middle class, who argue amongst themselves about how best to structure the world (*Fear* 139).

### **Addressing Race**

At this point, it is important to point out that, so central is this discourse of middle-class authority to Moore's work, that it structures every aspect of it, no matter what "issue" he takes up. As such, on the rare occasions that Moore shines his lens on political issues *other* than class, his "classed" mode of address remains intact, creating and reproducing further distinctions, and inhibiting his own desire to encourage a broad sense of solidarity in relation to progressive politics. For instance, race has been a subject that Moore has tackled with some frequency (if usually tangentially) in his work. However, as with class, his treatment of race remains hindered by his deployment of narrative strategies that construct anti-racism as a "fantasy of advocacy." As such, at moments when Moore's films do touch on the issue of race, his imagined audience of middle-class advocates takes on a specific racial hue; namely, white. The fact is, African Americans remain the most underdeveloped subjects in Moore's work; often present as narrative devices, but forever absent in their utter objectification. For Moore, African Americans represent the "ultimate" social victim.

To be sure, Moore's depiction of race is transgressive on many levels. His focus on *racism*, itself, not only as something white people "do" to black people, but as a logic that is deeply imbedded in our culture, is an argument not often given air-time in the contemporary media landscape. However, even when media texts, such as political documentaries, take a "progressive" stance on issues of race, underlying aspects of a racist ideology may still be present. As Stuart Hall has argued, in contemporary popular culture, there are usually two ways of depicting racism; what he calls "overt" and "inferential." Overt racism are instances when "favorable coverage is given to arguments, positions, and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view" ("The Whites" 91). While still all-to-present in contemporary society, overt racism is not widespread in the mainstream media. Much more prevalent is "inferential" racism, by which Hall means "those naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race ... which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions*" (91). Thus, even when whites have sought to promote decidedly anti-racist views, they have often done so in a manner that upholds white-privilege, nonetheless.

For instance, John Fiske argues that liberal constructions of anti-racist arguments have often excluded racial "others" from the equation, denouncing racist attitudes, but simultaneously celebrating whites' ability to do something about it:

Hall's "inferential racism" is often exerted by liberals who genuinely want to mitigate the problem and who feel a sincere guilt both at the unearthed benefits that a racist society has granted them and denied others and at their own responsibility, not as individuals but as whites, for the historical development of racism. The white liberal assumption that as "we" are the cause of the problem "we" must provide the solution, can result in a form

of inferential racism driven by “white guilt” that can, at its worst, exclude victims of oppression from the processes of analyzing it and of devising ways to combat it.

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Here we can see the structural similarities between this “progressive” stance on race and Moore’s “progressive” stance on class. By excluding African-American voices from the equation, white anti-racism can actually work to reinforce white power and privilege, by implicitly infantilizing the victims on whose behalf it speaks. As Fiske puts it: “[i]n its more benign forms infantilizing the other can produce a liberal, paternalist form of racism” (46).

This patronizing depiction of racial “others” is not only insulting but disempowering, working as it does to create the impression (or naturalize the implication) that white people and white culture is in some way superior. Indeed, as many scholars have argued, a paternalistic version of anti-racism has, more often than not, acted as a hegemonic strategy to defend white privilege against challenges to its authority from racial minorities. Kelly J. Madison makes this point in her analysis of what she calls the “‘Anti-Racist White Hero’ Film.” In films such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *A Time to Kill* (1996), and *Amistad* (1998), Madison argues, white protagonists are positioned as heroic leaders who will stop at nothing to achieve racial justice, while African American characters are relegated to the role of victim or “background help” to the “solo efforts” of the always more “efficacious ‘white’ protagonists” (409-10). The result of this narrative framing is the reclamation of white power through the strategic deployment of racism as a prop against which to depict “a more flattering mirror for whiteness than the one originally created by the [civil rights] movements” (413).



Paul Smith adds a gendered layer to this hegemonic strategy, arguing that this kind of “liberal,” beneficent perspective has long worked to safeguard the power and privilege of white men in the face of advances made via contemporary social movements, including those by women and gays and lesbians, as well as racial and ethnic minorities:

The paternal and patronizing function of these white male protagonists is part of a general defense necessitated by seeing rights attaching to minorities in a world that the white man nonetheless keeps on ruling. ... a way of asserting that ... the white male will continue to rule, will settle all claims, and be the dispenser of rights ....

Smith 36-37

These patriarchal characters retain their place within an overall hegemonic structure by virtue of their heroic status. They are not only posited as characters who *help* minority populations, but as characters who are *needed* by them. They are, as Smith calls them, “enlightened community makers” (36): “the oppressed do not even begin to emerge into the narrative as agents; rather, they remain only marginals or menials in the diegesis, people to whom largesse and tolerant benevolence of the whites should be directed” (Smith 41).<sup>58</sup>

While Moore’s work is certainly more progressive than the anti-racist white hero films of which Madison and Smith write, his own anti-racist arguments are, nonetheless, hampered by his reliance upon a similar narrative structure. In much of Moore’s work, African Americans are not only relegated to the role of the victim – they are the symbol of social oppression *par excellence*. Take, for instance, the politically inert evictees of

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<sup>58</sup> Lipsitz has made a similar argument: “Our history and our fiction contain all too many accounts of whites acting with unctuous paternalism to protect ‘helpless’ people of color .... Members of aggrieved racialized groups appear most often as threatening strangers or servile sidekicks in the stories we tell about our past and present, and only rarely as self-active agents operating in their own behalf” (xiv).

*Roger & Me*. Whereas the white working class is often derided for directing their political agency in the wrong direction (a point I will discuss further on), the African Americans Moore films aren't even allowed the "privilege" of false consciousness. They barely register on-screen as characters, deployed instead as objectified symbols of Roger Smith's social malfeasance.

It is telling, for instance, that the only evictee in *Roger* who articulates an analysis of his own situation is the white, laid off autoworker, James Bond, who argues with Deputy Fred during the eviction. Indeed, even a group of white children playing outside Bond's home are allowed a brief assessment of the town's economic situation: "This is a rough time! A really rough time. I got thrown out of my house once!" But when Moore films African American evictees, the film takes on a decidedly voyeuristic feel, as we watch the evictees go through the humiliating process of eviction. Thus, while Moore engages Bond in conversation, asking him what he thinks of GM, etc., Moore does not address his African American counterparts at all. Instead, his camera pans back and forth as an angry mother stomps about her house in a fury, trying to get all of her worldly possessions out to the street corner, and lingers at times on a close-up of her young children, who stand by helpless and confused. The only words we hear her speak are the exclamations of anger she levies at her evictors, while Moore captures it all in verite-style: "Where are the motherfucking keys! That motherfucker got his money! I paid this man his rent! Give me my shit!" While Bond is allowed the privilege of self-analysis (slight though it is), African American evictees are simply spectacles of their own oppression; understood only "in terms of their immediate and relatively superficial responses to their victimization" (Madison 407).

Similar depictions of African American victims have been prevalent in Moore's work throughout his career, such as the helpless (and silent) African American poor who Moore uses (literally) as human props when he stages an elaborate M.A.S.H.-style medical tent outside a Maine hospital in an episode of *The Awful Truth*.<sup>59</sup> However, nowhere is this strategy more powerfully on display than in *Bowling For Columbine*. As argued above, it is in this film that Moore articulates his most pointed, structural critique of institutionalized racism. However, paradoxically, for a film so focused on the issue of race, *not one African American subject* is allowed to speak specifically to this issue. Instead, we get a plethora of *white* advocates (all middle-to-upper-class and male) – both “true” (Barry Glassner, Arthur Bush, Sheriff Robert Pickell) and “false” (Dick Herlan, Dick Clark, Charlton Heston) – who Moore engages on the matter of how to treat the African American community. The scene in which Moore and Barry Glassner go for a casual stroll through South Central L.A. serves as a perfect example. Here, Moore and Glassner perform an act of “white-heroism” simply by *walking the streets of South Central*. At no point in this sequence does Moore include the voices of African American residents, activists – or even community leaders or elected officials – who could, we might imagine, provide crucial insights and interpretations to Moore's argument. And at no point does he invoke the historical intertwining of racism and economic policy that produces places like South Central in the first place.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, this sequence is in many ways a pale substitute for Glassner's own argument, upon which Moore's analysis is largely based. In his book, *The Culture of*

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<sup>59</sup> In this stunt, Moore and his “medical staff” offer free treatment to uninsured victims as a way to expose and critique a new policy requiring uninsured patients to pay for their care by working for free at the hospital.

<sup>60</sup> See: Lipsitz (1-23).

*Fear*, Glassner makes the case that the media reinforces an unfounded fear of black males by over-playing stories about crimes committed by black men. However, crucial to Glassner's argument is not only what the media plays up, but also what it *plays down*: the fact that many more black men are the *casualties* of crime and drug-related violence than are its perpetrators; that a black man is 18% more likely to be murdered than is a white woman; that for a black male between the ages of 15 and 30, violence is the leading cause of death. These are all facts that go under-reported, or are just plain ignored, by the news media, who instead focus fanatically on black male perps and innocent, white victims. In the end, Glassner argues that the problem isn't just all the *attention* given to black male perps, but the subsequent *inattention* given to the African American community as a whole.<sup>61</sup>

But in Moore's account of Glassner's argument, the African American community drops out of the picture entirely, as Moore focuses solely on white, racist fear (portrayed mainly via the juxtaposition of his own, unfearful, white-heroism). In fact, his casual stroll through South Central can give the misleading impression that the African American community is not beset by violence at all, glossing over Glassner's argument that the world is *much more dangerous for black people than it is for white people*.<sup>62</sup> In fact, as Christopher Sharrett and William Luhr have pointed out, by using the Columbine massacre as the sole, dramatic lynch-pin of his film, Moore reproduces "a glaring omission long noted by scholars critical of media representations of Columbine:

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<sup>61</sup> An inattention that is not only practiced by the media, but by the social system itself, such as in the rampant "police inattention" to black male murder victims which are considered so "routine" that they hardly warrant special focus (Glassner 112).

<sup>62</sup> For instance, Glassner describes how the media created the impression that there was a virtual "wave" of tourist murders in Florida in the early 1990s. This was an impression that was completely contradicted by the statistical facts of the matter. However, for Glassner the point is not only that the media exaggerated the importance of ten tourist murders, but that they neglected the very real news that "the typical victim of crime in Florida ... was a young, local, and black or Hispanic" (110).

schoolyard shootings have been common place in inner city minority communities for decades” (258). In the end, Moore’s argument about institutionalized racism disappears beneath a veneer of heroic white-advocacy. One would imagine that had Moore included members of the African American community as subjects – indeed as “experts” – his analysis would have been considerably more complex. But in *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore’s narrative structure reproduces the form and tone of the anti-racist white-hero film, by describing the “race problem” as one for whites, alone, to solve.

In fact, it might be argued that more often than not Moore is in the business of constructing what Annalee Newitz calls “fantasies of [white] racial self-punishment and humiliation” (140). Newitz argues that many contemporary films feature the brutal and violent punishment of ugly, white racists by other, guilt-ridden whites. These texts, she argues, constitute “self-shaming rituals” in which “whites use images and acts of victimization to reimagine themselves as civilized and just” (139). Such films create spectacles geared not towards an empathetic understanding of racism and their (white’s) position in it, but spectacles geared towards the purging of white-guilt, and solidifying white folks’ hold on their authoritative position of power.

Moore’s ambush interviews of people like Dick Herlan, the producer of *Cops*, Dick Clarke, whose restaurants take advantage of the cheap labor provided by the disastrous welfare-to-work program, and most famously, Charlton Heston, act as just this type of “shaming spectacle.” In this sequence, for instance, Moore provokes Heston into revealing an underlying racism (when he tells Moore that America’s violent culture might have something to do with its “mixed ethnicity”), but the connection between Heston’s remarks and Moore’s “culture of fear” argument aren’t entirely clear. As Sharrett and

Luhr argue, this constitutes “a curious ending” for the film because it “enables it to sidestep its central issues” (258). In one fell swoop, Moore erases many of the complex, structural arguments he has made by seeming to boil them down to the heartless view of one, white racist. It’s a curious ending indeed, but one that fits nicely with Moore’s fantasy of advocacy – here re-imagined in terms of Newtitz’s fantasy of racial self-punishment:

One might understand these narratives as fantasies about whites resolving their racial problems without ever having to deal with people of color ... a way of heading inter-racial revenge off at the pass. Although white guilt is usually accrued as a result of whites mistreating non-whites, these films demonstrate the extent to which whites want to imagine their repentance for this mistreatment solely as an intra-racial affair.

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In *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore offers up one more fantasy-narrative in which white viewers can take pleasure in the self-gratifying spectacle of one of their own heroically standing up against racism and speaking out on behalf of a victimized African American community.

Thus, in the end, Moore’s representation of racism is beset by the same problems as his representation of class. He turns racism, itself, into a problem to be solved by virtuous, liberal whites with the courage to stand up to their own and do what’s right. In the process, Moore inadvertently reinforces the very hierarchical relationship between white/black that he obviously means to denounce. While Moore may display a different attitude towards his African American victims than the racists he exposes, he still retains the power and privilege, as a middle-class white guy, to define and change the world.

Indeed, one of the most powerful markers of Moore's display of white-privilege is his seeming ability to unproblematically come and go as he pleases within black, urban communities. While Moore is constantly refused entry to the halls of corporate America, he casually strolls into and out of the homes of evictees, up and down the boulevards of South Central, and onto and off the welfare-to-work bus in Flint. As John Fiske argues, such an assumption only works to reinforce relationships of power where alliances are the intended goal:

Liberal deployments of whiteness often treat its boundaries as permeable, so that liberal whites may cross them at will and enter the space of the other, where they will often expect their crossing and weakening of the boundary to earn them a welcome. Movement that crosses boundaries and enables one to enter the space of others and to form alliances with them is clearly crucial, but the politics of such movement depends upon its motivation and the control of its direction: if the movement *into* is the result of an invitation and not an intrusion, however friendly, and if a reciprocal movement is equally invited, then interracial alliances may be formed. Alliances will not be formed, however, if the entry is that of the missionary, whose sincerity and desire to help the other may not be in question, but who assumes the right of uninvited entry, and who reserves to him- or herself the right to define what constitutes 'help' and who is the proper provider of it.

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The casualness of Moore's entry into these places only works to strengthen his aura of white-privilege. Moore's ability and, indeed, purported "*right*" to enter into these communities is never in question; why wouldn't "these people" welcome the presence of such a benevolent figure?

In many ways, all of Moore's films assume the "right of uninvited entry."

Whether it be the homes of poor evictees, the downsized factories of middle America, the suburban streets of Littleton, CO, or the embattled platoons of American soldiers in Iraq,

Moore's films always gaze upon their subjects from a position of power and privilege. As such, more than anything else, his films flatter the authority and privilege of those with the ability, and indeed the "right," to change the world: the white, middle-class.

### **The Bad: Working-Class Dupes and Working-Class(ed) Desire**

"Miss Michigan, could we talk to you for one second?"

The voice, of course, is Moore's, and the image we see on screen is that of a jubilant Kaye Lani Rae Rafko, Miss Michigan, climbing down from a parade float. The scene is Flint's annual parade, and the film is *Roger & Me*. The following conversation was to become one of the most famous – many would say *infamous* – "gotcha" moments in Moore's entire career.

"How does it feel," Moore asks her, dead-panning, "driving through Flint, Michigan today, and so many people being laid off, so many plants being shut down?" The scene quickly turns almost excruciatingly uncomfortable as Rafko, who has presumably spent the last few hours basking in the glow of congratulations and well-wishes on her upcoming trip to the Miss America Pageant, attempts to process this drastic change in context:

"How does it feel? ... I feel like a big supporter."

"Of?" Moore asks, not willing to let her off the hook.

"Does it matter what?" she answers, clearly becoming nervous, but also more than a little confused at the line of questioning. "A supporter of General Motors?" Moore asks slyly, setting her up for an obvious fall. "Of, of just being here for the people," she answers, now visibly flustered – "Is it the parade? I don't ..." Sensing her confusion, Moore now gets more specific: "When you go past so many stores that are boarded up



and people that are laid off, how does that make you feel, just on a personal level?”

There’s a pause here, as Rafko now begins to think through her answers. “A little sad, of course – I’m for, umm, employment and working in Michigan, and ... hopefully, its just temporary. So I just keep my fingers crossed that they’ll be back and working soon.”

Here she pauses and smiles awkwardly: “I’m trying to stay neutral here. I’m going to Miss America in two weeks and I don’t wanna ...” Having made his point, Moore quickly changes the subject, finally letting her off the hook: “It’s a great day for a parade, isn’t it?”

“Oh, it’s beautiful” she answers quickly, taking advantage of the opportunity to move on. “It turned out wonderful. I can’t believe the crowd.”

### **Working-Class Dupes**

In this scene we get a somewhat different depiction of class than the one described in the previous section. In this scene Rafko exemplifies at best a kind of duped naiveté as to the current economic situation, and at worst a kind of willful ignorance, choosing to focus on parades and pageants rather than economics and unemployment. This scene is paradigmatic of what some have called Moore’s darker side. The picture we get of the working class here is not that of sympathetic, powerless victims, but rather that of ignorant, complicit dupes. In this sequence, the working class are not only trapped by the problem of material constraint – they, themselves, are the problem. In the parade sequence, Moore’s sympathy for the working class reveals a double-edge of disgust. As we watch Miss Michigan’s face contort in panic and confusion, trying to wrap her head around just *what* this man with the camera is getting at, the feeling Moore invokes is not one of sympathy and moral outrage, but of *shame*.

Of course, here we might protest that Rafko does not represent the working class, but the indifference of the middle class: she's just another failed advocate. However, I would argue that this is not exactly the case. For one thing, Rafko's actual class position is relatively unmarked. We don't know whether she is the daughter of an affluent doctor or a laid-off autoworker. However, for Moore's purposes, this is entirely beside the point. Like many of the characters we meet in Moore's films, Rafko's role is symbolic, not indexical. She represents the ignorant, duped complicity of a quiescent working class. For, the overall emphasis of this sequence is not really on Rafko, at all, but on the Flint community itself and its willingness to go along with these shameful proceedings.

Thus, tellingly, Moore begins this segment by "laying blame" not on an individual villain, but on the entire community. This marks the first time in the film Moore rhetorically endows "Flint" and its citizens with any kind of agency:

With 30,000 jobs now eliminated, the city decided to turn to that one event that had always made us so happy: the big parade, this time honoring the surviving Flint Sit-Down Strikers. The highlight of the parade was Miss Michigan, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko. Passing by the dozens of boarded-up stores and hundreds of jobless Flint citizens she was an inspiring sight to all present.

There is, of course, more than a small helping of irony attached to Moore's words here; Rafko represents anything but an "inspiring presence," and the misguided notion that the "big parade" could do anything to *truly* make Flintonians happy again is obviously being held up to ridicule. However, Moore's ridicule is not focused solely on Rafko, but on the entire community. When he says that she was an "inspiring sight to all present," his camera tells us that he's not kidding – the shot is trained not on Rafko but on the

nameless Flint residents – clearly coded here as pathetic – sitting on the sidewalk and waving happily as Moore’s camera sweeps by. These people cannot possibly be waving happily at Rafko, specifically, as Moore’s camera crew is not positioned on her float. But the way in which he structures the scene – a shot of Rafko’s float moving down the street followed by a shot of Flint residents waving at a moving camera – creates the impression that this is shot from Rafko’s POV. As such, Rafko and the Flint community are melded together, all complicit in a corporate group-think gone awry.

Thus, when we then cut to Moore’s initial attempt to ambush her – “How do you feel about the economy here in Flint? The factories all shutting down?” – Moore differentiates himself not only from the false advocates he valiantly pillories, but from the masses those advocates have so easily duped. His is a lone voice of reason awash in a swamp of false consciousness. “This isn’t my interview yet!” Rafko yells back. “This is my time for enjoyment!” And, indeed, Moore lets us know that this is a sentiment the town has bought, hook, line and sinker. The very next image is a medium-shot depicting a banner reading: “We love a parade and we love our Governor!” Rafko, Moore seems to be saying, isn’t the only one willing to ignore those boarded up storefronts and put on a happy face.

The next shot depicts the governor, himself, as Moore tells us: “All kinds of important people showed up to march in the parade, like the governor of Michigan, James Blanchard.” When Moore asks him if he thinks they need another sit-down strike, Blanchard says weakly, “Well, I don’t know if that would do any good. That’s the problem.” In a way, Moore agrees. From here he cuts to a shot of Ronald McDonald in a parade float (a visual joke in and of itself, implying that Blanchard is “a clown”) saying

through a loud speaker: “Is this a great time for a parade?” As the crowd answers in the affirmative, Moore cuts to a close-up of an older man passively asleep on a beat up lawn chair positioned along the parade route; then zooms out to reveal the boarded-up shoe store behind him. It’s a devastating series of shots that reveals Blanchard’s point to be painfully “true” in a certain sense; while a sit-down strike is actually *just* what the town needs, Moore implies, the town itself is in no way capable of coming to such a conclusion. The Flint population is so sedated by the logic of corporate capitalism that they show up, en masse, for a parade in their rotting downtown to “commemorate” those very strikers whose ethos of valiant, working-class activism they have so thoroughly forsaken. Indeed, the unlikelihood of another sit-down strike, Moore seems to be saying, is *precisely* the problem.

For many scholars and, indeed, many reviewers in the popular press, the most jarring aspect of the parade sequence in *Roger & Me* is the blatant unfairness of it all: its cheap-shot mentality. Moore knows he’s got people like Blanchard, Owen Bieber (then president of the UAW) and especially Kaye Lani Rae Rafko, over a barrel. It’s all a set-up, custom-made to show them in the worst light possible.<sup>63</sup> However, this criticism, while certainly valid, remains at the level of the individual subject. I am more interested in what Rafko is made to represent. As Corner points out, her role in the film is mostly metaphorical. For Corner, this fact absolves Moore of the moral “cost” his manipulative tactics may have taken on an individual level:

Undoubtedly, the sequence is highly effective in the ‘deconstruction’ of a learnt, promotionalist perspective, one radically inadequate to the general

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<sup>63</sup> Thus, for instance, Mathew Bernstein calls his interview with Rafko a form of “verbal cruelty” (408), while John Corner describes it as an example of “bad faith” (*The Art* 165).

circumstances surrounding this civic event and the speaker's role in it. The cost is, once again, a degree of 'bad faith' in portrayal. Miss Michigan to some extent mediates between the world of ordinary people and the world of corporate promotionalism. Unlike many of the people who appear in the film, she is not so much the calculating author of promotional speech as its awkward device. But within the terms of Roger's project – its troubling of the discourses of rationalization and self-justification both at the national and local level – her temporary on-screen discomfiture might be seen as justified.

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It is here that my analysis takes a different tack. In some senses, I am willing to forgive Moore his deployment of the ambush-tactic. Indeed, as Corner points out, this is, and has always been, a tried-and-true device of investigative verite filmmaking (165). And whether they were expecting it or not, anyone acting in an official capacity during a civic event is responsible to public questioning, whatever the context might be. Instead, what I am critiquing here is both the argument itself and the specific way in which it gets articulated within the mode of address being employed. What's so troubling about this scene is the way it reveals a certain kind of affective attitude towards the working class that is endemic to Moore's films; he may paint them sympathetically, but he doesn't take them *seriously*. And in many cases, he finds them flat-out embarrassing. For Moore, the outward display of civic pride in this sequence is nothing short of shameful.

It is this attitude of condescension – engendered by the very act of "classification," itself – that Beverley Skeggs refers to when she describes the tendency of working class people to resist their designation *as* working class:

Categories of class operate not only as an organizing principle which enable access to and limitations on social movement and interaction but are also reproduced at the intimate level as a 'structure of feeling' in

which doubt, anxiety and fear inform the production of subjectivity. To be working-classed ... generates a constant fear of never having 'got it right.'  
*Formations* 6

It is in sequences like the one described above that the discursive work of Moore's critique begins to show. Moore's valiant effort to emphasize working-class issues comes at a cost (much different than the one described by Corner): the *delegitimation* of working class experience, knowledge and understanding; in short, the delegitimation of what Skeggs calls working-class cultural capital.

Skeggs utilizes Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to describe the way in which class analysis, itself, works (paradoxically in the case of the Left) to dis-empower working class people. For Bourdieu, of course, cultural capital works through the process of legitimation. In order for "value" to be attached to specific things, or in this case cultural competencies, they must first be recognized and perceived as legitimate. As such: "Legitimation is the key mechanism in the conversion to power. ... capital has to be regarded as legitimate before it can be capitalized on" ("Classifying" 132). As previously argued, the problem for Skeggs and others is that in its drive to reveal the oppressive consequences of the capitalist system, the middle-class Left often ignores working-class experience (preferring to see it only as an "effect" of this logic) and, as such, engages in a brutal form of delegitimation. As Steph Lawler has put it:

The "working classes" have been the source of much disappointment and disgust for the middle class observers who have studied them, and, in large part, this is marked through the lack of legitimacy granted to working class cultural capital. ... They do not *know* the right things, they do not *value* the right things, they do not *want* the right things.

"Escape"117

Lawler's comments here work as a perfect description of the parade sequence in *Roger & Me*. What Moore implies in this scene, and many like it, is that while Roger Smith and irresponsible corporate leaders may be the villains, it is the apathy, complicity – in short, the stupidity – of their working class victims that remains the problem.

Moore's perspective is not unique. In fact, it has historically been one of the most persistent tropes in Left class analysis. In his insightful analysis of the way in which modern Sociology in the postwar era worked to construct a stereotypical notion of working class identity, Ian Roberts argues that this concept of the working class *as social problem* has dominated most theoretical accounts of working class life, especially those emanating from the Left:

It [read: the working class] has been seen variously as a social problem to be controlled, a social problem to be helped (these two views are by no means mutually exclusive), a threat to cultural standards or as the subject and object of history ... Whilst a number of positions have developed, when considered together one thing most of them have in common is the impression they give that the working class just can't win.

147-8

More often than not, Roberts argues, many social theorists have adopted a discourse of "pathology" when analyzing the working class. And it is precisely a discourse of pathology, I would argue, that Moore constructs in the parade sequence described above.

In fact, Moore's depiction of Flint mirrors, in many ways, postwar sociological accounts of the working class; in particular, what Roberts calls the "theory of emourgeoisement." (155). According to "emourgeoisement theorization," due to "secular changes, greater affluence, the changing nature of work, etc., the working class are becoming more akin to the middle class in behavior and outlook" (155). Of course, for

many Left analysts, who were sympathetic to working-class issues, this wholesale endorsement of middle-class lifestyles and desires was interpreted as a gullible and self-destructive repudiation of their own (the working class's) culture and values: "They ... saw working-class life as distinctive and valuable and this led them to fear the secular developments of affluence and privatization which they saw as tending to destroy those older qualities that they so valued" (155).<sup>64</sup>

Thus, in these studies the working class appear as shameful subjects, marked by greed, rabid-individualism, and a "flock-like" mentality – a mass that has been irreparably duped by capitalist logic. In such a view, any endorsement of capitalist enterprise, desire for material goods, or rejection of "proper" working class values (unionism, etc.) is interpreted as a sign of impoverishment: "What we are left with is a view of the world and working people which is clearly pathological: 'Prosperity, which was to have raised their eyes above the pitiful horizon of blinkered insufficiency, has plunged them rather into the consolations of forgetfulness'" (159).

It is here that Moore's "sympathetic portrait" of Flint's working class is revealed to be more of an accusation. His emphasis on the fact that the parade "honors" the Flint sit-down strikers is meant to be bitterly ironic. This is a town that has forgotten – and hence, forsaken – its own working-class past. Indeed, the rest of *Roger & Me* follows a

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<sup>64</sup> While Roberts is writing primarily about British Left sociology, it is important to point out that this tendency to reject/denounce a working class desire for middle-class status and material comforts has also been endemic to Left analysis of class in the American context. As mentioned in the last chapter, Ehrenreich has argued that a middle-class tendency to pathologize the working class has been present within American class discourses since, at least, the 1950s, when it dominated most sociological analysis. "In fact," she argues, "it would be easy for any middle class sociology student to conclude that the major problem with the lower class person was stupidity" (27). And as Croteau argues, this tendency also continues to pervade Left *activism* in the US, – a fact that often undermines their own political goals: "The rejection of the material component of middle-class life, coupled with the retention of the cultural elements ... puts activists at double odds with workers. First, activists often do not recognize the cultural/knowledge gap of which workers are painfully aware, and second, activists sometimes reject the material comforts for which most workers are adamantly striving" (206).



similar pattern. While, structurally speaking, the film revolves around a succession of false advocates, all of whom Moore skewers in turn, their arrivals are always sutured through the shameful quiescence of a duped working class that is all-too willing to accept the hokum they are selling. As such, the emphasis in every one of these scenes is not on the machinations of irresponsible leaders, but on the “gullibility” of the people, themselves.

Thus, early on in the film Moore describes a visit by Ronald Reagan, who attempts to assuage the worries of laid-off autoworkers by suggesting they just pick up their lives and move to where the jobs are. In this sequence, we learn very little about Reagan’s economic policies or the way in which they affected Flint, specifically. Instead, what we get is a typical interview-montage of local residents, clearly coded as working class, portraying their gratitude that he “wanted our opinions and our views, “ and that he “spoke on their level.”<sup>65</sup> This sequence then cuts to black & white images of Reagan talking to workers, while on the sound track we hear a 1950s recording: “Luck, lucky, lucky me, I’m a lucky son of a gun!” This music clearly lends an attitude of sarcasm to the sequence, which illustrates the ease with which the working class bought into Reagan’s exhortations; a loyalty, Moore points out, that came cheap: “Just when things were beginning to look bleak, Ronald Reagan arrived in Flint and took a dozen unemployed workers out for a pizza.” Moore pairs his own sardonic interpretation of this false advocate’s machinations with images of happy workers, waving as they enter the

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<sup>65</sup> One woman offers a dissenting opinion, arguing that she has “a son and a home, I’m trying to do it by myself and I can’t just pull up stakes and take off by myself.” However, she is never seen again and, in terms of this sequence, serves a descriptive function, providing us with a summary of Reagan’s argument and its futility.

bus to go get that pizza, and listening intently while Reagan delivers his “message.” As viewers, we are left shocked and mystified that these people could be so short-sighted.

This tendency to describe false advocates through sarcastic depictions of their duped “followers” is a running motif in *Roger*. In another sequence, Moore tells us that the mayor of Flint paid TV Evangelist Rev. Robert Schuller \$20,000 “to come to Flint and rid the city of its unemployment plague.” But, what is really shocking, Moore implies, is that, “Thousands filled the hockey arena to hear his message of hope.” Moore doesn’t spend any time talking to those folks filling the hockey arena, nor to Schuller himself. Instead, he splices together a few choice words from the sermon – “You’re not going to be able to pull yourself from poverty to prosperity until you realize you have to be humble enough to say, ‘I need help’” – with images of hopeless Flint residents looking up at him reverently, queuing up to speak to him at a reception, and perusing programs that read: “Flint’s attitude towards unemployment is: Yes we can!” Later on in the film, when Moore details the town’s misguided attempt to re-imagine Flint as a tourist destination, it is the popular *reception* of this idea that catches Moore’s condescending ire. “Although most people in Flint were now too poor to afford a room at the [newly built] Hyatt,” he tells us, “the hotel allowed the public on opening day to come and ride the city’s only escalator;” a remark dutifully accompanied by shots of “duped” residents happily doing just that.

Moore’s deployment of this “ain’t it a shame” discourse did not end with *Roger & Me*. He has continued to rely on it throughout his career. For instance, his two television series, *TV Nation* (1994-1995) and *The Awful Truth* (1998; 2000) are littered with segments “investigating” the stupidity of average Americans who, more often than not,

are part of the working-class population these series are purportedly meant to defend. The pilot episode of *TV Nation* is a case in point. In it, one of Moore's "reporters," comedian Mara Marko, travels to Appleton, Minnesota to do a mock-news report on their new prison facility. The segment mimics *Roger & Me* in many ways. The prison, we are told, has been commissioned and built by the town in an attempt to counteract a failing economy. The only problem is that Appleton, a small, sleepy, Midwest town, can't manage to drum up a single inmate. As with his critique of Flint's failed attempt to attract tourism, the Appleton sketch is meant to expose the way in which irresponsible leadership, coupled with a malfunctioning economic system, has left working people in dire straits. However, as with *Roger*, Moore focuses less on the powers-that-be, and more on the townspeople themselves, whose gullibility is meant to shock (and entertain) an audience that is "in the know."

The sketch opens with Marko framing the prison fiasco as a decision made and accepted by the community:

Welcome to Appleton, MI. Like so many farm towns in America these days, it's struggling through hard times. But unlike many places, the citizens here figured out a plan for their salvation: the Prairie Correctional Facility, an ultra-modern, state-of-the-art prison, funded by private investors, and the city of Appleton to help revive the local economy.

From here, we cut to an interview montage in which city officials attempt to deflect or negotiate the "hard questions" put to them by Marko, all to humorous effects. However, the majority of the segment focuses on the people of Appleton themselves, both the residents who support the prison and the working-class folks who have been hired to work there. The piece is edited to highlight the absurdity of the entire situation. Thus, we

see Chief Security Officer David Harris showing Marko all the “personal amenities” the prison has to offer, including washers and dryers, a state-of-the-art kitchen, and cable television with HBO. His description makes it sound as though he’s describing a new hotel, not a prison, an absurdity emphasized by Marko when she cuts to a shot of her lying on a cell-bed and saying: “Comfy.” This sequence is followed by one in which an employee talks about the art programs the prison plans to run, while another talks about the salad dressings that will be on offer in the cafeteria. The segment winds up with Harris remarking: “Everything you’d have at home, except freedom.” As such, the segment is edited in such a way as to highlight the employee’s *enthusiasm* about the venture; an enthusiasm that can only seem misguided given the overall framing of the piece. The residents of Appleton don’t come off much better. For instance, in one sequence Marko interviews a local farmer and his wife. The woman tells Marko: “It’s given us some joy. Isn’t that crazy? But it has!” Both husband and wife tell Marko how they believe the prison will even bring more people to the local fair, who might come to catch a glimpse of some “actual prisoners.” Meanwhile, Marko works to highlight the absurdity of it all, deadpanning comments such as “Doesn’t that kind of put a damper on the fair” and “It won’t kind of depress you to be looking at quilting and then look over there at the prison?”

It is in sequences like this that the classifying discourse of middle-class analysis really becomes visible. For the humor in this sequence, and so many like it, stems from the juxtaposition of what is assumed to be “proper” behavior and the actual behavior documented on the screen. Of course, the behavior of Appleton residents is funny only because Moore has neglected to provide us with any context other than his own thesis in

regards to defective economic leadership. Almost nothing in the piece details the way in which Appleton actually came to this decision or what their economic situation really looked like. Shorn of a more complex contextualization, the image of prison workers happy and excited to be working in a place that is not only grim by definition, but economically useless as well, can only work to depict these workers as dupes of the worst kind. As such, pieces like this are less instances of political analysis than they are acts of classifying judgment. The working class is held up to scrutiny and found pathetically wanting.

This tendency to map a patronizing form of judgment onto analysis is what Roberts means when he argues that Left class analysis has often worked as a kind of pathologizing discourse:

[the working classes] are seen as becoming enmeshed in a faceless culture or impoverished in the presence of unexampled wealth. ... One is tempted to throw one's hands in the air and exclaim, "Are they stupid?"

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Indeed, for Valerie Walkerdine, in many cases this working class "pathology" becomes not only the description of a social "problem," but a source of morbid fascination for middle-class observers:

Researchers, often on the Left, frequently ask too *why*, why, how can they endure it, as they conduct one more study of the line, or penetrate the factory gates once more to rush out, reeling, to wonder how people can put up with it and why they don't rebel. How *can* they? How can they be like that? Fascinated horror.

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It is this sense of fascinated horror that, more than anything else, marks Moore's depiction of the working class. Indeed, the real question that drives the entire Appleton segment is not, what's wrong with the economy, the government, the system, but: what's wrong with *these people*?

This sentiment is emphasized in devastating fashion in Moore's second series, *The Awful Truth*, during a segment entitled "Strikebreakers." In this fictional segment, the decline of working-class consciousness is laid at the feet of the working class, themselves, albeit in humorous fashion. The piece is shot in black & white, beginning with a title card – "Strikebreakers" – written in old fashioned film script, manufactured to look like a depression-era film. It depicts the head of a group of strikebreakers addressing his men, who stand in a semi-circle around him bearing torches, baseball bats, etc., and are clearly coded as stereotypically working class (workmans' shirts, ethnic accents, etc.).

"Fellow strikebreakers," the leader says, "you done good work tonight. We busted the heads of those filthy unionizers, we broke apart their picket line, and we showed 'em that management always wins!" The men respond in kind, chanting: "Crush the union! Crush the union!" However, when the leader goes on to detail their next union-busting action, the strikebreakers become more skeptical. "How much are we gonna get paid?" asks one. Unhappy with the answer, the strikebreakers become indignant. "That's not fair," says one, while the rest chant, "We want more!" Their leader admits they have a point: "Well, you guys are the best strikebusters in the county. ... Maybe you *should* get more!"

"But what if da management don't want to give us more?" comes the inevitable reply, and the direction this piece is going starts to become clear. "Then we refuse to

work!” the leader offers stubbornly, eliciting twitters of laughter from Moore’s studio audience. “We ain’t going to bust no more strikes until they agree to our demands!” The workers erupt into chants of enthusiastic agreement: “Yeah! We want more! We want more!” All seems to be going swimmingly until one of the men, “caught up” in the emotion of the event, switches to the chant of: “Union or die!” The chants stop dead in their tracks and the leader points the culprit out, yelling: “Hey! He’s a union guy! Get ‘em!” The men proceed to beat him into submission. As the violence subsides, the leader drives the joke home by saying: “OK, now, getting back to this idea about not working until we get higher wages, we either stick together, or we perish apart ...”

In many ways, the strikebreakers sequence sums up the discourse that implicitly structures so much of Moore’s work. While corporate America may be run by all sorts of villains, it is the working class, themselves, that constitute their own most troubling “problem.” So hoodwinked, so duped, and so beholden to the logic of corporate capitalism have they become that they are, in many ways, both cause and effect of their own degradation. This is a working class that, as the strikebreakers film humorously portrays, literally beats itself down.

In fact, so important is this trope of working-class ignorance to Moore’s rhetorical strategies that he uses it to buttress just about every political argument he makes. For instance, in *Bowling For Columbine*, Moore attempts to make a broad argument about America’s “culture of fear.” But it is a bevy of working class dupes (usually from Moore’s home state of Michigan, which always acts as a symbol for “working-class culture” in his work) who bear the burden of representing the problem; be it the members of the Michigan Militia who can’t see they are just one step away from becoming

Timothy McVeigh,<sup>66</sup> the police officer who tells Moore that dogs cannot be charged with a crime in the state of Michigan,<sup>67</sup> the Oscoda, MI kid who tells Moore that he was disappointed to learn he didn't make it to the top of his high school bomb-threat list, or the Michigan barber who happily hands Moore a box of bullets while giving him a haircut. In this last sequence, Moore emphasizes the connection between a particular kind of ignorance and a specific working-class milieu when he sarcastically laments in voice-over: "Yep, this was the kind of place I was from!" In many ways, this is a line that underwrites every sequence Moore has ever constructed depicting Flint.

Similarly, in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore argues that the American populace has been duped by the Bush administration into supporting a misguided war. But, once again, it is the working class who stand as exemplars of this ignorance; be it the small-town hicks of Rappahannock, VA, the naive American soldiers who thought that war would be a "blast," or Lila Lipscomb, who learns that her faith in the American military may have been a bit naive.<sup>68</sup> In just about every film or television program he has made, Moore locates the problem he diagnoses squarely within a working class that just doesn't seem to know why they are being "screwed," where to direct their anger, or simply how to behave.

### **Working-Class Desires**

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<sup>66</sup> Moore is careful to establish the working class status of these subjects from the outset of the scene by asking them what they all do for a living. The first three are: a draftsman, a truck-driver, and "unemployed." Moore betrays his assumption that these guys are "working class" when the fourth man tells Moore he's a real estate negotiator. "Real Estate negotiator?!?" Moore exclaims, laughing with surprise. "White collar all the way!" answers the man. In fact, this is not the first time Moore has used the Michigan Militia to represent working-class dupes. They first appear in a *TV Nation* episode, in which Moore describes them as laid-off autoworkers with a dangerously misplaced sense of outrage.

<sup>67</sup> In this scene, Moore "interviews" the officer about a hunting accident in which a dog, who had a rifle strapped to its back for a humorous picture, shot its owner when the gun accidentally went off.

<sup>68</sup> I will discuss all of these scenes in detail in Chapter Six.



In the last section, I noted the ambiguous class-positioning of Miss Michigan, Kaye Lani Rae Rafko. It is unclear whether we are meant to include her with the mavens of society Moore finds lounging about the golf course, or with the denizens of Flint's downtrodden working class. However, in terms of Moore's overall argument, it is this very ambiguity that makes Rafko so important. The Miss America pageant holds an almost mythical place in American popular culture; with its celebration of glamourized consumerism and its quintessential narratives of small-town girls "making it big," Miss America is a very particularized version of the American Dream. As such, Rafko represents not a specified class *position*, but a particular kind of class *desire*. Namely; the desire to escape working class life and "move up."

This is an important point that reveals another facet to the way in which Moore's class analysis delegitimizes working-class subjects. In this scene and others like it, Moore is not only ridiculing the working class for being duped; he is ridiculing the very desires that allowed this to happen in the first place. For Moore, the desire to become middle (or possibly upper) class, itself, is a sign of failed working-class subjectivity. Once again, this tendency is not specific to Moore, but is endemic to the type of middle-class discourse I have been discussing. As Roberts argues, where the embourgeoisement theorists were concerned, by striving for middle class status and consumerist lifestyles, the working class were not changing their class position so much as shifting their social commitments and cultural values. In this view, the working class are no longer "noble" (as in romanticized versions of the revolutionary proletariat), nor – to be sure – are they legitimately "middle class" (in the same way that their "classifiers" are). Instead, driven by status-anxiety and sated by trivial, consumerist pleasures, the once proud working

class now exist in a dehumanized middle-ground characterized by greedy individualism and striving consumerism.

Cultural theorist Rita Felski has given a name to this precarious position: the “lower middle class;” a position which exists on both economic and cultural planes. As she defines it:

The lower middle class ... is a messy amalgam of symbolic practices, structures of feeling, and forms of life. It usually includes both the traditional petite bourgeoisie of shop owners, small business people, and farmers and the “new” lower middle class of salaried employees, such as clerical workers, technicians, and secretaries. Such positions pay little more and often less than blue-collar industrial jobs.

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Indeed, considering the lack of screen-time devoted to actual blue-collar workers in Moore’s films (as detailed in the last section) and the vast amount of time spent hectoring all varieties of clerks, security guards, low-level foremen and secretaries, one might argue that Moore’s films aren’t really “about” the working class at all, but the lower middle class, as defined by Felski. In many ways this should come as no surprise since the lower middle class is a quickly-expanding class position, due to the economic restructuring of the past few decades.<sup>69</sup> When Moore sets up the distinction, as he does explicitly in the beginning of *Roger & Me*, between a mythical, “noble” working class and a modern, “pathological” one, it is precisely the culture and values of the “lower middle class” that he is at pains to critique.

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<sup>69</sup> Felski argues that, “as older forms of class polarization and class identification begin to dissolve, the lives of ever more individuals in the industrialized West are defined by occupations, lifestyles, and attitudes traditionally associated with the lower middle class” (34).

To return to *Roger & Me*, the ethos of the lower middle class is, perhaps, best exemplified not by Kaye Lani Ray Rafko but by another one of Moore's most enduring characters: Janet "the Amway lady." As many critics have pointed out, Janet is a particularly vexing character in Moore's oeuvre because she is one of the few working class people with whom Moore actually spends some screen-time. However, she is also one of the many "jokes" in *Roger & Me*. As referenced in the last chapter, this joke becomes apparent when Moore tells us that, "three months after Janet's Amway meeting she phoned me in a panic and asked that we please come back, as she had made a terrible mistake." That mistake, of course, was that she had mis-analyzed her own skin color tone: "I am not an autumn. I have discovered that I am another season. ... I'm out there color-analyzing people all the time and, little did I know that I was not the season that I was telling people I was." Moore then hams it, letting Janet analyze him, all the time wearing an expression of mock-seriousness: "as it turned out, we were the same season."

The Amway scene has bothered many critics throughout the years, both Moore's supporters and his detractors. At worst, Moore's handling of Janet is seen as an act of cruelty (Kael 91). At best, it is seen as a kind of comic sidetrack from the film's main argument (Corner 163). I agree to some extent with both of these arguments. There can be a tendency for Moore's lighter, "prankster" mentality to detract from the serious political matters at hand, and there certainly *is* something disquieting about his willingness to use subjects simultaneously as sympathetic victims and as the butts of silly jokes. However, I think both these readings may miss the cultural work being performed by the humor invoked in this sequence and others like it. For, what Moore is at pains to point out here is what he believes to be the very *triviality* of Janet's decision to join

Amway. What's so "funny" about this scene is not just the fact that Janet takes color tones so seriously, but that she does so at a time when much more serious matters are afoot.

This juxtaposition between the serious and the trivial is set up by the way Moore contextualizes the scene. Like most of Moore's working-class subjects, Janet fulfills the role of exemplar. Specifically, she exemplifies the way in which misplaced desires have clouded the judgment of the working class. Janet's entrepreneurial dreams of making it in the world of consumer products are revealed to be nothing more than escapist hokum. In the scenes leading up to Janet's appearance, Moore details the ways in which the denizens of Flint have become "distracted" from the economic oppression that surrounds them. Having detailed the bevy of false advocates rolling through town (Reagan, Schuller, and others), Moore moves on to describe a series of distractions to which the working class has turned in order to ease their pain. "Maybe Reverend Schuller was right," Moore's voice-over intones, as the camera pans a bulletin board covered in headshots of various TV, film, and stage personalities. "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."

From here we cut to an interview with one of the theatre's directors, who tells Moore:

Buick City, this is called, you know. Rednecks, hardhats, automotive workers. We bring Broadway and the theater to them in this beautiful edifice. ... And you'd be surprised, some of those hardhat factory workers on the assembly line say, "Hey-yeah!" They present their badge or identification, so that they can come at a half-price ticket! To keep them coming, you know, when they're having hard times.

Importantly, Moore ends with this last line: “to keep them coming when they’re having hard times.” By juxtaposing the reality of Flint’s “hard times” with the trivial pleasures of Broadway theater, Moore makes a telling distinction: like the annual Parade, the Flint Star Theatre doesn’t provide “escape” at all, but mere *escapism*. It’s an important distinction, and one that gets to the heart of Moore’s class politics.<sup>70</sup> Once again, we are in the presence of a classifying discourse. This time, however, it is the hopes and dreams of the working class that are being offered up for disparagement. In scenes like this, Moore finds fault with what he describes as a misplaced sense of *desire*.

Felski offers the work of George Orwell as exemplary of this classifying discourse. For Orwell, the lower middle class are the ultimate exemplars of “false consciousness.” They have become so hypnotized by the desire to “move up” through the acquisition of material goods that they have lost all ability to see the world for what it is and, as such, have become their own worst enemy:

Permanent anxiety about money and about keeping up appearances creates a gray, cringing mentality composed equally of conformity and bitterness. The lower middle class has completely internalized the structures of authority; it is the ultimate example of psychic self-regulation, of a class that has built the bars of its own prison.

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As such, this duped pathology quickly becomes understood as a kind pathological and pathetic brand of conservatism. Here she quotes Orwell:

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<sup>70</sup> Note that I draw this distinction from Steph Lawler (“Escape”).

We're all bought and what's more we're bought with our own money. Everyone of those poor downtrodden bastards, sweating his guts out to pay twice the proper price for a brick doll's house that's called Belle Vue because there's no view and the bell doesn't work – every one of those poor suckers would die on the field of battle to save his country from Bolshevism.

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As Felski argues, this is an attitude that still characterizes much class analysis done today by “left intellectuals [who] want the working class to remain poor but pure, untainted by consumer culture and social aspirations” (44). However, once again, it is an analysis that ignores class experience for a romantic notion of class consciousness. It is an analysis that seeks only to describe the working class's conditions of experience, without bothering to consider how they experience those conditions. In fact, Felski argues:

The issues raised by the ‘problem’ of the lower middle class – issues relating to changing forms of employment, desires for social mobility, aspirations for one's children – are more pertinent to much of the population in the industrialized West than is the left's residual fantasy of an organic working class.

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Indeed, Janet's Amway scheme points to a problematic distinction at the heart of traditional Left analysis; the separation of home-life from work-life. As Sonya O. Rose points out, class scholars continue to retain “a basically Marxian understanding of class rooted in work-place relations,” and as such continue to “orient their studies around transformations in the nature of work and the impact of these transformations on workers” (139). But, as argued previously, studies have shown that people do not live class-relations in the workplace alone and, indeed, home life (including family life and consumer culture) is an important locus for class-relations to be lived, felt and

understood. Defining class only in terms of work-relations creates a false dichotomy between the public and the private which has led to innumerable “blindspots” in the analysis of class relations. Most egregious has been the delegitimation of any kind of working-class agency or activity other than that which falls under the classical rubric of proletarianization:

Scholars of working-class formation have tended to understand other kinds of responses to domination as indicative of “quiescence” or “accommodation.” Indeed even when organized political resistance has fought for “bread and butter issues,” or has pushed relatively for modest goals rather than revolutionary change, there has been a tendency to understand the working class as quiescent.

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Moore reproduces this argument in the Amway scene. What seems most “funny” – and pathetic – is the way in which Janet (and, presumably her husband) have mistakenly forsaken the shop floor and their own history of working-class militancy for the world of domesticity and consumer products. The “sideshow” effect felt by Corner is, in fact, just another one of Moore’s ironic juxtapositions. The way in which Janet seems so “out-of-context” here is precisely the point. What is most funny – and most shocking – about the Amway scene is the juxtaposition of women sitting around in Janet’s living room talking about skin-tones with the images of laid-off workers and poor evictees that have encompassed most of the film to this point.

The problem is that, by portraying Janet in this way, Moore also delegitimizes the feelings of pleasure and pride that she clearly seems to feel in relation to her new endeavor. This is what is so important about the “coda” of this segment, in which Janet returns to admit her mistake. What Moore is really poking fun at here is not the lower-

class status of Amway products (as some reviewers have suggested), but the fact that Janet takes her role as an Amway Color Consultant so *seriously*. Their economic lives are falling apart around them, Moore seems to be saying, and *this* is how Flint's working-class is spending their time; on useless consumer products and specious entrepreneurial dreams? In this way, Moore's critique of corporate irresponsibility is also, and equally, a critique of crass-materialism and faith in the "American Dream." It's not just GM's manipulative tactics that have destroyed the working class – it's the working class, themselves, and their misplaced desires for material success.

Here, it is important to note that there is also a specifically *gendered* layer to Moore's critique of Janet's shameful desires. Clearly, his mock-willingness to let her do his colors is also a sarcastic jibe at the ridiculousness of Janet's *feminine* obsession with appearance. However, I would argue that this is not (or not *simply*) evidence of a latent sexism in Moore's analysis, but once again evidence of a class discourse that demeans materialist desires in working-class subjects. In traditional, left discourses of class, the working class has often been an explicitly gendered (and racialized) stereotype: typically marked as white and, most specifically, as *male* (Ehrenreich, *Fear* 109; Bettie, "Class" 128; Rose 145). As such, working-class *women* have often served not as subjects in their own right, but as symbols *for* a pejorative concept of "working-class materialism" (Fox 41; Lawler, "Escape" 123). In this logic, working-class desires for affluence are demeaned via a discursive logic which expressly ridicules such wants and needs as precisely *feminizing*. This is especially the case, Felski argues, where the lower middle class is concerned:



... many of the values and attitudes traditionally associated with the lower middle class are also identified with women: domesticity, prudery, aspirations toward refinement. ... Whereas the working class is represented through images of a verile proletariat in left rhetoric, the lower middle class is often gendered female, associated with the triumph of suburban values and the symbolic castration of men.

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Seen in this light, then, it is not so unsurprising that Moore has continuously used *female* subjects, specifically, as exemplars of the problematic working class in his films.<sup>71</sup>

The result, once again, is a delegitimization of working class experience – this time, in relation to class desires; the desire for social mobility, social comfort and, perhaps more than anything else, social *respect*. Felski, for instance, puts a different spin on the lower middle class obsession with materialist desire, referencing her own childhood in a milieu similar to the one skewered by Orwell:

The prevailing characteristic was an anxious display of refinement on a low income: an immaculately mown lawn, a carefully presented collection of knick-knacks and ornaments in a rarely visited front room, starched and fastidiously arranged lace curtains. These and similar items signaled cleanliness, respectability, and distance from the perceived grubbiness and disorder of working-class life.

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Here, Felski sketches out a materialism that is driven not by crass greed (“embourgeoisement”), nor self-delusion (“false consciousness”), but by a deeply felt fear

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<sup>71</sup> Women such as Kaye Lani Raye Rafko and the “Bunny Lady” in *Roger & Me*, the downsized woman who literally cries on Moore’s shoulder and his misguided PR-escort in *The Big One*, and, of course, Lila Lipscomb in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

of *shame*. “Shame,” she argues, “may provide an important clue to the connections between class identity and social mobility” (39).<sup>72</sup>

Felski draws her conception of class shame from the work of Carolyn Steedman and, specifically, her landmark book, *Landscape for a Good Woman*. In that book, Steedman reconsiders (among many issues) the “problem” of working class conservatism, as specifically espoused by her mother. However, unlike Moore, who paints working class “conservatives” as stupes and dupes (i.e. those foolish enough to fall for Reagan’s hollow promises, Reverend Schuller’s calls for “faith,” or, indeed, the entrepreneurial opportunities offered by Amway), Steedman reveals a different set of motives:

Her Conservatism did not express deference, nor traditionalism; nor was it the simple result of contact with rich women who could afford to have their nails painted. She did not express by her political allegiance a tired acceptance of the status quo; in fact, she presented her Conservatism as radical, as a matter of defiance.

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The tale that Steedman references here is one of material desires and a demand for respect – “what might be called (as well as all the other names it is given) a proper envy of those who possess what one has been denied” (123). Anecdotally, Steedman represents this structure of feeling via her mother’s intense longing for a “New Look skirt,” which is *precisely* the kind of materialistic escapism Moore pillories in the Amway sequence. The

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<sup>72</sup> And shame, she argues, is actually a more likely possibility in contemporary societies whose class boundaries are much more porous than they have been, perhaps, in the past: “Shame ... rises out of a discrepancy between certain norms and values and others perceived as superior. The opportunities for experiencing shame increase dramatically with geographic and social forms of mobility, which provide an infinite array of chances for failure, for betraying by word or gesture that one does not belong to one’s environment” (39).

problem, then, for social critics like Moore, is that - at least on the Left - “there is no language of desire that can present what my mother wanted as anything but supremely trivial; indeed, there is no language that does not let the literal accents of class show, nor promote the tolerant yet edgy smile” (113). What better way to describe the humor that the Amway sequence invokes, and the discomfort many viewers often feel even as they laugh? When Janet calls Moore back to tell him she got his colors wrong, Moore is inviting his audience to express their own tolerant-yet-edgy smiles.

Thus, it is precisely this contradiction in values and desires that, Felski argues, has “made the lower middle class an object of amusement and scorn for the intelligensia”:

The problem posed by the lower middle class ... is that it crosses conventional class boundaries. It nurtures aspirations that distance it from stereotypes of working class identity and that in turn appear pretentious and banal to those higher up the social ladder. Lacking the ironic and self-critical dimensions of high culture and any connections to an organic tradition of working class community, the culture of the lower middle class is viewed as singularly inauthentic and uniquely conservative.

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Indeed, the same can be said of Moore. Armed only with a rather simplistic notion of false consciousness, Moore not only dismisses attempts to maintain a sense of pride or respectability in contemporary capitalist culture, he runs roughshod over these attempts and, in the process, reproduces the very kind of “shaming discourse” upon which class antagonisms are so often constructed.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Here it is important to point out that while many of the scholars I have quoted in this section, such as Felski, Roberts and Steedman, are British, their analyses of a general “left discourse of class” carry over into the American context. Indeed, Felski, herself, speaks less of a *British* class discourse, than one that is generally deployed on the left in the “contemporary Western context” (34). She references both British scholars in her analysis, and American (such as John Fiske, Lawrence Grossberg and Herbert Gans). More than this, she argues that her description of a lower middle class identity (and its discursive construction) is perhaps uniquely-suited to the contemporary American context, thanks to the rise of a largely post-

For instance, one of the running jokes in *Roger & Me* is the way in which the residents of Flint persist in denying their own economic ruin at the hands of GM. However, what Moore seems to miss is the deep sense of shame that can so often drive such denials, and the way in which a certain pride of place can act as a means of resistance. This contradiction is perhaps most painfully apparent during the sequence in which Moore documents the town's angry reaction to a *Money Magazine* article in which Flint was designated the "Worst Place to Live" in the U.S. In a show of defiance, the town stages a large protest at which copies of the magazine are burned. In what has become a repeated strategy, Moore begins by describing this protest as yet another ploy foisted upon the people of Flint from above: "The chamber of commerce and the local beer distributors got together and decided to take a stand; they would burn *Money Magazine*." However, the event itself is sutured through a depiction of the duped citizens who fall for this line of baloney and show up to support their rotting town. Thus, one woman tells the camera: "Well, I came down to burn *Money Magazine* because Flint's my adopted city. And I've lived in plenty of cities, and this is one of the best. There's plenty of things to do. The economy isn't that bad off. We're all hard workers and survivors and I support Flint." Meanwhile, a local man leads the crowd in a show of

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industrial workforce (42). And, while Felski draws heavily on British scholar Carolyn Steedman for her conceptualization of class shame, it is from the work of American sociologist, Helen Merrell Lynd (and her work with husband Robert Lynd in Muncie, Indiana) that she draws her primary definition (39).

British scholar Pamela Fox (whose work I will reference later on) also relies heavily upon the work of both Lynd and Steedman to structure a similar critique of left class discourse (12-17). In fact, Fox argues that Steedman's description of a working-class structure of feeling inflicted with feelings of shame has much in common with the American working-class context: 'Much like the search for 'dignity' and the suffering of 'hidden injuries' in U.S. working-class culture documented by Richard Sennett and Jonathon Cobb in the early 1970s, or the 'yearning' among working-class African Americans more recently explored by bell hooks, the 'unfulfilled desire' that propels [Steedman and her mother's] lived class experience reflects an attempt to achieve some measure of control, to perform some kind of operation on the delimiting borders of their own lives" (10).

defiance – “A lot of people say there’s nothing to do in Flint. Ha! Ha, I say! Ha! ... Don’t ever let anybody tell you, you live in the worst place in the country. They’re wrong!”

The emotions on display here are clearly anger and resentment driven by the shame of being so maligned in the national spotlight. But, by framing these emotions in his typical ironic fashion, Moore transforms them from righteous anger into a misplaced obsession with trivial, middle-class desires. The people who show up to the magazine-burning appear more interested in “keeping up with the Joneses” than they do with “serious” matters like plant closings and a failing economy. While Moore sympathizes with their plight, he delegitimizes their reaction. There is a “proper” way to react to such a situation – and these people just don’t get it.

One of the more infamous scenes in *Roger & Me* illustrates the point. During the Great Gatsby Party Moore documents, one of Flint’s socialites is shown talking about hockey, ballet, and what an over-all great place Flint is to raise a family. This interviewee serves the same function as all the other false advocates Moore portrays: just another fat cat spewing a line of “B.S.” that the working class dupes will no doubt believe. However, the man in the film was not just another “fat cat,” but Larry Stecco, a local lawyer with strong connections to the Democratic party. Stecco had, in fact, been an outspoken supporter of union issues in Flint and had even contributed financially to Moore’s alternative newspaper. As Stecco tells it, during the interview Moore told him he was working on a story about the *Money Magazine* “worst places to live” article and, as such, Stecco responded, understandably, by defending Flint’s image (Larner 85-9). The point here is not that Moore deceived Stecco (although this fact is certainly noteworthy), but

that it belies Moore's lack of understanding and/or *empathy*, for the sense of anger felt by many in Flint as a result of this shaming discourse.<sup>74</sup>

Moore's tendency to read material desires and American Dream-style exhortations as just one more instance of working class quiescence is not only the central theme of *Roger & Me*, but a running theme throughout most of his work. *TV Nation* is filled with such "suckers," characters whose adherence to the American Dream marks them as worthy of derision. This can be seen in the segment described above, in which the residents of Appleton are so cowed by the visions of entrepreneurial possibilities that they are fooled into building a maximum security prison in the middle of rural Minnesota. But perhaps more telling is the next segment in the same episode which details the transformation of Love Canal, a former dumping ground for toxic waste near Niagara Falls, into a new real estate development called Black Creek Village. The segment sarcastically exposes yet another instance of corporate indifference. And per usual, this exposé comes at the expense of those citizens who have taken the bait. However, it is not only the stupidity of the Black Creek residents (both current and potential) that is being pilloried in this segment, but the desires that drive them to such self-delusion.

The segment is framed entirely within a narrative of misplaced material desire. Moore introduces the segment (as he often did in *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*) from a New York City street corner, where he stands next to a real estate agent who deals in luxury homes. Moore tells him that fifteen years ago they had to move residents out of Love Canal because of the toxic hazard, but now they're setting up new developments. "I wasn't aware they were selling homes there again," says the man, with mock-incredulity.

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<sup>74</sup> Stecco later brought a successful lawsuit against Moore for presenting his character in a false light (Larner 87).

“Well,” says Moore, sarcastically, “don’t you think we could pick up something kind of cheap?” Here, Moore – in very uncharacteristic fashion – practically aligns himself with an upper-class businessman, as they both wonder aloud at the lengths people who can’t afford a home might go, in an attempt to achieve this quintessential American goal.

The scene then moves to Love Canal itself, where Moore’s reporters pose as typical American newly-weds willing to do anything to get to the next level: “Meet Jane and Jeff,” the voice-over says, while Moore’s usual staple of “cheesy” 1950s music plays on the soundtrack, “a young couple in love and in search of their new home.”

“Being close to nature really does something to me,” says Jeff.

“Yeah,” answers Jane, “if only there were a community with houses we could afford.”

“There is a place!” interrupts the voice-over. “Love Canal! Now called Black Creek Village, in romantic Niagara Falls!” Here, the music continues, juxtaposed ironically to shots of dilapidated houses, factory smoke, and a toxic waste dump. “It’s not just where the Hooker chemical company buried 20,000 lbs of toxic slime. It’s also a great place to buy a home!” At this point, the camera zooms in on a still photo depicting houses located just behind the dump-site.

In this sequence, the mis-guided materialistic desires of Orwell’s Belle Vue buyers are on clear display. As the segment continues, we get various outtakes in which residents are shown trying to rationalize their decision to live on such a site; attempts that inevitably fail. “They’re all way up in age now and they’re just as healthy as I am,” says Ken, a local real estate salesman, referring to the residents who decided to stay after Love Canal was declared hazardous by the Government. “I figure I’m healthy. I had cancer 3

years ago but it's gone now." Moore's reporters, of course, do all they can to coax their subjects into making statements that can only look delusional given the context: "So there might actually be some health benefits to living here?" says Jeff, referring to one woman's insistence that the area still has trees. "Oh yeah! My allergies haven't bothered me at all since we moved back here." Thus, this entire scene is marked by the same kind of shamed outrage that appears to drive the citizens gathered to burn *Money Magazine* in *Roger*. They are constantly on the defensive, angrily defending their decision to live in Love Canal while these outsiders persist in prodding them with questions about the wisdom of such a decision.<sup>75</sup>

### **Working-Class Dreams (as Suburban Nightmare)**

By directing his criticism at materialist desires and consumerist hopes and dreams, Moore also reproduces another stereotype that has long haunted Leftist discourse: the devalued and reviled image of the quiescent, conservative suburb. As Roger Silverstone puts it: "The suburb is seen, if at all and at best, as a consequence, an excrescence, a cancerous fungus, leaching the energy off of the city, dependent and inert and ultimately self-destructive" (4). And as Alison J. Clarke argues, "Mass consumption and material culture in suburbia are judged, implicitly, as embodiments of alienation. ... False consciousness and the increasing consumption of goods stand as commonly ascribed conditions of suburban living" (143). While *Roger & Me* was an attack on the working-class desire to latch on to the suburban dream (even if it meant ignoring their own crumbling reality), then Moore's *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth* were often geared

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<sup>75</sup> Given this analysis, it is hard not to see a similar theme underlying the connection Moore draws between a knee-jerk consumerism and a misplaced fear of terrorism in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, where the public's interest in hair-brained schemes for parachutes and emergency home bunkers exemplifies their status as victimized dupes.



towards skewering those who had “made it there” already. The programs were built around an urban-suburban dichotomy, in which Moore pontificated about politics and introduced segments from the streets of urbane New York City (in *TV Nation* and the second season of *The Awful Truth*), or from the stage of a Chicago-based studio (in the first season of *The Awful Truth*), then asked us to watch as he and members of his team went “out” into the hinterlands of middle America to see what was wrong with American culture.

Here, Moore reproduces a stereotype that has been endemic to left/liberal discourses in America for the last fifty years. Laurie Ouellette argues that a similar logic underpinned much of the programming on PBS in the 1970s. Ouellette singles out the satirical program, *Great American Dream Machine*, as the quintessential example of this discourse.<sup>76</sup> *Great American Dream Machine* was geared towards exposing the short-sightedness of Middle America by exploring “people’s goals, ideas of themselves, their country, their hopes and dreams” (196). Specifically this meant exposing the false values under which much of suburban, Middle America lived:

Our basic theme is the gulf between promise and performance in American life,” stated the producers of *Dream Machine*’s rabble-rousing mission. “We’re trying to show what a great country this could be if we got rid of the false values sold to us by hucksters and con men who have contempt for the public.”

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Clearly, this false-values perspective drives much of the humor in both *Roger* and Moore’s television work, but it is perhaps most pointed in *Bowling For Columbine*,

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<sup>76</sup> Again, as mentioned in the last chapter, an important point given the fact that Moore has recognized this very program as a guiding inspiration for his own work.

where it takes a turn towards the tragic. In this film, the Columbine shootings are revealed to be the logical end-result of a suburban community saturated in a self-destructive, consumerist ethos. In many ways, the middle-class, suburban residents of Littleton, CO are the natural outcome of Flint, MI's decision to abandon good, old-fashioned working-class values in *Roger & Me*. When Americans buy into the American Dream, Moore seems to be saying, this is what you get.

As is so often the case in Moore's films, the Littleton segment begins with a brief interview-montage. An unidentified woman stands in front of her house on a street chosen for its suburban typicality. Behind her we see, stretched out, a line of small, neat houses with clean, white driveways and immaculate lawns. "This is a great place to raise your children, a really great place to raise your kids," she tells Moore. "A very close-knit community we have here. Everybody looks out for everybody."

"Good people," we hear Moore say matter-of-factly, just off camera. "Good people," she replies. Of course, this is a set-up, as Moore then cuts abruptly to a shot of Lockheed-Martin PR official, Evan McCollum, standing in front of a missile casing in the Lockheed-Martin plant. "This just happens to be the place where two young men made very bad, very wrong decisions and there has been international notoriety as a result of it. Other than that, I don't know that Littleton is a lot different than a whole lot of other suburban communities." Indeed, unbeknownst to McCollum, this commonality is precisely Moore's point.

Next, Moore cuts to a brief clip from an "Economic Development P.R. Video," a promotional tool used to coax corporations into moving to Littleton. Placed as it is, within the context of the Columbine killings, the video is obviously played for uneasy

laughs, as the narrator continuously touts Littleton as the “perfect location” for new corporate offices. As the man in the video talks about Littleton’s comfortable weather and terrific golfing, a pointed tension is constructed between what the residents of Littleton are saying about their community, and what we “know” to be true. This tension becomes the driving force behind the emotional scene between Moore and Denny Fennell, the home security consultant. Both the humor and the tragedy of this sequence derive from Fennell’s inability to understand the “folly” of expounding on the dangers of home invasion in a community where the biggest, and likely only, violent threat actually came from within. Fennell’s emotional breakdown demonstrates the confusion of a community that clearly doesn’t have the answers.

Of course, Moore never asks them for any. In fact, other than McCollum, no Littleton residents are asked to address their understanding of the Columbine tragedy. Instead, they are shown making statements that can only be interpreted as incongruous, given their context within the film. By exposing residents who claim Littleton is a “great community,” just like “any other suburban community” – indeed, the “perfect location” – Moore constructs an image of Middle America as clueless; so in love with its own image of material stability and success that it is quite incapable of seeing what’s going on right inside its own tree-lined blocks. For Moore, the real problem gripping America isn’t structural, it’s pathological. Middle America’s values are all askew. This is a place where not only corporations, but *the residents themselves* put “profits over people” – even when those people are their own children.

Thus, after the McCollum interview, Moore cuts to a sequence that is geared towards illustrating the willful ignorance of the Littleton populace. Moore’s cameras

quickly take us on a tour of the “real Littleton,” while elevator music (almost identical to that used in the Littleton P.R. video) lends ironic counterpoint to the images we see on screen. Those images include: a memorial at the U.S. Airforce Academy commemorating the largest bombing campaign of the Vietnam War; Rocky Flats, the largest plutonium weapons-making factory in the world; and the NORAD complex. Finally, we get shots of workers inspecting a rocket, and shots of a truck driving through the Littleton night, as Moore’s voice-over explains:

And once a month Lockheed transports one of its rockets with its Pentagon payload through the streets of Littleton, passing nearby Littleton High School on its way to the Air Force base on the other side of Denver. The rockets are transported in the middle of the night while the children of Columbine are asleep.

Here, Moore makes an important argument about the connection between war-making and corporate capitalism, but by placing it – awkwardly – within the localized space of the Columbine massacre, it has the unfortunate consequence of laying the blame squarely on the shoulders of the people, themselves. Indeed, in this context, the hard-hat factory workers shown scuttling about the Lockheed-Martin plant seem just as guilty as the smoothly corporate McCollum, himself. This is a town, a region – indeed, an entire culture – that has sold out the safety of their own children for a slice of the American Dream.

Of course, not everyone from Littleton is to blame. There is hope, Moore tells us ... for those who *get out*. Importantly, there are two subjects in *Bowling for Columbine* who “get it,” but neither one represents the community itself. One is a local kid who (like the young Michael Moore at the beginning of *Roger & Me*) managed to leave the

suburban nightmare behind; the other is an outsider so reviled that he is denied access to the community by its narrow-minded citizens. Both, importantly, are celebrities: Matt Stone and Marilyn Manson.<sup>77</sup>

In the first interview, Stone offers a pointed diagnosis for what happened in Littleton. “This is Matt Stone,” Moore’s voice-over tells us, as we see Stone and Moore sitting together at what appears to be an outdoor café. “He grew up in Littleton and has fond memories of Columbine.” It goes without saying that this is a statement dripping with irony. “Well, yeah.” Stone tells Moore. “Columbine is a crappy school in the middle of a bunch of crappy houses.” From here, Moore cuts to shots of Stone and writing partner Trey Parker who, Moore tells us, “found a way to take out their anger of being different in Littleton and turn it not into carnage, but into a cartoon.” We then get a very quick clip of the opening moments of Stone and Parker’s *South Park* that encapsulates the kind of suburban backwards-ness that Moore is trying to invoke. “You can see your breath hanging in the air,” sings the cartoon-narrator, “You see homeless people but you just don’t care. It’s a sea of smiles in which we’d be glad to drown! It’s Sunday morning in our quiet little, white-bread, redneck, mountain town!” In this way, the familiar opening lyrics of *South Park* work to buttress the image of a destructively quiescent Middle America that Moore has been at pains to paint. Once again, working-class desires for middle-class lifestyles are pathologized, while those “living the dream,” so to speak, are vilified. If you’re someone who lives in one of those crappy houses, and sends your kids to one of those crappy schools, then you are *part of the problem*.

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<sup>77</sup> In both segments, unlike the residents of Littleton, these celebrities are depicted as co-equals with Moore. We see both interviewee and Moore onscreen, sitting casually and discussing the issue. Importantly, these are represented as full-fledged dialogues, not interview-snippets, as Moore allows each celebrity room to respond to his questions in a thoughtful manner and take some measure of interpretive control.

Of course, by incorporating Stone into his argument, a virtual icon of cultural “cool,” Moore is not only pathologizing Middle America, but subtly *deriding* it, as well. There’s not only something wrong with Littleton, but something terribly un-hip. Stone helps him drive the point home: “Painfully, painfully, painfully normal. Just absolutely, painfully, horribly average. You know. Littleton in general is.” Here, Moore’s critique of suburban pathology takes on a modicum of smugness, as Stone goes onto explain that probably all Eric and Dylan needed to do in order to circumvent their tragic actions was to extract themselves from the debilitating squareness of Littleton, Colorado:

... the teachers, counselors, and principals don’t help things. They scare you into conforming and doing good in school by saying, “If you’re a loser now, you’ll be a loser forever.” ... It’s amazing how fast you lose touch with all those people. They just beat it in your head, as early as 6<sup>th</sup> grade: “Don’t fuck up, because if you do, you’ll die poor and lonely. And you don’t want to do that.” And you’re like, “Fuck, whatever I am now, I’m that forever.” And of course it’s the complete opposite. The dorks in high school go on to do great things, and all the really cool guys are living back in Littleton as insurance agents. Almost person-to-person, its completely that way. Yeah, so if someone had told them that, maybe they wouldn’t have done it. But, yeah.”

Here, Moore uses Stone’s comments to draw a bright line between those who buy into the American Dream, and those who don’t, while simultaneously making the paradoxical – and deeply patronizing – argument that those who disdain the desire-for-financial-success will, in fact, become successful.

Moore’s interview with Marilyn Manson provides similar commentary. Here, Moore (justifiably) critiques the notion, propagated by cultural conservatives and the religious right, that the Columbine killings resulted from the killers’ listening to Manson’s music. However, Manson’s retort, while showcasing a lucid understanding of

the media's role in hyping misinformation, also plays up the stereotype of a duped, quiescent Middle America hypnotized by consumerist desires:

Nobody said: "Well, maybe the President had an influence on this violent behavior." No, because that's not the way the media wants to take it and spin it and turn it into fear. Because then you're watching TV, you're watching the news being pumped full of fear. There's floods, there's AIDS, there's murder. Cut to commercial, buy the Acura, buy the Colgate. If you have bad breath they're never gonna talk to you. If you got pimples the girl's not gonna fuck you. And it's just this – it's a campaign of fear and consumption. And that's what I think it's all based on, is the whole idea that, "Keep everyone afraid and they'll consume." And that's really as simple as it can be boiled down to.

Here, Moore recreates the kind of analysis Ouellette argues marked much of PBS's output in the 1970s – an analysis that "probed [Middle America's] psyches for puzzled liberals" (194). In segments like this, we get no sense of what's good and desirable about suburban living – only pronouncements about what's so terribly wrong with it, and depictions of residents performing their own ignorance. In *Bowling for Columbine* there appears to be no middle ground where Middle America is concerned; you're either inside it, perpetuating the problem, or outside it, laughing one minute and shaking your head the next.

### **The Ugly: White Collar Workers and the Betrayal of the Working Class**

Perhaps no subjects symbolize the self-destructive delusions of the working and lower middle classes more than those workers who stand between Moore and whatever corporate villain he happens to be chasing down. More often than not, it is the P.R. flacks, office clerks, secretaries and security guards of corporate America who are made to bear the burden of representing America's corporate culture. And it is in these

confrontations, perhaps, that Moore does the most damage to his own class-based arguments.

Reviewing *The Big One* for the *Buffalo News* in 1998, Ronald Ehmke criticized one of Moore's narrative strategies:

In nearly every city on his book tour, Moore seeks out a company that is closing its doors, laying off its workers and leaving town. First he interviews the freshly "downsized" locals, who are almost invariably articulate and impassioned, then he and his film crew head to the company's headquarters to confront the hard-hearted bosses, who almost invariably refuse to see him. The message: Workers good, bosses bad. You'll get no argument from me there. But every one of these guerrilla maneuvers in the corridors of power brings on a posse of receptionists, greeters and security guards, all of whom are made to look foolish just for doing their jobs -- which is precisely to keep uninvited guests of any political persuasion, particularly the ones bearing cameras, out of the building. Moore seems to have no problem bullying these employees, or the steady stream of "media escorts" who accompany him throughout the book tour, simply because they don't fit the romantic ideal of the blue-collar laborer.

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Whereas most journalists who had tired of Moore's "schtick" simply complained about Moore's seeming hypocrisy, Ehmke takes his analysis a bit deeper, arguing that Moore's use and abuse of corporate drones is not only cruel, but belies an unstated accusation.

These workers aren't just "doing their jobs" -- they've sold out the working class themselves; they've joined the other side; they've become "cushy" with management. In much of Moore's work, white collar workers are caught up in a "What side are you on, boys?" narrative that paints them as villainous traitors. In the process, as Ehmke alludes to above, Moore establishes an unstated code of conduct for what is -- and what is not -- "proper" working class behavior.



One scene in *The Big One* stands as a good example. It begins with an establishing shot depicting the ominous grey walls and darkened windows of the Leaf corporate office building, where the company that owns Payday candy bars resides. From here, a hand-held camera follows Moore as he steps out of a car that has just parked out front. Moore's voice-over sets the scene: "Back when we were in Centralia, we had promised the workers at PayDay that when we got to Chicago, we'd pay their owners a visit." Clearly, this is one of Moore's patented ambush-sequences. He then cuts to a shot of himself striding in the front door, enormous bank check in hand, while the camera follows shakily behind him. Once inside, Moore is (of course) not greeted by the "owners," but by a series of security and office personnel.

First, there is the security guard who offers to sign Moore in. "We're just supposed to take this into the chairman's office," Moore lies, referring to the check. "It's a surprise." Looking justifiably skeptical, the security guard motions Moore into the front desk area. "You'd better check with that girl in there before you go anywhere," he says, gesturing towards a secretary. As Moore walks towards the front desk, the secretary, having just checked with someone via the phone, addresses a third office worker, who seems to be some sort of security manager: "Jim, they're not allowed in here. You have to get them out."

"Wait a minute," says Jim, while Moore explains, incredulously: "I've got a check here for 65 cents to buy the last PayDay."

"Yeah, but who says you guys could come in here?" asks Jim. "We did," says Moore, grinning mischievously. "Who's Michael Moore," Jim asks (in what was perhaps the last time *that* phrase was ever uttered by a mid-level employee in a Michael Moore

film!). “That’s me,” says Moore, with mock-humility. “I’m Michael Moore. Are you security?” This last utterance is more challenge, than question. Moore, of course, is baiting the office staff to throw him out of the building. The enormous check, the hand-held camera, Moore’s exaggeratedly “casual” demeanor; all works to code this scene as a stunt geared towards proving what is, in many ways, an obvious point – that corporate America doesn’t want a radicalized working class breaking down its doors and demanding restitution. However, the burden of representing such corporate indifference does not fall to the CEO, shareholders or trustees, but to the low and mid-level white-collar workers in charge of carrying out day-to-day operations. Inevitably, they comply with Moore’s dare. Together, the security guard, secretary and Jim escort Moore and his crew out of the building, trying their best not to make eye-contact with the camera, and threatening to call the police. Most of the dirty work falls to the security guard, who looks justifiably uncomfortable as he repeatedly asks Moore to leave, while Moore continues to ask if “the Boss” is going to come downstairs. Eventually, he tells Moore that the Boss will speak to him outside. The camera then begins to jerk wildly, as Moore and crew, refusing to budge, force security to physically nudge them outside. “Hey, what are you doing!” we hear a member of Moore’s crew yell, as both security guards lock the door behind them.

Once outside, Moore continues to dog the security guard, who now sits just inside the huge front window, staring blankly at Moore, who peppers him with questions and taunts: “The boss is coming?!? Is he coming down? The boss?!?” The security guard, stone-faced, shakes his head, “no,” as police sirens wail in the distance. “He’s not coming

down?” Moore says. “Oh, man – we’ve been hoodwinked!” The scene ends with Moore getting arrested.

What is so important about this scene (and so many like it throughout Moore’s work) is the way in which, once again, working people become the “problem,” in a way that undermines Moore’s structural argument about corporate capitalism. Here, however, the problem is not duped and/or quiescent blue-collar workers, but a group of white-collar workers that could fairly be described as “traitorous,” according to the logic of Moore’s film. Indeed, by staging a confrontation in this way, Moore turns this sequence from a satirical jab at corporate power into a searing critique of white-collar complicity. The whole point of the sketch seems to be to point out the lengths to which office staff will go to keep Moore from doing “the people’s work.” This is certainly the impression Moore, himself, gives, as he cuts from this scene to one in which he describes the encounter to an audience that roars with laughter:

... and the private security officer’s going – ‘Arrest him! Arrest him!’” Moore tells the crowd, recounting the escapade. “We told him to get off our property and he refused to leave! He’s trespassing!” And, well, wait a minute! That’s not what happened. They told us to come outside and wait for the boss. “No we didn’t. that’s a lie!” Of course, he’d forgotten about the people he had pushed out the door with me. And so I said to the officer – “Officer, let’s roll the video tape!”

Here, it is the security guard who becomes the villain, as Moore describes the guard’s attempt to protect “the Boss” from Moore and his crew. Indeed, in many ways, the security guard becomes “the Boss,” telling Moore to get off “our” property. In this sequence, the security guard *is* corporate America.

This depiction of white-collar complicity is, once again, indicative of the ways in which the Left has often constructed an essentialized notion of working-class identity. In fact, I would argue that it stems from what Jaquelyn Southern has called the “discourse of the collars,” a discourse which, she argues, has been endemic to “a Left language of class” for decades. In this discourse, class difference is defined via a “constitutive dualism” between blue and white-collar workers (199). According to this logic, “the terms ‘blue’ and ‘white collar’ are constituted by their opposition; that is, the white collar consists in all that the blue collar is not and vice versa” (199). This logic leads to a number of binary oppositions dividing – and defining – the two:

Among the most frequently rehearsed have been goods/services, productive/unproductive labor, manual/mental labor, unskilled/skilled, production/administration, subordination/authority, wages/status, production/consumption, strength/weakness, male/female, working class/other (usually middle or new middle class, often neoproletariat), *and not least, class consciousness/self-estrangement.*

200 (my emphasis)

Indeed, while sociologists, union leadership, and labor activists have often squabbled over the exact definition of the collars (what constitutes “skilled,” how should we define “authority,” etc.), it is the notion of class-consciousness that has, by and large, enlivened the notion of a blue/white collar divide. In this “longstanding story”:

the class-conscious blue collar, seasoned by its history of anticapitalist struggle [is contrasted] with a consensual white collar stigmatized as the bearer of false consciousness. From this perspective, white-collar growth represents working-class erosion, and charting the relative strength of the collars has been considered politically and strategically important.

Southern 193

Clearly, Moore's depiction of the office staff in the sequence above, and throughout his work, employs a similar logic; one that has defined white-collar workers disdainfully as "close to management,' holding distinctly middle-class interests, values, ambitions, and characteristics; lacking in the militant, anti-boss, solidaristic qualities that would suit them to join the house of labor" (193-4).

Of course, in many ways, this story completely ignores the changes that have taken place in the economic work structure over the past fifty years. Broadly speaking, economic restructuring (including downsizing and outsourcing – two issues central to much of Moore's own work) have led to the decline of traditional, blue-collar manufacturing jobs and the subsequent rise of white-collar service industry employment (Zweig, 43; Bettie, "Class" 126). But this, of course, does not mean that the working class is "shrinking." Far from it. Indeed, many of these white-collar jobs pay significantly less than the old, blue-collar jobs they have replaced (Zweig 43).

More to the point, however, is the way in which the discourse of the collars works as just another form of class judgment; another act of classification that, once again, finds working-class people wanting. As Southern argues, the "collar line" reinforces "a rigidly bounded, essentialist construct for class" (222). Specifically: "this language of class has supported unhappy descriptions and unfortunate practices, trivializing and rejecting the struggles and aspirations of a wide variety of workers who fall short of the normative worker known from labor iconography and the proletarian imaginary" (223). Herein lies the dilemma posed by Moore's class narratives: by utilizing white collar workers to symbolize capitalist logic, he equates those workers with corporate power and, in so doing, reinscribes the dismissive stereotype of the striving, complicit white-collar worker.

Thus, in most of Moore's work, white collar workers are forced to "perform complicity" in a variety of ways. More often than not, this performance of complicity is achieved by asking workers to do something Moore knows they cannot. This usually comes in the form of a request to see the boss, as in the scene from *The Big One* described above. We're left with the spectacle of white-collar workers leaping over themselves to "do the boss's bidding." This strategy works not to differentiate white-collar work staff from corporate ownership, but, indeed, to conflate them. Thus, in *The Big One*, when Moore infiltrates the offices of Milwaukee's Johnson Controls to present them with a "Downsizer of the Year" award (along with an 85 cent check for the first worker in their new Mexico-based plant), Moore's righteous ire at ownership is quickly redirected towards the office "flacks" obliged to withstand his assault:

Moore: This is the "Downsizer of the Year" award, and ah, you win it for Milwaukee. Each city that I'm in for my book tour I'm giving out various downsizer awards to the companies that make millions in profits and then throw people out of work. And because you've done that in here Milwaukee, I want to thank you. Are you sure Mr. Keyes won't see me?

P.R. Woman: Yeah, I'm afraid he's not available. And again, I'd like to request—

MM: But he's here?

P.R. W: He's unavailable. I'm really not sure—

MM: Oh, you should tell him I'm here! He'll know who I am.

P.R. W: I'm not sure

MM: He supplies G.M.!

P.R. W: I would like to request that if you'd like to come back sometime, make an appointment, we can talk some more—

MM: I'd be glad to make an appointment.

P.R. W: I'd like to request – and Jack, if you could help me out please.

[Camera pans to reveal a middle-aged man who has now appeared on the scene].

MM: Jack, how ya doin? Michael Moore. What's your job here?

Jack: Jack Higgins.

MM: Jack, what do you do here?

Jack: Human resources.

MM: [with clear sarcasm]: Ohhh, that's always my favorite department. Because they take care of the people here, right? ... The people that you're going to be laying off. Right? The *human* resources.

Jack: Well, it's not actually my area but, yes, we will be doing that.

MM: What does "human resources" do?

P.R. W: OK. Let's hold on, I think we've had enough discussion.

MM: Well, you've brought Jack out here to talk to us!

P.R. W: Well, Jack just came out to keep us company.

MM: [laughing] Jack, go away!

P.R. W: We've had our little discussion. Thanks very much for coming. I wish you had called to let us know, and maybe we would have been better prepared–

MM: [leaning right into P.R. Woman now] You know, we wish you would have called and told all the workers so they would have been better prepared.

Here, Moore quickly gives up his feigned effort to sit down with “Mr. Keyes” and redirects his accusations at the P.R. staffer, herself, who quickly becomes the personification of the entire corporate structure (*you* win the downsizer award; *you* should have told the workers; the people *you* are going to be laying off). Things quickly get more “personal” when Jack arrives, introducing himself by name, only to be held up as morally responsible for the hypocrisy inherent to the entire field of Human Resources. In scenes like this, Moore draws a bright line between blue-collar victims and white-collar traitors. By asking them to do something they clearly cannot (get the boss, rally the workers, etc.) Moore forces white-collar employees to perform complicity by stepping into the symbolic shoes of their corporate ownership and speaking the company line.

Indeed, this is a tack Moore takes no matter what the situation. For instance, in *Bowling for Columbine*, after ascertaining that he can’t see the Hollywood sign as a result of all the pollution in the air, Moore asks a Los Angeles police officer to do what is, obviously, impossible: “Is there anybody you can go and arrest for polluting up the air?” The officer looks disdainfully at Moore, says “absolutely not,” and walks away. “Why not?!” Moore calls after him. “Why not, sergeant?!” Here, Moore makes an important argument about the way in which political leadership has misplaced priorities; putting money behind false threats, such as inner-city crime, and ignoring real ones, like escalating amounts of smog. However, the burden of “answering” for this mismanagement falls to the low-level police officer who is stuck performing the same kind of callous indifference as the office workers in *The Big One*. Of course, removed from the context of Moore’s narrative trajectory, the officer’s decision to brush Moore off makes perfect sense. In this sequence, Moore and his crew are milling about a crime



scene. As such, his persistent questions about city pollution are nothing if not incongruous and distracting. Once again, a working person is pilloried for merely performing his job.

The consequences of Moore's collar-line discourse can only be described as politically disabling. For one thing, Moore virtually denies white-collar workers their very status *as* workers. For instance, while he spends much time in *The Big One* detailing the travails of downsized blue-collar workers, his depiction of white-collar workers ignores the fact that these people are quite possibly the "next in line." Indeed, if Moore's thesis is correct, then these workers' drive to follow orders might be read as an act of personal *survival*, not betrayal. Indeed, as Katherine Newman has argued in her important analysis of white-collar workers, there has long been a tendency to think about issues of job loss and displacement as "blue-collar issues," due in large part to the mass industrial layoffs of the 1970s and 80s. However, she argues that "While this image is not wholly inaccurate, it is overly restrictive" (25). During the 1980s, for instance, nearly one in six displaced workers was a manager or professional, and more than one in five held technical, sales, or administrative jobs (25). And, as mentioned above, the recent trend towards the replacement of blue-collar production jobs with white-collar service jobs in the last few decades means that, increasingly, it is white-collar workers who are feeling the effects of corporate indifference. White-collar workers are just as "trapped" within the corporate structure as anyone else. But, by ensnaring them within his carefully scripted spectacles of confrontation, Moore elides this fact and creates the impression that white collar workers are a major part of "the problem."

Perhaps more concerning, however, is the fact that white-collar workers never appear as full-fledged “characters.” We never get a sense of how they feel about their jobs, lay-offs, downsizing, etc. As Newman has argued, white-collar work breeds its own “culture,” based upon the context within which they must operate. For instance, one significant difference between white and blue-collar work is the individualized nature of the former. As she puts it:

When the General Motors Corporation shuts down eleven plants across the country, idling 29,000 workers in one fell swoop ... the experience of GM workers is much different than that of an individual salesman who is fired for failing to sell his quota of widgets. ... Collective loss focuses attention away from the individual largely because, in occupations where mass losses occur, work life has a collective rather than an individual character.

12

Implicit in Moore’s derision of the white-collar mentality is their seeming inability – or callous unwillingness – to think about the “collective.” However, lost in this critique are the ways in which corporate structuring destroys the collective nature of white collar occupations. “Even in times of prosperity,” Newman argues, “the fate of most blue-collar workers is more a matter of their union’s strength than it is one individual’s behavior” (12). But for most of the white collar workers Moore challenges, it is precisely upon their individual behavior that their professional lives depend. As such, Moore’s implicit accusation that they lack “proper solidarity” is, at best, misinformed and, at worst, disingenuous.

Ultimately, this discursive logic works to undermine the very goal Moore claims to be working towards: namely, a broad-based sense of cross-class solidarity against the oppressive aspects of an under-regulated capitalist system. For, as Southern argues:

... white-collar theory on class formation rests explicitly on the notion that solidarism follows from an identical condition, and, conversely, that heterogeneity creates disparate and necessarily conflicting interests and action. ... Subtly, the collar line supports the dangerous idea that only like people can organize and work together; almost imperceptibly, solidarity across differences great and small becomes virtually oxymoronic.

222

By pitting victimized blue collars against traitorous white collars, Moore creates antagonisms where there should be connections, pitting people from within the working and (lower) middle classes against one another in a fashion that is not only disabling but anachronistic.

Perhaps most importantly, Moore fails to offer a depiction of working-class identity that is likely to resonate with the relatively new, vast majority of white-collar service workers who are, in the end, the “constituency” Moore truly wants to reach. For, as Southern points out: “Whatever white collar people themselves may think, being described for decades as conformist, instrumentalist, self-serving, loyal to capital, and the comfortable beneficiaries of unearned wealth neither invites nor expresses sympathetic identification” (208). Ultimately, Moore’s narrative of class conflict has more to offer an audience of professional middle-class observers with enough cultural authority and job security to think of themselves as ‘above’ such squabbles (and subsequently in a position to advocate from above if they so desire). However, for those potential viewers who would find themselves on the front lines of a Michael Moore ambush should he bang down the door of *their* employer, Moore doesn’t offer much in the way of pleasurable or, indeed, inspirational identification.

### **Learning to Resist: Enlightened Activism**

## Modeling Activism

As his career has moved on, Moore seems to have become aware of some of the pitfalls involved with the politics of representation. Throughout the years, many critics have criticized Moore for being disdainful towards his subjects, particularly those marked as working class, and Moore has responded by constructing a small number of “positive” working-class portrayals in his films: for instance, the man who accompanies Moore, in an episode of *The Awful Truth*, on an ambush-mission into his HMO’s corporate offices to demand the kidney transplant he has been denied and (perhaps most famously) Lila Lipscomb, the mother of a deceased American soldier, who serves as the “emotional center” of *Fahrenheit 9/11* by directing her pain and anguish directly at the White House. Both of these subjects represent working or lower middle class people who stand up and strike back at the powers-that-be. They are subjects who make the transition from quiescence to agency, from victim to activist, from passive complicity to spirited defiance. With these subjects, it is possible to imagine Moore’s films rejecting the “fantasy of advocacy” for a narrative of empowerment. However, even in these scenes – perhaps especially so – Moore’s advocacy-narrative remains paramount.

The focus in both of these scenes is not on the activism of the subjects in question, but on their *conversion* into active agents. It is the transition from complicity to resistance that Moore is at pains to represent, and the reason for that transition is always quite clear; the wisdom and courageousness of Moore, himself. These scenes are less about working class activism than they are about Moore *modeling activism* for a working class who doesn’t quite understand how to properly “resist.” As such, they depict a

specific form of activism: what we might call “enlightened activism.”<sup>78</sup> In this trope, working-class activism is only ever the result of advocacy from above. Working-class subjects don’t resist on their own; they must be taught how to resist, and why. As such, while these narrative sequences may offer images of active subjects, standing up and speaking out, they still bear the “hidden agenda” of middle-class authority; they are still “fantasies of advocacy,” in the end.

Moore’s television work was rife with narratives of enlightened activism. The HMO segment, referenced above, serves as a good example. Moore introduces Chris Donahue, a severe diabetic and father, who will die if he does not receive a pancreas transplant. His HMO, Humana, has denied his claim due to a contradictory insurance contract that promised to treat all problems related to his diabetes, but did not specify a possible pancreas transplant. The scene follows Moore and Donahue as they storm the corporate offices of Humana to demand coverage for the transplant. Moore elicits a sense of shock and outrage as we watch Humana’s P.R. executive dutifully deny his company’s obligation to save Donahue’s life. Throughout the scene, Moore acts as a kind of surrogate activist for Donahue, who is relegated to following Moore around like a lost puppy dog. Donahue’s role in this segment is not that of angry activist, but hapless victim and activist-sidekick, who Moore tutors in the ways of political activism.

At the outset of the segment, Donahue is shown describing the pain and anguish he feels, but not anger. “I don’t want to die. Not yet,” Donahue tells Moore, who is interviewing him from off-screen. “My daughter’s four years old,” he continues. “She’s going to need a father ... Excuse me.” Here, Donahue is shown tearing up, while Moore’s authoritative voice-over explains the situation:

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<sup>78</sup> Reference Ouellette here, because I am riffing off of her notion of “enlightened citizenship” here.

Humana presents itself as America's feel-good health insurance company. In 1997 they had revenues of nearly 8 billion dollars, and they paid their chairman David Jones over four million, plus stock options. With that kind of loot kicking around, you'd think they could afford a lousy pancreas.

From here, Moore cuts to a morbidly funny sequence, set to the upbeat song, "Looks Like It's Over," in which Donahue walks into a newspaper office and asks to place an obituary notice. When the woman asks him who the obit is for he says, matter-of-factly, "it's for myself," and describes the cause of death as, "the lack of quality care from my HMO." At this point, Moore's studio audience is heard over the soundtrack, breaking into applause, and there is the sense that something unique to Moore's work is afoot here. At this moment, the audience is figured in solidarity with Donahue, himself, as this working-class subject becomes the hero in his own story of heroic intervention. However, the moment is short-lived. As we watch clips of Donahue picking out his own coffin and stepping into a hearse, Moore's voice-over takes control of the narrative once again, re-figuring Donahue's actions as part of a grand scheme cooked up by Moore, himself:

Time was running out. And since Humana had played such a vital role in Chris's death, I wanted to invite the executives at Humana to Chris's funeral. Chris and I then headed off to Louisville, KY, and Humana's corporate headquarters.

As the image shifts from Donahue alone, to a shot of Donahue with Moore, both striding purposefully into the foyer of Humana's headquarters, the studio audience is heard once again, this time bursting into a jubilant round of applause, as the *real* hero of the story has

now emerged. Donahue's activism has become reinscribed within Moore's typical pose of heroic advocacy, as the filmmaker steps in to show a hapless victim how its done.

From here, Moore takes on the active role. He secures a meeting with Greg Donaldson, the Humana P.R. executive, explaining Donahue's predicament and "inviting" Donaldson to Donahue's funeral. As Moore talks, the camera cuts between shots of an increasingly uncomfortable Donaldson and an utterly complacent Donahue, who sits passively by at an office table, while Moore valiantly states his case. "He has a four year old daughter! Every day that goes by, while you 'investigate the facts,' is a day closer to his funeral!" Finally, Moore invokes his own power, as celebrity advocate, threatening Donaldson with continued exposure:

Moore:           You know I won't take no for an answer ... we're not going to stop until you guys let him live. It's that simple. We're going to be all over you, man. ... Your name again is ...?

Donaldson:     Greg Donaldson.

MM:             [Turning towards camera while shaking Donaldson's hand]. This is Greg Donaldson, from corporate communications here at Humana, and he'll be with us for the rest of our series here on *The Awful Truth*, as we follow his efforts to get to the facts of this case –

Donaldson:     OK. So, are we going to get on the elevator this time?

MM:             We'll check back in with you from week to week, OK? To see how you're doing, checking the facts, and maybe Chris will still be alive at the end of our series here on *The Awful Truth*, OK?

The studio audience is present throughout this scene, heard on the soundtrack, cheering and applauding every sarcastic threat levied by Moore. Meanwhile, Donahue remains in the role of passive sidekick, present only when the camera cuts away to him at Moore's insistence, such as when Moore asks him whether or not he likes oak for his funeral casket, or stops to point out the shirt Donahue is wearing, which reads: "I signed with Human and all I got was this lousy t-shirt ... but no pancreas." Once Moore enters the picture, Donahue's role shifts from active agent to narrative prop, used by Moore to shame Humana executives. (At one point Moore even instructs Donahue to remove his shirt, revealing his catheter).<sup>79</sup>

As such, the scene quickly shifts gears into a typical Fantasy of Advocacy, as Moore hands out fliers for Donahue's "funeral" to workers in the office lobby, and stages the faux ceremony, complete with bagpipes, outside the corporate offices. When Donaldson asks Moore to just leave, "as a courtesy to me," Moore replies: "As a courtesy to *me*, why don't you pay for his pancreas." The comment is telling. Despite Moore's incorporation of a working-class victim into his narrative, the relationship between subject and Moore (and by proxy – the studio audience, signified by the applause) remains unchanged. Donahue is figured as a subject without the knowledge or ability to change his own situation. It is up to an advocate like Moore to marshal the facts and levy the charges.

The episode ends on a true note of enlightenment, when Moore reveals that Chris and his family are in the audience. The scene takes on the atmosphere of a charity-event,

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<sup>79</sup> Moore's use of subjects as "shaming" props was a regular occurrence on his television programs. Perhaps the most infamous example was a segment of *The Awful Truth* entitled, "The Voice-Box Choir," in which he escorted a group of tracheotomy patients into the headquarters of Phillip Morris to perform Christmas carols.



as the audience stands and applauds wildly while Donahue hugs his daughter. In this way, while Moore has often constructed narratives of “resistance,” this resistance is always the result of advocacy from above rather than action from below. When they are present at all, working-class subjects are represented as hapless sidekicks, who “tag along” as Moore models his version of “resistant activism,” usually to successful ends.<sup>80</sup> These episodes speak less to an “activised” working class than they do to an audience of potential, would-be advocates that Moore attempts to inspire into action. Thus, he ends the first season of *The Awful Truth* inspiring his audience with the words of John Steinbeck, from *The Grapes of Wrath*:

We are the People’s Democratic Republic of Television. But we’re not just a group of individual malcontents, screw-ups and rabble-rousers. We’re a *Nation* of malcontents, screw-ups and rabble-rousers! Right?!? So wherever there’s a guy down on his luck, we’ll be there. Wherever there’s a greedy corporation, trying to lock out its workers, we’ll be there. Wherever there’s an independent prosecutor trying to overturn the will of the people, we’ll be there! Wherever there’s a Mexican worker staring longingly at the GM car he just built but can’t afford to buy, we’ll be there!

Of course, in this speech, the locked-out workers and Mexican car builders are the *objects* of history while Moore and his audience of advocates are the true actors. Thus, despite endowing subjects with a limited amount of “agency,” Moore’s narratives of enlightened activism serve a similar function to his depiction of working-class dupes and white-collar traitors. In this framework, “Leftism,” itself, becomes a form of cultural capital, possessed by Moore and the audience he courts, and to be doled out to those in need of enlightenment.

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<sup>80</sup> Mention other examples: voicebox choir; sal the bill collector; nafta mike. Sometimes Moore uses a surrogate for himself, but the relationship stays the same.

Pamela Fox has described a similar conceit at the heart of Left analysis. In their laudable desire to demystify dominant ideologies and promote everyday forms of resistance from within marginalized (often designated “subaltern”) communities, Fox argues that “radical” scholars run the risk of promoting a “prescriptive mode of class agency” that is based upon an image of “‘authentic’ working class resistance” (7). She employs the radical pedagogy of Henry Giroux as an example. According to Giroux, radical pedagogy would help oppressed groups such as the working class, women and minorities to “affirm their own histories” through their apprehension of language/knowledge that “critically reconstructs and dignifies” their own cultural experiences. However, Fox points out that, in such a system, “those experiences are only ‘dignified,’ it seems, *through* their reconstruction into a ‘progressive’ tradition” (7). That tradition, of course, is based upon a notion of proletarian resistance to the capitalist system itself; a tradition that sees anything less than outright defiance as an act of complicity and self-delusion.

*Contestation, disruption, opposition, transgression, subversion* – all have become key words in our profession for describing practices by which a range of marginalized groups can suggest some sense of both action and refusal. But refusal of what? Despite their attentiveness to ... class-based cultural differences, resistance theorists tend to answer that question by proceeding from what are essentially dominant assumptions and values. Experiencing as well as sacrificing privilege, they can afford to accept the premise that incorporation is equivalent to defeat or regression.

8

As I have argued, this standpoint denies working class experience and understandings. According to this logic, the working class is only really offered two choices; the “freedom” that comes from acquiescing to the Left’s specific version of “authentic”

political resistance, or the shame that comes from complying to one's own oppression. This scheme, Fox argues, "appears to allow little room for survival, getting by – the state in between momentary demystification and cataclysmic transformation" (7). It also acts explicitly as a form of class judgment, shoring up the ability and right of those above the working class to decide just how they should behave, and why. Here, she employs the words of Giroux himself, who writes that, in radical pedagogy:

It is important that students come to grips with what a society has made of them, how it has incorporated them ideologically and materially into its rules and logic, and *what it is that they need to affirm and reject in their own histories* ...

quoted in Fox, 7

Fox singles out the last line of the quote, remarking:

The basis of their choice – what to affirm and what to reject – appears clear cut. But perhaps only for those not directly immersed in the process. ... Who finally decides upon the identities which students are allowed to reclaim?

7

The answer is a middle-class Left which stands above and looks down upon a working class they deem sorely in need of enlightenment.

This is the story that Moore's narratives ultimately work to construct. By depicting the working class as *either* passive dupes and complicit traitors, *or* activists who owe their very agency to Moore's heroic interventions, Moore creates a very circumscribed space within which a "good" working class might exist. In every case, there is still an implicit system of *judgment* at work. Moore's films delineate just what it

is that working class people need to “affirm and reject in their own histories,” and, in so doing, celebrates the authority of middle-class advocates to perform such judgments. Nowhere is this process more apparent than in Moore’s most famous depiction of a working-class “agent” – Lila Lipscomb.

In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Lipscomb serves as a buttress against accusations that Moore often ridicules the people for whom he purports to speak. Lipscomb is a self-proclaimed “conservative democrat,” and a working-class mother fiercely proud of her family’s military history. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore depicts her growing discontent with the war in Iraq, spurred on by her son’s death on the Iraqi battlefield. By “giving voice” to Lipscomb’s pain, anguish, and anger, Moore incorporates an “authentic” working-class voice into his own anti-war argument, in a clear attempt to defend himself from the inevitable accusations that he is “against the troops.” However, as is the case for all of Moore’s subjects, Lipscomb’s narrative is not her own.

The first extended interview with Lipscomb begins with a shot of her hanging the American flag. Moore asks a series of leading questions: “Do you consider yourself a proud American;” “Do you have ... family members that have been in the military?” In response, Lipscomb describes her patriotic nature:

Lipscomb: I’m an extremely proud American ... probably more proud than the average Joe. When I put out my flag out I can’t allow it to touch the ground. Because I know the lives that were lost and the blood that was shed so that I could be here and have a flag.

MM: How often do you hang it?

LL: Every day. Every single day. I started when my

daughter was in Desert Storm. I had the same flag flying on my front porch, and the same yellow ribbons – praying and hoping every day that my child would come home safe, and that everybody’s child would come home safe.

MM: And she did.

LL: And she did.

Lipscomb goes on to tell Moore that she feels her family and others like it are the “backbone of America,” that she’s proud of her son Michael for joining the military (“he made it!”), and that she’s had conflicted feelings about war protestors. It is during this sequence that Moore’s film takes an entirely different tone. Lipscomb is the first subject Moore has interacted with on a personal level. For the first time he appears to actually be *conversing* with a subject and allowing her the space to interpret the world according to her own experience.

It’s a moment that is short-lived. This segment of the film acts as the pivotal set-up for a narrative of enlightened activism. The next time we meet Lipscomb, her son has been killed and she has become completely disillusioned with the war and the President. Thus, the earlier piece of “unmediated” dialogue between Moore and Lipscomb actually works to establish her *misguided* faith in the American military and the role it plays in alleviating economic disparity, thus setting her up for a later transformation from quiescent military mom to angry anti-war activist. Lipscomb’s unswerving faith in the military and those who command it becomes the part of her own history that she must reject for a more resistant attitude, a transformation that only Moore can help her achieve.

The viewer, of course, is made painfully aware of Lipscomb's status as duped victim. In fact, the two sequences detailed above are part of a broader segment in which Moore develops two related arguments; that America's working class have been duped into service through a combination of devious recruiting techniques and economic hardship, and that military service enacts a terrible toll, both psychological and physical, on those who serve. In this way, both interviews with Lipscomb act as "covert interviews," depicting with excruciating emphasis her own misguided acquiescence to the status quo. For instance, Moore sets Lipscomb up for such a portrayal by inserting her into a much earlier sequence detailing the economic woes of Flint. She tells Moore in an interview:

I started taking my children and telling my children: 'The military is a good option. I can't afford to have you go to college. I can't pay your way. Financial aid will not help you.' So I, as a mother, started teaching my children about the options that the military could do. They would take them around the world. They would see all the things that I, as a mother, couldn't let them see. It would pay for their education that I, as a mother and father, could not pay for.

"The military's a good option for kids in Flint?" we hear Moore ask in response, knowing full-well the question is disingenuous. "The military is an *excellent* option for the people of Flint," Lipscomb answers. In so doing, Moore sets Lipscomb up as a kind of tragic (though sympathetic) "fool" – for the rest of the film works to contradict that very sentiment. Thus, from here, Moore segues into a sequence that shows a pair of unscrupulous Marine recruiters targeting a "lower-class" mall for potential enlistees. He then cuts to a sequence detailing the depraved actions of soldiers in Iraq, so desensitized to their cruel and violent mission that they cheerfully carry out house-raids on Christmas

Eve. At the end of this sequence he shifts back to Lipscomb by cutting from a shot of American soldiers pointing guns at a group of Iraqi women, on their knees, pleading – “Don’t hit him! Why don’t you tell us? God keep you, what did he do?” – to a shot of Lila hanging her American flag dutifully in front of her home. In this way, Moore constructs Lipscomb as an exemplar of what he believes to be the misguided logic of working class people who send their kids into the military.

The piece de resistance comes when Moore “returns” to Lipscomb’s home later in the film to reveal that her son has perished in battle. We are invited to witness Lipscomb’s painful retelling of the day she found out her son was killed on the battle field, as well as her emotional reading of his last letter home. Later, Moore accompanies Lipscomb on a journey to the White House in Washington D.C., where her anguish turns to anger. During the filming, a woman confronts Lipscomb, telling the camera, “This is all staged!” When Moore asks Lipscomb what the woman in front of the White House yelled at her, she replies:

“That I’m supposed to blame the al Qaeda. The al Qaeda didn’t make a decision to send my son to Iraq. The ignorance that we deal with, with everyday people. Because they don’t know. People think they know, but you don’t know. I thought I knew, but I didn’t know.”

The power of this scene stems not only from the emotional intensity of Lipscomb’s anguish, but from the political 180 she has made in regards to the war. Indeed, she replicates Moore’s argument about a duped American populace: “she didn’t know.” Lipscomb becomes Moore’s most powerful “enlightened activist.” Indeed, her transformation seems to provide Moore with the inspiration to perform even greater acts

of political courage. The film fades from Lipscomb, hunched over and sobbing in front of the White House, to a shot of Moore, striding purposefully alongside a uniformed officer, who has already pledged earlier in the film to refuse another tour in Iraq. Moore's voice-over strikes an heroic pose:

I guess I was tired of seeing people like Lila Lipscomb suffer. Especially when, out of the 535 members of Congress, only one had an enlisted son in Iraq. I asked Corporal Henderson of the United States Marine Corps to join me on Capitol Hill to see how many members of Congress we could convince to enlist their children to go to Iraq.

Moore ends *Fahrenheit 9/11* on the same note he has sounded throughout his career: heroic advocacy-in-action. According to this narrative, Lipscomb's political awakening is nothing more than a plot-point in Moore's fantasy of advocacy. Her eventual enlightenment serves both as "proof" that Moore is in the right, *and* as inspiration for Moore to continue on with the mission. Thus, in all cases, Moore's depictions of working-class activism are revealed to be instances of "enlightened" activism, marked by a political agency that does not emanate from the subjects themselves, but is bestowed upon them by Moore, who then goes off to do the "real" work of political resistance on his own.

### **Ignoring Activists**

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Moore's "enlightened activism" is the fact that, in many cases, he misses – or perhaps more troublingly, chooses to ignore – the "everyday activists" right in front of him. As such, he passes over perfect opportunities to create compelling portraits of people who *do* "get it," and do, indeed, "fight back." If Moore's goal is to provoke people into action, finding and highlighting subjects already



engaged in political action – or who are, at least, openly critical of the status quo – would seem to be an effective means towards this end. However, Moore’s advocacy narratives constantly work to shut the very possibility of “outside” agency down.

For instance, when *Roger & Me* became a smash-hit nationally, it was initially met with mixed reviews from within the Flint community, itself. Jim Musselman, a lawyer working for Ralph Nader’s organization at the time, argued that the idea for Moore’s film actually stemmed from Moore’s involvement with citizens groups, organized in part by Nader’s organization, which worked tirelessly to challenge GM’s corporate policies and their effect on the broader community (Levin C12). However, when *Roger & Me* came out, Musselman and others involved in the movement were incensed to find that Moore had left them entirely out of the picture: “Everything dealing with the citizen’s movement, everything dealing with the workers, the union people, that was all on the cutting room floor” (*Manufacturing*). *Roger & Me*, Musselman charged, glorified Moore’s own role as heroic savior, while, “forgetting about all the middle-of-the-road people who worked so hard on these issues” (Levin). This resentment was evidenced during a live taping of the *Donahue* show, in which Flint residents packed the studio, many to vent their outrage at Moore’s patronizing portrayal of Flint’s working class (Corliss, “Michael” 58; *Manufacturing*).

In fact, Moore performs a similar act of “silencing” in his portrayal of his long-time friend, Ben Hamper. Hamper is famous in his own right, the author of *Rivthead: Tales from the Assembly Line*, and a longtime columnist for Moore’s muckraking newspaper, the *Flint Voice*. Ironically, Hamper represents, in many ways, what could have been a much more progressive strategy for working-class representation in Moore’s

film. Writing for the *Flint Voice*, Hamper (an autoworker himself at the time) did, in fact, act as a “voice of the working class,” covering daily life on the shop floor and the culture that surrounded it. In fact, it has been argued that it was Hamper, himself, who initially helped boost Moore to national prominence when his column got picked up by the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>81</sup> However, in *Roger & Me*, Moore never lets on to Hamper’s own success as a writer and working-class activist. He’s simply described as one of Moore’s working-class “friends.” As such, Hamper is less a character than a character-*type*. His emotional recounting of his nervous breakdown, brought on by the fear of another impending round of layoffs, serves to crystallize not working-class agency, but the image of a powerless working class.

Indeed, Moore’s refusal to feature the activism of average and working class Americans is a verifiable staple of his work. For instance, one of the most memorable segments from the *Awful Truth* follows Moore as he takes up the cause of a group of Mexican maids at a Holiday Inn Express in Minneapolis. The hotel management, we are told, has sold the women out to the INS in retaliation for their attempt to form a union. Moore frames the segment as yet another narrative of audacious bravado, and thus he embarks on an heroic quest to single-handedly save the maids from deportation. We watch as Moore turns the hotel in for health code violations, dashes back and forth across the country to meet with various INS agents, and (of course) confronts the hotel manager, himself, in his usual courageous fashion. The segment ends with a brief sequence depicting the workers celebrating outside the local court house after a judge’s ruling gives them the right to remain in the US.

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<sup>81</sup> For a fuller description of Hamper’s career and his connections to Moore see: Larner (39-45).

While this is certainly a rousing story of political justice, however, the segment omits the real work done behind the scenes that led to the workers' victory. The episode gives the impression that Moore, alone, discovered this situation and that a legal victory was reached as a result of his heroic effort; but in fact the workers were very much a part of their own struggle, as were many members of the community. Parishioners of the workers' local Catholic Church had been speaking out against the Holiday's Inn's actions months before Moore got involved – holding prayer vigils, rallies and fundraising drives. The Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Unions were also actively involved in the struggle. This collective action by community supporters, organized labor, and the maids, themselves, culminated in a large, public rally of support outside the INS district offices in Bloomington, MN the morning of their court date (Grow 2B). In fact, it is safe to assume that this rally serves as the footage Moore uses at the end of his segment depicting the workers celebrating. However, none of the collective action employed to bring this all about is included in Moore's piece. While there is no doubt that Moore, and the publicity his television program brought with it, had a hand in the workers' victory, the segment makes it appear as though Moore was the only one involved.

Even when real-life activists *are* included in his films, they seem to get short shrift. In *Bowling For Columbine*, Moore introduces us to Tom Mauser, whose young son was killed at Columbine. In many ways, Mauser represented a golden opportunity for Moore to include the character of a real-life, grass-roots, political activist who took action against the powers that be. After his son's death, Mauser transformed himself into a nationally recognized anti-gun activist, and had been working to change gun laws well before Moore began filming *Bowling for Columbine*. In 1999, Mauser quit his job to

become the director of SAFE Colorado (Sane Alternatives to the Firearms Epidemic), a lobbyist group pushing for safer gun laws (Romano). So prominent had his work become that, in 2000, he was recognized by President Clinton during his State of the Union Address. In fact, Moore's mano-a-mano confrontation with Charlton Heston at the end of *Bowling for Columbine* should have felt somewhat familiar to Mauser, for it was Mauser, himself, who originally mounted a one-man challenge to Heston and the NRA in 2001. He was arrested outside NRA headquarters in Fairfax, VA for staging a "one-man march" to demand a personal apology from Heston (Silverman).

However, like the maids, community members, and union organizers who challenged the Holiday Inn Express, Mauser is, for all intents and purposes, absent from Moore's narrative. In *Bowling for Columbine*, Mauser is relegated to the exemplary label: "Tom Mauser: Father of Columbine victim." Rather than representing an angered, and active, segment of the community, Mauser represents a victimized population, overrun by Heston and the NRA, and unable to do anything about it. Indeed, when Moore includes a small clip of Mauser's emotional speech, delivered as part of an anti-gun rally protesting Heston and the NRA's presence in Denver so soon after Columbine, it would have made sense for him to also include an interview – or some kind of engagement – with the anti-gun movement, itself, as a way to give voice to those from the Littleton Community who stood up against Heston and the NRA. But instead, Moore cuts to his interview with celebrity Matt Stone who, as described earlier, is invited to sit in judgment upon a Middle American community that has lost all sense of perspective. As such, Moore simply ignores the efforts by many members of that community who were working towards social change.

Thus, what Moore's narratives of enlightened activism represent, more than anything else perhaps, are great *missed opportunities*. Moore is always at pains to describe his films as efforts to move a complacent public into action; to make political activism seem not only right, but *possible*. However, every time he gets his camera on someone doing just that, he relegates them to the sidelines of history. In the end, Moore's films create the image of a world in which he seems to be the only activist.

### **Conclusion**

As Stephanie Lawler has put it, summarizing recent theorizing on class:

class inequality is not [to be understood] simply as a matter of economic inequality but also as circulating through symbolic and cultural forms – through, for example, the means by which people become judged as morally worthwhile, or as having the right kind of knowledge ...

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Moore's depiction of working class people as victims, dupes, traitors, and enlightened “recruits;” as people who harbor faulty desires, perpetuate self-destructive behaviors, and require education and enlightenment in the ways of progressive “resistance;” works to reproduce this very kind of class inequality. His films are not only political critiques but cultural *diagnoses*; invitations to observe and judge the working class.

Thus, more than anything else, Moore's films celebrate a middle-class claim to cultural authority; what Beverly Skeggs calls a “structure of feeling” that is:

not based upon the emotional politics of anxiety and doubt, but on that of security and confidence. Middle-class people are able to operate with a sense of entitlement to social space and economic rewards that would be beyond comprehension for those of the working class for whom limitation and restraint frame their social movement.

As such, rather than act as a “voice of the working class,” Moore’s films constitute “fantasies of advocacy” that are inscribed in specifically classed terms. While he often chides his imagined audience of middle-class advocates for their inattention to the plight of those beneath them, he also reinforces their sense of class privilege by invoking – and, indeed, celebrating – their ability and hence, authority, to make things right.

As I will discuss in Chapter 6, this classifying discourse has not only ideological implications but *strategic* ones as well. Specifically, I will describe the ways in which Moore’s classed mode of address opens himself up to charges of “liberal elitism” from the Right. Before I do that, however, it is important to move away from Moore’s *texts*, momentarily, and consider the broader, interpretive discourses that surround them. How are Moore’s fantasies of advocacy understood within the public realm? And how do Moore’s role as both cinematic “auteur” and political *celebrity* affect his own class-image?

## CHAPTER 4

### COMMITMENT ISSUES: MICHAEL MOORE AND THE POPULAR PRESS

*"We were dealing with reels of film, not politics.  
We all agreed that Fahrenheit 9/11 was the best film."*<sup>82</sup>

– Quentin Tarantino,  
Jury President, 2004 Cannes Film festival

#### **Introduction**

In the last two chapters, I looked at the ways in which Michael Moore's particular brand of reflexive documentary undermines his ability to create a truly ethical form of committed documentary. In the second part of this dissertation, I shift gears a bit to look at the ways in which Moore's reflexive style of documentary is articulated within the public sphere. Despite Moore's problematic mode of address and depiction of class identity, it is important to acknowledge the fact that he does, nonetheless, represent a rare, progressive voice in an overwhelmingly conservative mainstream media universe. Moore works within the realm of what Chris Atton calls "radical journalism," in that he offers alternative arguments about and interpretations of issues and events (from the GM layoffs to the Iraq war) not usually found within the mainstream media. Furthermore, his ability to make such arguments *within* the mainstream media, via national, theatrical releases, makes Moore the rare progressive voice working within the confines of the very media system he challenges. Thus, it is important to consider Moore's films not only in terms of their own representational strategies, but within the broader context of the mainstream media universe, itself.

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<sup>82</sup> Ebert, "Jury" 4

Given the “radical” nature of his work, Moore’s films have often been received with great trepidation by the mainstream media, especially the popular press. More often than not, his films have been mired in controversy from the start. In 1989, Moore was accused of and denounced for “manipulating” history in *Roger & Me*. Most critics found Moore’s committed style of documentary to be deeply at odds with the standards and tenets of “legitimate” journalistic practice. In the summer of 2004, when *Fahrenheit 9/11* broke box office records for documentaries, similar concerns and anxieties were stoked, sparking a national discussion on the place of documentary in contemporary political culture. Throughout his career, the legitimacy of Moore’s films have always been questioned, while the actual content of his arguments and analyses have been buried beneath raucous public debates over the efficacy of his films and the integrity of Moore, himself.

Of course, it has not always been entirely bad news for Michael Moore. Indeed, the vehemence with which journalists, film reviewers and other media commentators have debated his film’s merits stands as a testament to Moore’s successful career as a public figure. In fact, after the initial bruhaha over *Roger & Me* subsided, Moore launched a very successful career as a political entertainer and documentarian, producing two television series and penning a number of bestselling books of political opinion. He was often featured on news programs, such as *Nightline*, and talk shows, such as Bill Maher’s then-fledgling *Politically Incorrect*. Before his infamous antiwar statements on the stage of the Academy Awards in 2003, Moore and his 2002 film, *Bowling for Columbine*, were the toast of film world – and the recipients of nationwide critical acclaim. Thus, while Moore has often been criticized as a journalist, he has also been



praised as a filmmaker and, at times, as a bonafide cinematic *auteur*. As such, the story of Michael Moore is not only one of accusations and critiques, but also spirited defenses and critical celebration.

Given the vast amount of public discourse surrounding Moore and his work over the years, it would be virtually impossible to understand the role Moore's films play in contemporary political culture without taking into account the manner in which they have been interpreted and understood within the public sphere. Indeed, so prominent are the public debates and discussions surrounding Moore that it is virtually impossible for *any* viewer to come to a conclusion about Moore and his work outside of this context. Thus, whereas the last two chapters focused on the films, themselves, the following two chapters focus on the ways in which those films have been interpreted and articulated within the public sphere.

In the chapter that follows, I will look at the ways in which film reviewers and journalists in the popular press have interpreted Moore's films, paying particular attention to the criteria used to evaluate their efficacy and importance as political documents. Specifically, I will look at the ways in which three cultural "discourses" – what I call the "discourse of documentary," the "discourse of independent film," and the "discourse of infotainment" – all worked at various times to delegitimize the political potency of Moore's films and the integrity of Moore, himself, as an alternative political voice.

I intend to show that what the critical interpretation of Moore's work reveals is a broader social logic that appears to inhibit the legitimate airing of alternative political views within the public sphere. While critics are willing to compliment Moore's talents as a filmmaker, and his right to free, personal expression, they seem unwilling to

legitimize his films as “true documentaries,” and thus, delegitimize the importance, and even usefulness, of his arguments. But just as problematic is the way in which Moore has often been defended and praised in the popular press. By celebrating Moore as a cinematic “artist” and “indie auteur,” Moore’s supporters often ignored the *political* aspects of his films. Furthermore, by positioning Moore’s documentaries as independent art films geared towards an elite, discerning audience of “serious” filmgoers, these supporters also reinforced the problems associated with Moore’s patronizing, “classist” mode of address. Ultimately, I intend to describe the discursive terrain within which Michael Moore’s films have been received and interpreted.

### **Discourse and the Critics**

As discussed in the Methodology section, I begin with the notion that we understand films not only as texts, but as “discursive events.” As Janet Staiger has argued, any give film is: “an event not a text ... a set of interpretations or affective experiences produced by individuals from an encounter with a text or set of texts within a social situation” (“Taboos” 144). As such, what is performed by the analyst is “not an analysis of the text except in so far as to consider what textually might be facilitating the reading” (144). Thus, in analyzing Moore’s work, it is crucial to pay attention not only to the ways in which his texts are constructed (as I have done in previous chapters), but to what aspects of his texts are deemed important by viewers, what meanings are made of them, and why. To carry out such an analysis, Staiger argues that we locate the “traces” of such an event; and by this she means instances of interpretive practice. For Staiger, often times these traces can be found most prominently within the public record; film reviews, news articles, advertisements, and publicity circulated in the mass media are all

“traces” of an interpretive event from which the analyst might elucidate discursive logics (144). Specifically, by paying attention not only to what interpretations are repeated, but what interpretations are not present at all (“structuring absences”), the analyst is able to consider the “range of readings” that are possible within a given historical moment (144).

According to this perspective, the public reception of a film not only provides evidence of particular interpretive strategies and discursive logics; it should also be seen as a crucial part of the process *by which* those discourses are solidified and reinforced. What film scholar Paul Smith calls the “tributary media” are a crucial part of the process through which any given text is understood:

I make use ... of the term *tributary media* to point to the discursive arenas whereby the Hollywood text is, in effect, advertised and amplified, where its meanings are explicated and reinforced, for viewers and potential viewers. Among the tributary media I include particularly television and journalism and their functions as what we call ‘reviewers’ of texts that Hollywood has produced. It becomes daily more and more inescapable that many television programs (such as *Entertainment Tonight*) and many media-oriented magazines (such as *Movieline*), as well as the traditional newspaper and magazine practice of film reviewing are all part of the Hollywood text.<sup>83</sup>

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Many scholars have argued for the importance of reviewers, critics, reporters and editorialists in solidifying the meaning of a particular film. E. Deidre Pribram argues that reviewers perform a mediating role when it comes to film interpretation, constituting a “second tier of interpretation that comes after industry personnel and before a wider

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<sup>83</sup> Here it seems important to point out that, even though Moore’s films have usually been positioned as “independent films,” the “indie” film sector within which he operates has, by in large, been co-opted by the Hollywood industry as a whole See: Perren; Wyatt, “The Formation.”

audience” (142).<sup>84</sup> Seen in this way, while the interpretive practices of “actual viewers” are not *determined* by journalists, the critical discussion surrounding any given film does become part of the context *within which* viewers construct their own interpretations of a given text. As such, Pribram argues that critics often perform the function of meaning “stabilization”:

It is difficult to determine the extent to which newspaper and magazine reviews affect public interpretations of films. While they may serve as indicators of how films can, and perhaps are, being read, they clearly do not speak for all viewers. However, their public role may help forge culturally negotiated interpretations of any given text; they may participate in the consolidation process of what come to be widely accepted readings.

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Furthermore, I would argue that the role journalists play in “consolidating” interpretations is even greater when a film becomes the subject of controversy and public debate, as is the case of so many of Moore’s films.

Given the tributary media’s ability to mediate between text and audience, stabilizing and consolidating meanings and interpretations, we must view the process of film reviewing precisely as an *ideological* endeavor. This argument is made by Meaghan Morris:

In the heterogeneity of a postindustrial culture, reviewers of films are not arbiters of taste, or judges, or even representative consumers, but mercenaries in the stabilizing force of the Thought Police. We do not decree what should be thought about any particular *film*; but we do help to patrol the limits of what is safely *or* adventurously think-able as *cinema* at any given time.

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<sup>84</sup> See also: Cooper and Pease; Projansky; Projansky and Ono; Staiger, “Taboos”; Staiger *Interpreting* (178-195); Allen and Gomery (91-104).

Importantly, what Morris describes here is a subtle form of censorship. Film reviewers can't tell us what to think about a given film, but they can help to determine what is “*interesting, important, and essential*” about a given film (113). These terms, Morris argues, are all “names for ideological decisions referring not just to the personal tastes of the editor but to a professional consensus about ‘what really matters’ when writing about film for the audience of any publication” (113). Thus, following Morris, Pribram, Smith, and Staiger, my analysis begins with the notion that the popular press plays an ideological role in constructing the meaning and importance of Michael Moore and his films.

In the following chapter, I will analyze the popular press reception of each of Moore's first four major documentaries: *Roger & Me* (1989), *The Big One* (1998), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Using Staiger's terminology, I am considering each film as a separate discursive “event,” and the reviews, articles and editorials surrounding each film their “traces.”<sup>85</sup> In studying the discursive strategies employed to interpret Moore's work, I will argue that both detractors *and* supporters of Moore worked to dull the political edge of his committed documentaries, while often times reinforcing the worst aspects of his patronizing mode of address. In order to understand how this takes place, however, it is first necessary to consider the way in which committed documentary – and, indeed, the concept of political “commitment,” itself – has traditionally been understood within mainstream media discourse.

### **Committed Documentary in the Public Sphere**

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<sup>85</sup> Please see the Methodology section of the Introduction for a description of how I constructed analytical sample sets for each film.

## Debating Documentary

In his recounting of Michael Moore's rise to fame in the Fall of 1989, independent film producer John Pierson, who was representing Moore at the time in his bid for a major distributor, argues that all was going swimmingly with the film until December of that year when "all hell broke loose" (168). The occasion for the downturn in Moore's to-that-point triumphant rise to the top of the film world was an interview with journalist Harlan Jacobson in *Film Comment*. Despite the magazine's tiny circulation, Pierson points out, the interview had a huge impact: "From December of 1989 through February 1990 almost every great development for *Roger & Me* was partly neutralized by bad news" (168).

In the interview, Harlan Jacobson lauded Moore's political goals, but attacked his methods. Central to Jacobson's critique was evidence that Moore had manipulated some of the time sequences in his recounting of Flint's history with General Motors. Referencing an article from the *Flint Journal*, Jacobson revealed that many of the failed attempts by city officials to address Flint's failing economy occurred *before* the massive GM layoffs in 1986 and 1987, as did the visits by various public figures who came to Flint in an effort to assuage residents' economic worries. Furthermore, Jacobson argued that Moore fudged the numbers when describing the severity of GM layoffs.<sup>86</sup> The crux of Jacobson's critique was that Moore played "fast and loose" with the facts in an effort to buttress his own argument. As such, Jacobson argued, Moore had tarnished what he called the "core credibility of the documentary" – namely, the expectation that "what we are seeing there happened, in the way in which we are told it happened" (22). Ultimately,

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<sup>86</sup> While Moore claims GM slashed 30,000 jobs, Jacobson points out that in 1986 the company laid off about 10,000. Moore's figures refer to a broad span of time between 1974 and 1989, while his commentary seems to imply that it all happened in "one single felling blow" (Jacobson, "Michael" 22).

he argued that Moore's film was faulty because it put his subjective opinions over traditional journalistic standards of objectivity. "You and I are both journalists," he scolded Moore. "That's the only thing we take into the marketplace" ("Michael" 23).

The repercussions of the interview and its revelations were "fierce" (Pierson 170). Critics across the country began to call the integrity of the film into question, including influential film reviewers Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* and Richard Schickel of *Time* (170). GM used the critical response to its advantage, circulating a "truth packet" which included the Jacobson piece as well as Kael's negative review. Phil Donahue devoted two entire television programs to the controversy, and the film was ultimately denied an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary (despite much speculation that it would not only be nominated but *win*). But Moore also garnered much support throughout the controversy. Journalists such as Vincent Canby and Roger Ebert enthusiastically defended Moore in print, while prestigious groups such as the L.A. Film Critics Association and the New York Film Critics Circle declared *Roger* the best documentary, and one of the ten best films, of the year. When the Academy snubbed Moore at Oscar time, a large group of documentary filmmakers signed a letter of protest.

Thus, the debate surrounding *Roger & Me* has often been defined as a battle between what B.J. Bullert calls "two conflicting perspectives" (168). The first, espoused by Jacobson, "applies the journalist's standards of accuracy and trust to the film criticism of documentary" (168). This is the logic of what I call the "discourse of documentary," in which the mere presence of a particular political "commitment" on Moore's part, along with "evidence" that he tailored an argument to support that commitment, is enough to tarnish the legitimacy of his film as a documentary. The second perspective, espoused by

critics such as Vincent Canby, who strenuously defended *Roger & Me* throughout the controversy, “grants broad artistic license to the filmmaker as a storyteller, with no requirements for ‘fairness’ when telling a larger truth” (169). However, Bullert argues that it was Moore’s detractors who ultimately won the day. By the time Moore’s supporters got around to defending him, “the framing of the debate had shifted from the content of the film to its integrity” (157).

While I agree with Bullert’s argument that the cultural obsession over journalistic standards of documentary worked to sink Moore’s film, I believe analyses such as this do not go quite far enough. Bullert’s analysis tends to paint the controversy over *Roger & Me* as a battle of journalists who “get it,” and those who don’t. According to this logic, a simple adjustment to the definition of “documentary,” itself, is all that is required to set things right. However, I would argue that a closer look at the controversy reveals a more complex situation.

As my analysis will show, those critics who *defended* Moore didn’t exactly make a spirited case for the legitimacy of committed documentary as a political tool. In fact, critics such as Canby did *not* defend Moore as “an activist, an essayist, and a revolutionary,” first and foremost, but rather as a filmmaker and *artist*. According to this logic, Moore’s film is to be defended primarily because it provides film-goers with a thought-provoking, “artistic” experience. As such, they *also* offered an interpretation of Moore that shifted attention away from (and at times delegitimized) his radical, political goals. Ultimately, then, what the *Roger & Me* controversy reveals is that the discourse of documentary stems from a much broader ideological context in which the mainstream



media work to dull the “radical” edges of any text that attempts to challenge the status quo.

### **Delegitimizing “Commitment”**

Michael Moore – along with most committed documentarians – operates firmly within the parameters of what Chris Atton describes as “radical journalism.” By this I mean that Moore’s main goal is to construct a “counter-discourse” that is specifically meant to be read *against* the mainstream media (491). As Moore explained in an interview for *Roger & Me*: “The movie is doing the job *The Flint Journal* should have been doing” (Hartl, “Michael” G1). When viewed within the context of the mainstream media landscape, Moore’s “committed” films must be viewed as acts of journalistic redress – as attempts to set “the record” straight by offering an alternative perspective not usually given a legitimate public airing.

For the mainstream media to maintain its dominance within society, it must be able to fend off such challenges to its authority; it must “contain and incorporate dissident values of subordinate groups within an ideological space” (Atton 493). More often than not, this containment is achieved by invoking what I call the “discourse of documentary.” According to this logic, rather than address the specific arguments made by a committed documentary in a way that properly contextualizes those arguments (as “alternative” or “counter-hegemonic”), journalistic standards of neutrality and objectivity are applied to the film instead. The committed documentary is inevitably found wanting, and denounced as biased and manipulative.

The work of Stuart Hall is helpful in explaining the ways in which this strategy works. In his analysis of television news programs, Hall argues that we can

pinpoint a number of interpretational schemes that influence the ways in which broadcasters report the news and the ways in which that news is subsequently evaluated by those outside it. These interpretational schemes are limited via a number of self-imposed “intervening concepts” which define what is and isn’t an appropriate way to report the news. These concepts, of course, are articulated within specific ideological contexts. Thus, it is through these intervening concepts that “broadcasting incorporates itself to the power-ideology complex” (“Media Power” 359).

We might take for example the notion of “impartiality,” which Hall argues is a crucial intervening concept. Under the requirement of impartiality, broadcasters are not supposed to give their opinions about the issue being represented; they are to remain “neutral.” Thus, any issue is assumed to have two sides, both of which are represented equally. However, as Hall points out, this notion of “balance” is purely *formal* in nature: “it has little or no relevance to the quite unequal weights of the case for each side in the real world” (360).<sup>87</sup> Indeed, in any given case, the notions of balance and impartiality are not ideal/universal concepts, but specific to and contingent upon the case at hand.

For instance, labor disputes are often defined within the mainstream media from a “consumer” perspective. According to this logic, events such as mass layoffs,

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<sup>87</sup> This formal balance is often simplistically conceived, on political grounds, as being one of *party* balance: “Political balance operates essentially between the legitimate mass parties in the [political] system” (Hall 359). But in the case of the GM plant closings, neither the Democratic leadership nor the Republican leadership had an interest in challenging GM’s mass lay-offs (despite their minor differences on the issue). Thus, merely referencing the Democratic and Republican “sides” of the story, while appearing neutral, has the result of strengthening the status quo, as neither side stood against the lay offs.

contract negotiations and labor strikes are described in terms of how they will affect the consumers who exist outside the confines of the dispute, itself. From this perspective, an “impartial” depiction of the event would give “equal” time to representatives from both sides of the dispute, all with a goal towards assessing for the “consumer” how the event will affect them. Of course, the result of such a depiction is to privilege the consumer-corporate relationship, at the expense of the labor-corporate relationship. In the end, what might be called the “labor perspective” gets short-shrift, despite a journalistic adherence to the tenets of “impartiality.”

Thus, we see the inherent problem for Moore’s film, and any film that attempts to construct counter-hegemonic messages. Within such a context, a film like *Roger & Me* is specifically meant to redress the omission of a labor perspective by providing one where it is sorely lacking. As such, the idea that a filmmaker like Moore must give “equal airtime” to GM’s perspective in order to achieve balance is utterly preposterous. However, because proper journalism has been defined as something which must be impartial, a film like *Roger & Me* is automatically “disqualified” from legitimacy *as a documentary* and reduced to the category of “biased propaganda.” This is what Hall calls the media’s “double bind.” “The media,” he argues, “cannot long retain their credibility with the public without giving some access to witnesses and accounts which lie outside consensus” (“Media Power” 364). The problem, of course, is that the moment it does this, the media “immediately endangers itself with its critics, who attack broadcasting for unwittingly tipping the balance of public feeling against the political order” (364). It is precisely this “double-bind” in which Moore has found himself every time one of his films has entered the public sphere. He is congratulated for offering a

“fresh perspective” and providing an “alternative voice,” but denounced for the very same reasons – for providing *only* his perspective, and airing *only* his voice.

While many scholars have concentrated on the ways in which Moore has been attacked according to stringent criteria for what “counts” as documentary,<sup>88</sup> it is also crucial to pay critical attention to the way in which Moore’s supporters defended his work. With no way to legitimately stake a claim for a committed form of documentary, Moore and his supporters often countered with what I call the “Art Defense,” in which *Roger* was defended primarily for its aesthetic achievements. However, by defending Moore’s film as art, supporters implicitly deflect the political aspect of his arguments by defining them merely as the personal thoughts of an individual “auteur,” geared towards providing a willing audience with a serious and intellectual cinematic experience. Within this frame, Moore’s work as committed documentarian – and the status of his arguments as alternative, counter-hegemonic perspectives – was lost.

The notion of documentary as “art,” rather than, say, journalism (or “radical journalism,” as Atton defines it) has a long history and has often worked to undermine the political potential of committed work. Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby provide a useful example of this tendency in their discussion of Louis Hine’s photography documenting child labor exploitation in the 1930s. According to Gross, et. al., the way in which any documentary text is interpreted is dependent upon the context within which it is viewed:

The meaning and significance attached to a visual image are a consequence of the label attached to it, the expectations associated with the context in which the image appears, and the assumptions made by

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<sup>88</sup> See: Toplin; Winston, *Lies.*; Bullert; Corner, *The Art*.

audiences about which sort of images are produced by which sort of image makers and shown in which sort of settings.

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Thus, the context within which Hine's photographs were viewed changed the way in which they were interpreted. When they were sent out to legislators, clergy, and other powerful groups as part of a political effort to stop child labor practices, the photographs took on the meaning of a "call to arms." However, when displayed as art in places such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, they argue, Hines' photographs lost their political potency. In these instances, the children in the images were transformed from "pitiable victims of capitalist exploitation" into "aesthetic objects with interesting if not haunting faces," while "[t]he photographs [we]re now regarded primarily for their syntactic elements, their formal and aesthetic qualities" (19). In the case of *Roger & Me*, critics who defended Moore constructed a similar interpretive context when they employed the "art defense."

Perhaps even more troubling, however, was the way in which the "art defense" also rearticulated the imagined audience to which Moore's films purport to speak. While Moore's intention has always been to create entertaining political documentaries for a mass audience, his celebration within the popular press as an irrepressible new documentary "auteur" constructed an image of his films as being geared towards providing a highly-educated, middle-to-upper class audience with a "serious" and "engaging" night at the movies. As such, Moore's supporters in the popular press often reinforced Moore's patronizing/classifying tendencies, furthering the impression that he

made movies about the working class for the pleasure and enjoyment of a broadly middle-upper class audience.

In later years the debate over whether or not his films should be designated journalism or art would be further complicated by Moore's insistence that they were better understood as *entertainment*. This was a strategy that would backfire in both directions; delegitimizing his journalistic aspirations by defining his films as "infotainment," and undermining his artistic credibility by creating the impression that Moore was "selling out" to a mass audience. However, as we shall see, despite the twists and turns, the basic contours of the debate which erupted around *Roger & Me* have remained relatively stable. Moore's committed documentaries have always existed within the complicated and contradictory nexus of journalism, art, and entertainment. And, at different times, different films have been attacked and defended according to the criteria of each designation. But, throughout the years, one pattern has remained consistent: Moore's films can only be taken seriously within the public sphere as long as his true, political commitments are held at bay.

### **(Re)Viewing Michael Moore**

#### **Documentary, Art, *Roger and Moore***

In this section, I look at the way in which traditional notions of "documentary" and "art" (specifically associated with the contemporary advent of "indie" cinema) combined to undermine the political meanings and radical goals of *Roger & Me*. Furthermore, I argue that the way in which this interpretive logic unfolded replicated, in many ways, how American political documentary has traditionally been articulated throughout the years. Thus, in order to understand the way in which *Roger & Me* was

interpreted in 1989, it is necessary to briefly consider the contours of this interpretive logic.

### **The “Documentary Idea” and the “Triumph of Verite”**

As discussed in the Introduction, Bill Nichols argues that the documentary form obtains its special status as a truth-telling medium from a broader discursive strategy connected with 20<sup>th</sup> century positivism: what he calls the “discourses of sobriety” (3).

This discursive logic defines documentary as a serious and trustworthy affair.

Documentaries are not meant to entertain, nor are they meant to “persuade” (since persuasion implies the possibility of falsehood). Documentaries are meant to *document*; to record what is, in fact, *true*: “Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real world as direct, immediate, transparent” (4). Seen in this way, the formal qualities of the traditional documentary text are not really meant to “guarantee” its truthful/objective relationship to the world, but instead to *meet the expectations* of an audience that demands such a relationship. As Nichols puts it: “The distinguishing mark of documentary may be less intrinsic to the text than a function of the assumptions and expectations that characterize the viewing” (*Representing* 24).

Perhaps the most forceful illustration of this idea is Brian Winston’s important book, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and its Legitimations*, in which he describes the way in which a specific discourse of documentary legitimizes some films while delegitimizing others, ultimately determining the manner in which all documentaries are evaluated. As discussed previously, Winston begins his analysis with John Grierson. Paying attention not only to the films themselves, but the public statements, arguments, and debates surrounding Grierson and his followers, Winston

describes the way in which a particular understanding of the documentary and its uses was initially molded.

To summarize briefly, Winston begins with the concept of “mimesis,” the indexical relationship of image to object that underlies the entire realist project in documentary film (*Claiming* 6). This power of documentary to “capture the real,” was placed within the logic of legal contract, in which the term “document” came to mean any piece of written material – a brief, a writ, a note, etc. – that took on the status of “evidence before the law” (11). The connotation of the document as “evidence” became, then, the “frame ... into which the technology of the photograph could be placed” (11). This kind of thinking equated documentary with a journalistic notion of neutral reportage, one that Grierson and his followers often claimed. Winston labels this way of thinking “burdensome.” According to this logic, any film that was deemed too “manipulative,” too “subjective” – indeed, too “committed,” was denounced as failing to live up to the stringent dicta of mimetic and evidentiary documentation (255). Ever since Grierson, “commitment has been seen as a species of deviancy, a falling off from ‘objectivity’ that was supposedly the norm of the Griersonian documentary” (255).

The Griersonian burden took on additional baggage during the 1960s and 70s when technological advances, such as lightweight, portable cameras and sync-sound recording, allowed documentarians to film events “in the moment,” as they transpired. Given the realist assumptions undergirding documentary discourse, these innovations were tailor-made to further the Griersonian tradition. In the U.S., filmmakers like Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and Frederick Wiseman used the technology to create a more “observational”-style of filmmaking, called Direct Cinema, in which the camera’s ability



to “capture the real” was highlighted. Bouyed by this new technology, filmmakers and critics alike developed a rhetoric that “luxuriated in the scientific potential of the form” (148).<sup>89</sup>

According to Winston, the effects of this discursive logic are still with us today. By reinforcing an understanding of documentary as a realist enterprise, the direct cinema movement, housed within the Griersonian tradition, set forth the criteria by which all future documentaries would be judged. The result is what Winston refers to as “the triumph of verite ... a bastard form [of direct cinema] that reduces the rigor of direct cinema practice to an easy amalgam of hand-held available-light synch shooting and older elements” (*Claiming* 210). The point of this style is to create the impression of neutral observation, a concession any documentary must now make in order to be received as “legitimate.”<sup>90</sup>

This “discourse of documentary” exerts an enormous influence upon how audiences interpret individual documentaries. Specifically, Winston argues, it has had two disastrous effects. First, it has succeeded in producing a series of moral panics over

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<sup>89</sup> Of course, even in the 1960s, the manipulative nature of the image was apparent to many, and as the rhetoric of Richard Leacock and others grew more strident, Direct Cinema came under increasing attack. As a result, practitioners such as Frederick Wiseman and Leacock developed a contradictory kind of double-speak that denied the absolute objectivity of the event on film, but recuperated the film’s status as evidence, nonetheless. In this rhetorical strategy, “the films are claimed as objective evidence of the subjective experience of the filmmaker ... It is the filmmaker’s subjectivity that is being objectively recorded. Direct cinema is still evidence of something – the filmmaker’s ‘witness’” (Winston, *Claiming* 162). What’s important here, as Winston points out, is that, while the rhetoric surrounding documentary may have changed, the discursive logic remains the same. Whether filmmakers were trumpeting documentary’s scientific power to capture the real, or describing it as an objective recording of a subjective vision, the documentary itself was still legitimated in terms of its mimetic powers: documentary was still being judged according to “the same implicit cultural appeal to photography’s scientific heritage” (Winston, *Claiming* 162).

<sup>90</sup> Indeed, so powerful has the discourse of documentary become, Winston argues, that even Grierson’s films themselves are now deemed illegitimate, thanks to their reliance on subjective techniques such as event-staging and voice-over commentary.

the issue of “fakery,” which delegitimizes any documentary in which filmic manipulation can be proven (*Lies* 25):

... there is now an established journalistic inferential frame that allows papers to continue to pounce on ... documentary, and other kinds of factual programming, for wrongdoings of all kinds. These include not just downright fraud and misrepresentation, but all aspects of reconstruction and editing as well as ineptitude and naivete.

*Lies* 26

Ultimately, this has created an environment that threatens free expression, especially as it concerns committed documentaries like *Roger & Me*, which Winston references specifically: “So far had the ‘pure’ direct cinema idea of the documentary as evidential reflection of the world triumphed in the public mind that *Roger & Me* was criticized ... because the order of the filming was not the order of the film” (206).

Secondly, and perhaps more dangerous, is the ideological function that this discursive logic serves. By “outing” various committed documentarians as fakers and propagandists (simply by revealing the obvious – and usually admitted – fact that they are in the business of *constructing arguments* rather than *recording reality*), Winston argues that the mainstream media shore up their *own* claim on truth and reality:

While threats to documentary free expression grow because of the feeble-mindedness of far too many current practitioners and their unwillingness to articulate a defense of practice on the traditional pre-Direct Cinema differences between documentary and journalism, at the same time the television system as a whole is able to claim, by contrast, that the rest of its output can be trusted, is not ‘faked,’ does not misrepresent. ... The more documentaries get into trouble, implicitly the more pristine is all the news, current affairs, and factual programming by contrast. *The failure of documentary to maintain its claim on the real, therefore, has profound ideological power.*

Here we return to Stuart Hall's notion of the media's "double-bind." The discourse of documentary not only has a chilling effect on the aesthetic strategies documentary can legitimately employ; it also serves as ideological justification for denouncing any film, and/or filmmaker, who attempts to challenge the status quo. According to this logic, the arguments of *any* filmmaker whose commitments lie outside the established consensus will not be judged on their merits. Instead, the very fact that they have committed themselves to an argument geared towards producing some kind of social change is "evidence" enough to denounce them.

### **The "Bias Caveat"**

The ideological function of the discourse of documentary was a defining feature of the controversy surrounding *Roger & Me*. Once the Jacobson interview came to light, the question of whether or not Moore's film lived up to the "standards" of documentary became paramount. Chief among the concerns journalists had was Moore's narrative "manipulation" of historical events. Critic after critic felt compelled to mention the sequencing controversy – even those who supported the film. For instance, Hal Hinson, of the *Washington Post*, wrote that the fact that Moore "fuzzied the chronology of events" cast Moore's "political points ... in a more dubious light ... reduc[ing] a great film to a nearly great one" ("Roger" D1). Clark Perry, of the *St. Petersburg Times* lamented the fact that More "violated a few unspoken rules of non-fiction filmmaking," arguing that "[y]ou want to shake Michael Moore's hand for the job he's done here, but at times you want to slightly slap it, too" ("Moore" 7).

However, the anxiety over Moore's "fuzzy" chronologies was not just about getting the facts straight, but about the very notion of *argument*, itself. It was Moore's *subjective interpretation* of the facts he presented that worried most journalists. Thus, Richard Schickel of *Time* read Moore's manipulations as evidence of something sinister at the heart of the film: an *opinion*. "He is ... not simply recording reality," Schickel wrote in his searing review, "but imposing on it a fictional design that proves the predetermined point he wants to make". Desson Howe, of the *Washington Post*, had a similar complaint, arguing that *Roger* was at its best when it kept Moore's opinions *out*: "Where Moore makes his mark is basically where he shuts up and, like a good documentarian ought to, lets the subject speak" ("*Roger*" N40). Even famed documentarian Frederick Wiseman weighed in on Moore's subjective journalism:

I readily acknowledge that my films are biased, subjective, prejudiced, condensed, compressed. ... But I think that my films are fair, and by fair I mean that they are an accurate account of the experience I had when making the film rather than an imposition of a preconceived point of view.  
Bernstein "*Roger*" C20

Here, Wiseman reveals the real "problem" with Moore's film to be its committed nature. According to this logic, *no* documentarian can create a film arguing a specific point, regardless of how "factual" it is.

As such, reviewers felt the need to continuously flagpost Moore's blatant *partiality* by employing what I call the "bias caveat." Reviews are laced with language such as: "Though *Roger & Me's* editing plays somewhat fast and loose with the juxtaposition of real-life events, it qualifies as an event itself" (Clark, "Freewheeling" 5D); "*Roger & Me* breaks ... documentary 'rules' ... and it's obviously biased approach

has been criticized as nonjournalistic” (Hartl, “A Humorist’s” 20); “... making not the slightest pretense of being fair ... [s]ometimes he is not precisely accurate ...” (Mahar, “Tailing” G13); “... one of the three or four best movies of 1989. Don’t look for even-handedness, though. And don’t depend on it for a strict accounting of facts ...” (Sterritt, “Freeze” 10); “a hilariously cranky bit of propaganda” (Hinson, “*Roger*” D1). Thus, even when Moore’s film was being celebrated, it was also, always delegitimized as a truly “trustworthy” source. Whatever their feelings for the film, critics felt the need to inform readers about the subjective nature of *Roger*’s content, in the same way that cigarette cartons carry a warning label. Journalists seemed to be saying that, while the film you are about to see is really, really good – it may also be somewhat unhealthy.

### **The “Art Defense”**

Of course, despite the furor over *Roger*’s status as ‘documentary,’ Moore still had his unequivocal supporters. Certainly before, and even after Jacobson’s interview was published, *Roger & Me* was a rousing critical success. However, the fact that many journalists chose to defend *Roger & Me* does not imply that journalists joined Moore in his effort to act as “radical journalist” and promote counter-hegemonic messages via the mass media. In fact, the way in which journalists defended Moore reveals a certain tendency that often worked to de-emphasize Moore’s specific political critiques. Rather than defend Moore’s *arguments* about corporate capitalism and labor relations, journalists instead, in the words of Winston, claimed Moore’s film for the realm of “art” (*Claiming* 71).

Take, for instance, Roger Ebert’s spirited defense of *Roger & Me* in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Ebert has long been a fervent supporter of Moore and was one of his most

vocal defenders during the flare-up over *Roger*. His piece in the *Sun-Times* was in direct response to Pauline Kael's scathing *New Yorker* review, in which she reiterated (and seconded) Harlan Jacobson's accusations. Under the headline, "Attacks On *Roger & Me* Completely Miss Point of Film," Ebert begins by referencing the *political* importance of Moore's movie:

The first time I saw *Roger & Me* ... I responded to it immediately, in part because it was a funny, angry film that was consistently entertaining, and in part because it said things that had not been said in the movies in a long time: That the MBA-powered "success ethic" is just another word for greed, and that beneath their benign PR-powered images, big corporations are as ruthless as they ever were.

Here, Ebert seems to be making the argument put forth by Atton; that Moore's arguments need to be understood within the context of the broader mass media, and that his role, as radical journalist, is to represent alternative points of view that challenge the status quo. However, rather than expand upon the point, Ebert quickly drops it in the very next paragraph, shifting gears and reframing *Roger & Me* in an entirely different light:

The whole movie, I wrote last September, "is not another one of those grim documentaries about hard times in the rust belt. It's more of a Bronx cheer aimed at GM." Well, of course it is. I would no more go to *Roger & Me* for a factual analysis of GM and Flint than I would turn to the pages of *Spy* magazine for a dispassionate study of the world of Donald Trump. What *Roger & Me* supplies about General Motors, Flint and big corporations is both more important and more rare than facts. It supplies poetry, a viewpoint, indignation, opinion, anger and humor. When Michael Moore waves his sheaf of *New York Times* clippings in the air and defends the facts in his film, he's missing his own point.

While Ebert's defense of the film is certainly passionate, it also belies a certain tendency to avoid defending Moore on the specific points of his critique, or to allow him any modicum of *journalistic* credibility. By telling us that *Roger & Me* is about something "more important and more rare than facts," Ebert implies that Moore's film is *not* about *facts*. Indeed, he admits that *Roger & Me* is the last place he'd go for "a factual analysis of GM." What is most important about Moore's film, Ebert argues, is that it is poetic, angry and funny – that it is filled with strident opinion and righteous indignation. As such, *Roger* isn't *really* meant to add useful (read: truthful) information to the public record – it is simply there to heighten our emotions and stir our passions – the role that any great work of art is supposed to play. According to this logic, Moore's contribution to the "facts" of the case hardly seems to matter at all.

This tendency has been reinforced not only by Moore's defenders in the popular press, but by many academic analysts, as well. Time and again, the controversy over *Roger & Me* is portrayed as a simple misunderstanding of the "documentary tradition" and Moore's place in that pantheon. For instance, in his analysis of the controversy, film scholar Robert Brent Toplin begins in a fashion similar to Ebert. He argues that Moore's main point was to "present a picture that the national news had not delivered" and to "tell stories that network news organizations were unwilling to take on directly and forthrightly" (21). He argues that journalists missed the point by attacking Moore on aesthetic grounds: "Those who disagreed with [Moore's] interpretations tended to disparage the film on artistic grounds, concentrating on its cinematic techniques rather than directly disputing the filmmaker's economic and political arguments" (17).

However, when Toplin then offers his own defense of Moore and his film, he resorts to the very tactics he condemns; focusing on Moore's cinematic techniques rather than the importance of his arguments. Toplin argues that the main problem with *Roger's* detractors was that they "demonstrated a rather limited appreciation of the style of documentary production that Michael Moore was undertaking" (26). Thus, while Moore

took a modern, innovative approach to the interpretation of political issues in film ... [Harlan] Jacobson pursued an old-fashioned approach, trapped in a traditional vision of the way documentaries should be constructed. He seemed incapable of imagining the evolutionary and revolutionary possibilities of the art form.

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Similarly, Toplin argues, Pauline Kael "revealed a limited understanding of the new art form that Michael Moore was developing" (28). And while John Harkness lambasted Moore for narrativizing history along the lines of a Carpaesque heroic drama, Toplin writes, "a defender of innovative cinema could easily praise Michael Moore for the very techniques that Harkness criticized" (31).

Here, Toplin's analysis of the controversy rearticulates the role and importance of Moore's film. According to Toplin, *Roger & Me* is to be celebrated mainly for its contribution to an important artistic tradition. As such, Moore is defended only in terms of "artistic license" (31). In arguing that Moore has the artistic "right" to bend, shape, and exaggerate reality as he chooses, these supporters *also* argue that Moore is, in fact, bending, shaping, and exaggerating reality. In fact, Toplin seems to imply that Moore never, really, constructs a *specific* political argument at all: "commentators who criticized Moore ... failed to acknowledge that a provocative documentary often raises more



questions than it answers” (30). One could hardly come up with a less strident defense of committed documentary, the whole point which is *precisely* to champion specific “answers,” causes, critiques and perspectives. By invoking the art defense, critics often deflect attention from the main purpose of Moore’s film; namely, its redress of the mainstream *journalistic* record.

The art defense is not unique to the *Roger* controversy, nor is it new to the discourse of documentary. Documentarians have often relied upon some version of the art defense when their films have been attacked. For instance, as Carolyn Anderson and Thomas Benson point out, Frederick Wiseman has often invoked the notion of artistic legitimacy to defend his films from public scrutiny. During the trial over *Titicut Follies*, Wiseman defended his film from accusations of exploitation and invasion of privacy by introducing rave reviews of the film from a variety of major newspapers such as the *New York Times*. According to this logic, *Titicut* was important not for what it said about the prison conditions at Bridgewater, but because it had been “consistently recognized as a powerful document of vast social sweep and artistic integrity” (Anderson and Benson 78).<sup>91</sup> As Brian Winston argues, the concept of “art” has been intertwined with documentary since its inception. By claiming the mantel of “artist,” Winston argues, documentarians essentially displaced their own connections to the “realities” they represented, thus protecting themselves from any and all attacks. This defensive strategy came at a cost, however. Not only did this notion of the documentarian-as-artist absolve the filmmaker from political *responsibility*, Winston argues, it also undermined documentary’s ability to have any kind of real political *effectivity*.

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<sup>91</sup> This is a direct quote from Wiseman’s own court submission, entitled “Answers of the Respondent Frederick Wiseman to the Petitioner’s Original Bill in Equity” (Anderson and Benson 78).

According to Winston, Grierson's "self-image of the documentarian as artist" was grounded in a kind of commonsense, romantic notion of art that has been dominant since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a notion based upon "the vision of the artist as a man apart" (22). Here, the artist is not seen to be engaged with the social world in a "committed" sense, but standing above and outside the world, observing it from a distance. He invokes Ruskin to exemplify this sensibility:

"Does a man die at your feet, your business is not to help him, but to note the colour of his lips; does a woman embrace her destruction before you, your business is not to save her, but to watch how she ends her arms." Thus Ruskin advised the young artist whose job it is, not to aid the dying nor protect the fallen, but only to observe. This injunction carried, in the age of "art for art's sake," but the barest hint of irony.

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This "concept of the artistic," Winston argues, "was at work everywhere in documentary production" during Grierson's time, and it had a detrimental effect. Not only did it absolve documentarians of ethical responsibilities, it also distanced them from real, political concerns. Films became paintings, while documentarians became "poets of the camera" (25).

The result of this articulation was an understanding of documentary practice that is at odds with the goals and aspirations of committed documentary. It cultivated a documentary practice that, as Winston describes it, "runs from social meaning," even as it depicts issues and events of social concern.<sup>92</sup> He gives as an example *The Drifters* (1929),

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<sup>92</sup> As Winston points out, Grierson and his team were dependent upon the sponsorship of both the government and big business (*Claiming* 31). As such, their more radical political aspirations had to be packaged in such a way as not to offend those sponsors, nor challenge, in any overt fashion, that status quo. The romantic rhetoric of art provided them with just such a package, allowing Grierson to construct films

Grierson's film on the working conditions of herring fisherman. Grierson described the film as an instance of "symbolic expressionism," emphasizing the picturesque beauty of the imagery. As such, Grierson's artistic framing of a social issue transformed the meaning of those issues in the same way that Ruby, et. al. argue that the meaning of Louis Hine's photographs are changed by exhibiting them in a museum.<sup>93</sup> As Winston puts it: "I believe that *running away from social meaning* is what the Griersonian documentary, and therefore the entire tradition, does best. It sums up, in one succinct phrase, the real price paid by the film-maker's political pusillanimity" (37).

Of course, if there is one thing that Michael Moore can not be accused of, it is "political pusillanimity." Moore has always been nothing if not upfront and forthright about his political opinions and radical agenda. However, as I have argued, the meaning of his films is dependent, to a large extent, upon the ways in which they get interpreted within the public sphere. Journalists construct the interpretive context within which a film like *Roger & Me* comes to "mean." And, as Winston argues, documentarians such as Grierson have not been the only ones enthralled with the romantic discourse of "art" when it comes to evaluating documentary. More often than not, critics and journalists have espoused a similar allegiance.

Winston's analysis of the reception of Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1938) serves as a case in point. *The River* was produced for the Roosevelt Administration in a specific attempt to build support for New Deal policies. As such, despite Lorentz's "picturesque"

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that displayed an "aura of radicalism, a lingering tinge," without ever going beyond the merely ameliorative (*Claiming* 35-6).

<sup>93</sup> This was a fact that Grierson, himself, later lamented, claiming: "As the catch was being boxed and barralled I thought I would like to say that what was really being boxed and barralled was the labour of men" (37). However, as Winston points out: "what he actually said instead, in the intertitles, was: 'And the sound of the sea and the people of the sea are lost in the chatter and clatter of a market of the world' ..." (37).

tendencies, the film did advocate for a specific, political solution to a social problem, mostly via a final “act” in which New Deal plans were explained and championed. However, critics lamented this final segment, lavishing most of the film with praise, but complaining about the didacticism and unimaginativeness of the last third (*Claiming* 71). To these critics, an overt commitment to a political position was understood to disrupt the film’s “higher” artistic purposes: “In this way, the overt political purpose of the films, what the sponsor actually paid for, are relegated to a position of secondary importance and the works are claimed for the realm of art” (71).

Of course, with *Roger & Me* (and all of his work) Moore advocates a more radical agenda than the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt Administration. But, in many ways, his films were interpreted according to a similar discursive logic. When critics employed the art defense, they courageously championed Moore’s “right” to have his say and speak his mind, but they did so by claiming his films for the realm of art. In so doing, they often de-emphasized the specific, political purpose of his films.

### **Independent Lens: Documentary for the “Art-House Crowd”**

It would be a mistake to argue that the way *Roger & Me* was interpreted by journalists was entirely derived from the Griesonian tradition, however. And it would also be a mistake to assume that its articulation as “art” was only invoked as a defensive measure aimed at protecting Moore from accusations of dishonesty. In fact, *Roger & Me* was defined in this manner *from the beginning*. While most analyses of *Roger & Me* single out the reviews of Harlan Jacobson and Pauline Kael as having the most important effect on the film’s reception, they overlook what was perhaps the most crucial review to that film’s public articulation – Vincent Canby’s initial assesment in the *New York Times*.

As John Pierson tells it, Canby was considered the “key individual” by Moore and his marketing team during *Roger*’s screening at the New York Film Festival. As the lead film reviewer for the paper of record, Canby had the power to make or break a small film like *Roger & Me*, and thus a positive review was crucial. More to the point for Pierson, however, was that Canby was understood to be a man of impeccable taste, who really understood innovative cinema: “He never fraternized with filmmakers [*sic*] like the Roger Eberts and Sheila Bensons of the world. He had the highest standards and a real affinity for independent film” (146). Here, in his depiction of Canby as taste-arbiter who stands above the star-struck, middle-brow tendencies of the “Sheila Bensons of the world,” Pierson exemplifies a very particular discursive logic through which *Roger & Me* was initially understood; what E. Deidre Pribram calls the “discourse of independent film.” According to this logic, *Roger & Me* was interpreted not as an instance of “radical journalism,” nor as a committed documentary made by a working-class activist, but rather as an “artistic triumph” made by a new auteur of independent film. Or, as Canby himself put it in his wildly lavish review: “America has an irrepressible new humorist in the tradition of Mark Twain and Artemus Ward. He is Michael Moore, the writer, producer and director of the rude and rollicking new documentary feature *Roger & Me*” (“A Twainlike” C15).

The articulation of *Roger* as an “independent film,” first-and-foremost, is an aspect of *Roger*’s reception that has been all but left out of the critical discussion; but it is a crucial aspect of the way in which Moore and his work have been understood over the years. Indeed, the presence of this discourse should not be surprising. *Roger & Me* was, in fact, a key player in the resurgence of independent film during the 1990s. The same

year that *Roger* premiered at the Telluride, Toronto, and New York film festivals, Steven Soderberg's *sex, lies, and videotape* had already made history at the Sundance Film Festival. The purchase of Soderberg's film by Miramax in 1989, along with the distributor's subsequent success marketing the film, ushered in a new era of "indie" films, literally repositioning the notion of artistic "independence" as a label with real marketing potential (Perren 30). When *Roger* was then purchased by Warners nine months later for the then-unprecedented sum of \$3 million, Moore became emblematic of the new indie turn in the U.S. film industry (Spillman 1D).

As many scholars have pointed out, the meanings attached to the indie label have important ideological implications and, as such, it is important to account for the ways in which the meanings of *Roger* change when read through this interpretive lens.<sup>94</sup> By claiming *Roger & Me* as an indie-triumph, journalists reiterated and reinforced the tendency to interpret documentaries in a way that "ran from social meaning."

For instance, in his *New York Times* article entitled, "Rejoice! It's Independent's Day," Vincent Canby singled out *Roger & Me* as the (then) current exemplar of what it means to be "independent" in a mass market industry. Contextualizing Moore's film within the recent success of *sex, lies and videotape*, Canby characterized Moore's film in this way:

These independents don't give audiences what they want. They give them what they don't yet know they want. Possibly the most invigorating news to come out of the 27th New York Film Festival ... concerns the interest of commercial distributors in acquiring the theatrical rights to Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*, a feature-length documentary. A feature-length documentary? In the syntax of Mr. Moore, who sometimes sounds like a folksy cracker-barrel Marxist, with a little bit of Barnum thrown in, you

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<sup>94</sup> See, for instance: Pribram; Perren; Wyatt, "The Formation."

heard right, son. One might suspect that the distributors who are reported to be so keen on the film, or, at least, so keen on looking at it, are out of their minds. With a handful of exceptions, documentaries are what open in theaters on Friday and turn up on public television 10 days later. *Roger & Me* is not only a documentary, it's also a documentary about economic depression and emotional dislocation, which are usually gritty subjects even for public television. Yet the audiences that saw *Roger & Me* first at the Telluride Film Festival, at the Toronto Film Festival and, finally, at Lincoln Center, have come out of the screenings buoyed up. The good feeling is not at the expense of the unemployed of Flint, Mich., who are the subject of the film. It's the result of attending to the on-screen personality of Mr. Moore, a former journalist (briefly the editor of *Mother Jones* magazine) who shares with Mark Twain the singular gift of being able to make common sense sound pricelessly funny. Also like Twain, Mr. Moore is biased, pessimistic, not strictly fair and, in this age of submission to consensus, nearly always a tonic.

“Rejoice!” 13

Here, Canby describes what makes *Roger* an important film, and his reasoning is telling. First and foremost, *Roger & Me* is described as an artistic and intellectual experience; a movie that doesn't just play on people's desire to be entertained – but gives them something “they don't yet know they want.” This is a film that will make you *think*. Second (but related), this is a film that will challenge pre-conceived notions of what “cinema” – and documentary – can be. Moore isn't just a “Marxist,” he's a “folksy, cracker-barrel Marxist with a little bit of Barnum thrown in” – this is aesthetic innovation at its best. In fact, the film is so innovative it constitutes quite a risk for the studio underwriting its distribution (“they must be out of their minds”). This is not just another example of safe, Hollywood moviemaking, but a rare instance of the film industry supporting a film that is truly *unique*. Finally, and in summation, *Roger & Me* is important because it marks the debut of a new, cinematic auteur; a rebellious, satirical genius reminiscent of Mark Twain.

Together, what all of these characteristics assure is that, as a viewer, you will be treated to something *different*; something *challenging*; something *distinct*. What is absent from Canby's description here, of course, is the fact that you will also be treated to something *political*. Despite his offhanded description of Moore as a "crackle-barrel Marxist," the political importance (or specifics) of Moore's arguments hardly enter into Canby's analysis. It is Moore's aesthetic contributions that are emphasized; hence, his somewhat surprising claim that rather than being angered or radicalized, audiences come out of the film "buoyed up."

This tendency to de-emphasize the political in favor of the aesthetic is a familiar characteristic of "independent film" as it has been understood for the last few decades. Indeed, it is entirely in keeping with the way in which E. Deidre Pribram describes the discourse of independent film.<sup>95</sup> Following the recent work of many scholars, Pribram argues that this discourse is, first and foremost, a relational logic which defines "independent film" *against* Hollywood and mainstream cinema (xiii). According to this logic, "the independent film industry is not supposed to be ruled by the same economic, political, aesthetic, and historical imperatives as Hollywood cinema" (xiv). In order to sustain such a distinction, Pribram argues, independent film draws its self-conception, broadly, from the tradition of the avant-garde as well as the European art-cinema. As such: "'New,' 'cutting-edge,' 'radical,' and 'alternative' are all self-styled properties of independent cinema" (xiii). Typically, this conception has been constructed and maintained within "two over-arching realms ... the aesthetic and the political" (xiv). In

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<sup>95</sup> Here it seems important to point out that Pribram defines discourse in the way I have been employing it thus far. Specifically, Pribram argues that she undertakes a "discourse analysis in the Foucauldian sense" – one that defines a discursive formation as "a set of cultural practices and institutions that cohere into an identifiable body or domain of knowledge that has been historically constituted within specific discursive and institutional power relations" (xii).



terms of the aesthetic realm, a film may be labeled independent if it can be shown to be aesthetically original or innovative in some way. It can also claim “independence” if it is deemed intellectually challenging or serious: “While no longer necessarily an experimental departure in either form or content, such films are usually identified by the greater intellectual demand they make of viewers or by their dramatic seriousness” (xiv).

Independent film can also be defined by the *political* nature of its content. Especially after the late 1960s and early 1970s (in the wake of the civil rights movement), independent film became associated with a “political mandate [that] is largely liberal to left wing” (xiv). However, it is here that we must be careful for, housed within this discursive logic, independent film’s “politics” take on a rather *un*-political connotation. In fact, the political content of independent film serves the same function as its aesthetic innovations and intellectual-bent; to mark it off as “‘new,’ ‘cutting-edge,’ ‘radical,’ and ‘alternative.’” Ultimately, Pribram argues, independent film’s “cultural currency is based upon its ability to remain recognizably distinct” (3). As such, despite its political content, independent films are hardly ever interpreted in an openly *politicized* way.

Take, for instance, Pribram’s analysis of the critical reception of Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993). Pribram argues that Campion’s film employs aesthetic innovations to achieve political ends. Specifically, she argues that many of Campion’s innovative visual and narrative strategies are geared towards overturning Hollywood’s tendency to individualize social problems and to construct a ubiquitous male perspective where gendered relations are concerned. When journalists reviewed *The Piano*, they lavished it with praise, emphasizing these aesthetic strategies as worthy of commendation. However, they did so in a way that deprived them of their political connotations. Specifically, she

argues, reviewers opted to “obliterate the ‘big picture,’ obscuring it behind the film’s experimental narrative modes” (162). In other words, reviewers masked the political intentions behind Campion’s aesthetic innovations by interpreting them within “the rubric of art” (162). Critics like Roger Ebert and Vincent Canby described the film as “startlingly original,” “so original,” and “a masterpiece,” without ever discussing the film’s political implications (162). According to this logic, Pribram argues:

formal elements such as the look of the film can be enjoyed for their artistic qualities without having to link them back to the narrative’s process of meaning production. ... Canby is able to state that Campion’s existence as a woman has nothing to do with her artistic powers because he, along with the majority of mainstream reviewers, relies on humanist notions of art. Here, humanist modernism constructs the works it claims for its own as *above and beyond* social categories or cultural constructs such as gender, in favor of universal truth claims.

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Thus, in Pribram’s description of an indie-art discourse we can detect a striking similarity to the discourse of documentary, as described by Winston; specifically, the ways in which the notion of documentary-as-art produced an understanding of documentary that “ran from social meaning.” By interpreting *The Piano* through an indie-art frame, “crucial portions of the film’s potential meanings are erased through its classification as such” (162). Far from celebrating and supporting the film’s “radical” politics, Pribram argues, *The Piano* was, in fact, “condemned by high (art) praise” (163, my emphasis). The same might be said for *Roger & Me*.

An early *New York Times* article in September of 1989, covering documentaries at the New York Film Festival, set the tone. “Has the power of documentary film to bear witness to reality endured in an era saturated by the instantaneous images of television

news?” began the article, by Glenn Collins. “Has the documentary been rendered irrelevant – or worse, boring ...?” (“Documentaries” C1). The answer is no, thanks in large part to “the festival’s most popular film,” *Roger & Me*, a film that “depicts the grim realities of the Rust Belt blues in a way that is so elliptical that festival critics in Toronto and Telluride have hailed it as a masterpiece of comedy. That’s right, comedy” (C1). Here, we can see the slippage from politics to “art” on full display. Collins praises *Roger* for being “elliptical” – for being elusive and understated in its political arguments. Meanwhile, it is praised for turning what should be a tragedy into something else entirely – a comedy, “that’s right. A comedy.” Thus, Moore is praised for the way in which his film purportedly runs from social meaning. Sure, on its surface this may be a film about economic exploitation, but *really* it’s a brilliant comedic twist on a tired cinematic form – a “black comedy.” Thus, Collins repeats Moore’s argument that this is a movie “made by a filmmaker who has zero tolerance for documentaries” (C1). Of course, by making such a comment Moore meant to call attention to the documentary’s failure to communicate its political messages to a broad, mass audience. But Collins’ reads this as an *aesthetic* judgment and, thus, Moore becomes the symbol for “the indomitable perseverance of the art of the documentary” (C1).

Frederick Wiseman makes this interpretive strategy explicit when asked for his assessment of *Roger & Me* during the New York festival: “The images you see on television news are so superficial. They don’t begin to touch the mountains of complexities and feelings and ambiguities behind those images. People working in documentary form are expressing what they mean to say in ways that are certainly unpredictable and I, for one, think that’s great” (Collins, “Documentaries” C1).

Wiseman's comparison of documentary and the evening news invokes a telling distinction. The difference is not one based upon content (what arguments are made, what voices are heard, etc.), but form; the news is "superficial," while documentary is something more. Here, Wiseman's description of documentary practice is strikingly reminiscent of Grierson's conception of documentary-as-poetry. Critics read *Roger* according to a similar logic.

Here, we might return briefly to the notion of *stylistic* reflexivity. While many scholars have argued that a stylistically reflexive form of documentary – and *Roger & Me* specifically – works to overturn the ideological function of the traditional documentary text, an analysis of *Roger*'s critical reception shows that this is hardly the case. As with *The Piano*, Moore's reflexive innovations were not read for their political implications but rather in terms of their aesthetic "originality." Thus, for instance, while many scholars have argued that Moore's comic persona constructs an "aesthetics of failure" that relinquishes narrative authority while equating him with the working-class subjects on whose behalf he speaks, critics read the comedy in *Roger* purely on aesthetic grounds; either as a brilliant new twist on an old form, or the resurrection of an ancient form (satire) for the twentieth century.

Indeed, it is often Moore's "brilliant" ability to turn tragic content into comedic fodder that garners the most emphasis in positive reviews, evidenced in statements such as: "Believe it or not, the film is funny. It's the black-comedy vision of Michael Moore" (Moore, "Flap" 1B), and, "Instead of producing an anti-capitalist screed, Mr. Moore made a parody" (Levin D1). In his original review of the film, Ebert reserved his most enthusiastic praise for Moore's ability to turn political critique into devastating humor:

“The wonder is that the movie is both so angry, and so funny. We knew revenge was sweet. What the movie demonstrates is that it is also hilarious” (“*Roger & Me*” 652). And in their review on the television program, *Siskel & Ebert*, both critics raved about Moore’s comedic brilliance. Siskel summed this interpretive scheme up when he declared: “This is a great American *comedy*, and made out of a tragic situation, which is all these people losing their jobs. The film really swings wide in its emotional range, from being hysterically funny, to also really sad.”<sup>96</sup>

According to this interpretive logic, the emphasis is always on the *form* of the film, itself; the *cinematic* experience on offer, as the *political* experience Moore wants his viewers to have recedes from view. Thus, Janet Maslin argued that what put Moore “among the most celebrated new stars of contemporary world cinema” was the fact that he constructed “brave, original visions” rather than “second-hand ones” (“Dark” 1). Or, as Canby argued in a piece about *Roger* and other political films: “... it used to be that movies were judged to be important or not, serious or not, by what they were about, not how good they were. ... Only later was it possible to admit that movies that tackle large social subjects tend to be clumsy” (“Blue Collars” 16). This, it seems, is what made *Roger & Me* so special; not the perspective it brought to bear on GM and corporate capitalism, but the brilliant way in which Moore turned a serious, social subject into an artistic, cinematic experience worthy of critical praise. Moore’s most important contribution was not his political arguments, per se, but that he made those arguments in

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<sup>96</sup> See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_\\_0wLSwMayI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__0wLSwMayI)

an *original* way. This interpretive strategy owes much to the concept of “art cinema” as it has been historically understood in the U.S. for at least the past half a century.<sup>97</sup>

Art cinema, as an industrial form, developed in the years after World War II in a direct response to the ever-tightening consolidation of the Hollywood distribution system. Marketing themselves as “art-houses,” smaller theaters could compete with the major studios by offering an alternative product (Staiger 183). This alternative product was conceptualized as a more “intellectual experience” than could be found at most mainstream cinemas. As such, art houses were (and still are) usually located in urban areas or college towns, specializing in independent, foreign language and documentary films (Wilinsky 1-2).

While specific definitions of art film varied, according to Staiger, most hold one point in common: “Art movies are no-holds-barred, frank; they are serious” (182). More often than not, this meant that the art-cinema dealt with issues of social and political import. However, the reason art cinema discourse gravitated towards “socially-conscious” fare had less to do with real political commitments, and more to do with market-differentiation; it was an attempt to produce what Barbara Wilinsky calls “the *image* of exclusivity” (5). As Staiger points out, the development of art cinema, as a commercial institution, coincided with two other major trends in the U.S. at the time; the rise of market analysis, which allowed the film industry to identify different “segments” of its audience according to a variety of variables, and the rise of a “popular discursive trend” which differentiated the American public into differentiated “taste cultures,” such as low, high, and middle-brow. Together, these trends combined to produce the image of

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<sup>97</sup> As Pribram argues, art cinema is one of the “representational discourses” from which current understandings of independent film are derived. Indeed, she argues: “In the 1980s and 1990s, independent film absorbed art cinema as part of its terrain or discursive formation” (57)

a new cinema clientele: an audience that was better educated than the average movie-goer and that preferred films of a more serious and intellectual nature (Staiger, *Interpreting* 182-7).

As such, the social/political content of these films had a mostly connotative function; to endow a film with a sense of “distinction” (Wilinsky 19-21). The *specific* content hardly mattered – what counted most was that a film *differed* from the usual Hollywood fare; that it made “original” points about real social issues, rather than peddling mere “escapism.” (Wilinsky 22). Read within such a discursive logic, political content was valued only if it could be understood as more intellectually challenging – as content that required hard thought on the part of the audience – something that wasn’t simple, or straight-forward; a film that “poses more questions than it answers” (Wilinsky 23).

How else to explain the fact that the terms reviewers most often used to describe *Roger & Me* were “irreverent” and “whimsical?” – terms that invoke a stance towards the social world that is more contemplative than committed. Two reviews provide good examples for this interpretive frame. In his review for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, John Stanley described *Roger* in this way:

It’s no laughing matter, what’s been happening in Flint, Mich., these past seven years. Ever since General Motors Corp. announced the closing of five plants in Genesee County, an estimated 45,000 people have lost their jobs, and an American dream has died. In the wake of the workers’ exodus to the next promised land, and in the wake of their pitiless evictions, thousands of homes have been deserted, and today the neighborhoods lie gutted and desolate, resembling a Third World war zone, not a place that once symbolized the industrial heartland of America.

But laugh you will, uneasily perhaps, when you see *Roger & Me*, a most unusual and irreverent film that documents the events in Flint, and singles

out GMC president Roger Smith as the chief gang leader in a black hat. In the process it also documents some of the more bizarre sides to the human condition. It's a gutsy movie that takes sharp, sometimes amusing jabs at corporate America ... Opening Friday at the Galaxy, *Roger & Me* transcends its immediate dimensions – the city limits of Flint, and the corporate headquarters of GMC in nearby Detroit – to become a dark, daffy and disturbing document about humankind and its more riotous foibles.

“Gutsy” 19

Here, Stanley reveals all the hallmarks of art film discourse. In this review, the political dimensions of Moore's film merely serve to denote its serious import (“It's no laughing matter, what's been happening in Flint”), while the emphasis here is on Moore's darkly comedic tone (“But laugh you will”). For Stanley, Moore's “irreverent” tone helps to distance us from the particularities of Flint, itself, turning the film into an artistic meditation on the “bizarre sides to the human condition,” and a grand metaphor “for human kind and its more riotous foibles.” In a phrase that literally turns the committed aspect of documentary on its head, Stanley argues that *Roger* doesn't invite us to commune with the people of Flint, but rather asks us to “transcend its immediate dimensions.” In this frame, *Roger & Me* becomes an intellectual experience, inviting us to ponder the most “dark, daffy, and disturbing” aspects of human nature.

Hal Hinson reiterated this interpretation a week later in the *Washington Post*, under the headline: “*Roger*: Rage and Irreverence.” Moore's subject, Hinson writes, “*in the most limited sense*, is Flint itself” (my emphasis D1). However, his irreverent tone belies a broader, “deeper” purpose: “[Moore] sees in the demise of his home city the perfect metaphor for everything that's gone wrong with America,” reducing what he calls a critique of the “Reagan 80s” into a treatise on the “absurdities” of American life. As such, Hinson interprets *Roger* less as a piece of radical journalism, and more as a satirical



jibe at the American way. Thus, for most reviewers, *Roger* isn't *really* about Flint, MI, or even corporate malfeasance at all. It is instead: a film that "celebrates the oddities of the American frontier" and that "manifests a down-home wonder at the world's idiocies" (Canby, "A Twainlike" C15); a treatise on "all sorts of human oddity ... a fantasia of misguided optimism and American puffery" (Klawans, "*Roger*" 505-6); and "an American tragedy and a cautionary tale, presented with the blazing bias of a humorist's fine rage" (Hartl, "A Humorist's" 20).

Central to this indie-art discourse, then, was a shift in focus from the subject matter at hand, to Moore, himself, as gifted artist and brilliant "auteur." Of course auteurism, as an interpretive strategy, has been central to the discourse of art cinema since its inception (Staiger 181). Evidence of what David Bordwell calls "authorial expressivity" became the distinguishing mark of an art film, while discovering and recognizing the contours of the "authorial signature" became one of the main goals for the viewer (Bordwell 718). As such, it has remained a central and defining feature of contemporary independent film (Pribram 57). The drive to elucidate a director's unique style and personal vision led to an interpretive strategy in which both "style" and "vision" were equated; "reviewers began assuming (as they were already accustomed to doing for contemporary paintings) that technique *was* part of the subject matter" (Staiger 190).

Thus, as an interpretive strategy, auteurism has a tendency to emphasize the personal in a way that can often supercede the political. This tendency was certainly on display in reviews of *Roger & Me*. Rather than contextualize Moore's arguments as specifically "radical," reviewers instead individualized them as "unique." The depiction of corporate America that we get in *Roger & Me* is interpreted as one that "only Michael

Moore” could have produced. Thus, for instance, Canby describes *Roger* not mainly as an alternative, labor-oriented perspective on corporate America, but as a collection of “remarkable ‘found’ moments” that “only a film maker thoroughly at ease with his subject, and aware of various possibilities would be able to find” (“A Twainlike” C15). As such, Canby instructs us to dwell on the originality of Moore’s documentary vision, rather than the political implications of what he sees. Similarly, Stuart Klawans (ironically writing in the political journal, *The Nation*), argues: “The real delight of *Roger & Me* comes from Michael Moore’s personality – his dry, common-sense wit as a narrator, his shambling on-camera presence, his interest in the people he encounters as he knocks around Flint” (“*Roger*” 505). And Hal Hinson argues that what is most impressive about Moore’s film is the way he “presents a collection of sneaky riffs on a score of topics, both large and small – from unionism and capitalism to Pat Boone, beauty pageants and game shows – and spins them into a highly personal, shorthand history of American corporate collapse” (“*Roger*” D1). Janet Maslin perhaps summed this attitude up best in the *New York Times*, when she singled out Moore as exemplary of an auteurist cinema that was “notable for eccentric elements that could never have been simulated by a conventionally well-adjusted mind” – which, she points out, “in the context of art, [is] indeed a compliment” (“Dark” 1). And Roger Ebert inserted Moore directly into the art-cinema’s auteurist canon when he began his television review by declaring: “All I can say is, if Woody Allen made documentaries, they might look a little bit like this one.”

The most troubling aspect of the indie/art discourse, however, was the way in which it often worked to reinforce Moore’s “fantasy of advocacy,” by articulating *Roger* as a movie *about* the working class but *for* an educated, middle-class elite. The art film,

as a concept, has always been primarily a tool of social *distinction*. This is the point made by Barbara Wilinsky in her historical study of the art house cinema and its development throughout the twentieth century. Wilinsky places the emergence of art cinema within the context of postwar U.S. society, in which changing economic structures gave rise to the ideal of a vast middle-class, and the notion that the U.S. had become a “classless” society. Since economics were no longer as crucial to social identity, the notion of “taste” became increasingly more important:

Taste became a significant source of distinction among the suburban middle class ... and taste relations came to replace previous power relations. Therefore, people’s taste – including what films they chose to see and where they saw them – became a significant element of how they viewed their place in society.

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In this way, the art cinema’s perceived difference from typical, Hollywood fare was not *only* an attempt to define itself against the Hollywood industry, but the Hollywood *audience*, as well: “art cinema can be seen as an alternative that allowed art film-goers to distinguish themselves from ‘ordinary’ film-goers” (Wilinsky 3).

And it is here that, once again, the serious and “political” nature of art cinema becomes important. As Wilinsky points out, the concept of “realism,” more than anything else, defined the art film experience. “Realism,” of course, is a rather ambiguous term with a variety of connotations, but in terms of art film, “it is always meant to imply something different from mainstream cinema’s illusion of reality” (Wilinsky 19). Specifically, Wilinsky argues, it has meant an uncompromising and “serious” look at the lower classes and the dispossessed (19). Seen in this light, art cinema’s honest depiction

of social problems has less to do with a political commitment to particular groups or causes, and more to do with the desire for middle-upper-class audiences to self-identify as more intellectually thoughtful and socially engaged than the average movie-goer out for entertainment and escape.

In the contemporary moment, “independent film” can be seen as engaging in a similar logic. Indeed, independent film’s “commitments” to issues of identity politics (and liberal-progressive politics in general) stems from the same legacy. As Pribram argues, despite the ubiquity of films by and about members of marginalized communities, the independent film industry has “failed to cultivate a sufficiently wide array of specialized audiences” representing all or parts of those communities (84). This is because the identities so frequently on display in independent film are, more often than not, used to connote a specific notion of “independence” that speaks mostly to an art film audience:

Instead of recognizing and carefully appealing to new audiences, particularly the communities of origin for subcultural filmmakers, the industry relies upon a known and established concept of art film viewers – traditionally white, urban, middle-class ticket buyers.

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As such, the depictions *of* marginalized communities tend to be depictions that are essentializing, exoticizing, and patronizing; in short, depictions that will feel familiar and flattering to an audience interested in viewing itself as socially conscious and politically “hip” (86). In short, the political “experience” offered by contemporary independent film is, more often than not, one geared specifically towards the same audience of would-be advocates to which Moore’s “fantasies of advocacy” are addressed.

We can see this tendency play out in the popular press reception of *Roger & Me*, as critics often worked hard to “mark” Moore’s film as one geared towards a more discerning clientele than the typical, Hollywood audience. Thus, in his write-up on the New York Film Festival, Canby argued that *Roger* was not a film “to soothe the philistines” (“Rejoice!” 13). Similarly, discussing the emphasis on documentaries like *Roger* at the festival that year, Wendy Keys, executive producer of the Film Society of Lincoln Center, reasoned, “maybe the escapist fare from Hollywood is so unsatisfying that we’re all looking for something with relevance and staying power” (Collins, “Documentaries” C1). And taking a slightly different tack, Mike Clark, of *USA Today*, acknowledged Moore’s desire to construct a film that was broadly entertaining, but expressed doubt that a mass audience would ever support it: “if Warner Bros. ... can’t sell a movie this breezy and this meaty to Joe and Mary Multiplex, documentaries could be deemed forever doomed at the box office” (“Freewheeling” 5D). According to descriptions like these, despite being a film *about* the working class, journalists expressed doubt that it was really a film *for* it. It’s populist appeals notwithstanding, critics agreed that *Roger & Me* was anything *but* a movie tailor made for “Joe and Mary Multiplex.”

Roger Ebert’s original review of the film exemplifies this tendency, and the way in which it rearticulates the political meanings of the film. Ebert defined the film in a way that is both curious and telling; not as a political call-to-action, but as a “revenge film”: “The peculiar genius of *Roger & Me* is not that it’s a funny film or an angry film, or even a film with a point to make-- although it is all three of those things. It connects because it’s a revenge comedy, a film in which the stinkers get their come uppance at last” (“*Roger & Me*” 651). Given the fact that, by the end of the film, nothing has changed for

the people of Flint, it is not out of order to wonder for whom *Roger* constitutes an act of “revenge.” Ebert supplies the answer towards the end of his review:

Moore has struck a nerve with this movie. There are many Americans, I think, who have not lost the ability to think and speak in plain English-- to say what they mean. These people were driven mad by the 1980s, in which a new kind of bureaucratese was spawned by Ronald Reagan and his soulmates-- a new manner of speech by which it became possible to "address the problem" while saying nothing and yet somehow conveying optimism. Roger Smith and General Motors are good at that kind of talk. *Roger & Me* undercuts it with blunt contradictions.

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For Ebert, Moore’s film acts as revenge for a section of the US populace not fooled by corporate America and the empty promises of the “American Dream” they peddle. As such, he implicitly reiterates the classifying discourse constructed by the film itself. Indeed, on an episode of *Siskel and Ebert* later that year, Ebert declared the “Janet” sequence one of the film’s most brilliant for the way that it takes us “into this wonderland of fantasy that is put on top of the fact that Flint is devastated by these plant closings.” According to such a reading, *Roger & Me* constitutes an act of revenge for those who “get it” and have had enough.

Such a view could often lead critics to reiterate the worst aspects of Moore’s narrative tendencies, in which working-class experiences and understandings are held up to ridicule. Thus, Hinson argues that:

Moore's greatest gift is his feel for the native American surrealism -- his sense of us as a people who love diving donkeys and dancing spark plugs and parades with Shriners driving around in miniature Model T's. To

Moore, these funky absurdities are on a direct line with an attempt to raise spirits in Flint by bringing the Rev. Robert Schuller to town to say things like "Tough times don't last, tough people do." Or Anita Bryant's buck-up rendition of "You'll Never Walk Alone." Or Ronald Reagan's kind offer to buy pizza for 10 unemployed auto workers.

D1

Here, despite his use of the collective "us," Hinson is clearly writing for an audience that would share his characterization of small town parades and Anita Bryant as "funky absurdities." Desson Howe employed a similar distinction between the film's audience and Flint's misguided residents when he described *Roger & Me* as a collection of "extraordinary images, strange happenings and real-life weirdnesses to savor" (Howe, "*Roger*" N40).

In reviews such as this, the subjects of *Roger & Me* become living artifacts representing America's duped and deceived working class, which Moore has "dug up" and presented for "our" amused appreciation (or, as Siskel and Ebert called them, "side characters" who become "great American characters" and are also "hilarious"). It is this very distinction – between an essentialized working class and the indie-film audience gathering to observe them – that reviewers like Canby and Klawans invoke when they describe *Roger* as a film that "celebrates the oddities of the American frontier," that "manifests a down-home wonder at the world's idiocies" (Canby, "A Twainlike" C15); and that acts as a treatise on "all sorts of human oddity" (Klawans, "*Roger*" 505-6). Through comments such as these, journalists both exoticized and classified Moore's working-class subjects. In so doing, their reviews reiterated and reinforced some of the worst aspects of Moore's mode of address; a tendency that is, perhaps, best exemplified by the final line of Klawans' review, in which he admonishes his audience to "put on

your windbreaker and your baseball cap and get ready for a night on the town!” (“*Roger*” 506). For many journalists, *Roger & Me* was the “fantasy of advocacy” they had been waiting for.<sup>98</sup>

No where is this classifying discourse more apparent than in critical discussions of the one aspect many reviewers found off-putting about *Roger & Me*: Moore’s alleged tendency to take “cheap shots” at his subjects. In this line of criticism, reviewers lamented the way in which Moore often times portrayed his subjects in an unfair fashion – especially the working-class residents of Flint. For instance, David Sterritt, of the *Christian Science Monitor*, lamented that the film “sometimes has a mocking tone, aiming cheap shots at ordinary Flint citizens” (“*Roger*” 10); while Pauline Kael famously described the film as “shallow and facetious, a piece of gonzo demagoguery that made me feel cheap for laughing” (“Melodrama” 91). In many ways, this line of reasoning was just as patronizing as the “mocking tone” they criticized in Moore. For, while critics blanched at Moore’s willingness to poke fun at his working-class subjects, they didn’t mind at all the way in which he portrayed them as helpless, sympathetic victims, lavishing praise on Moore’s willingness to put housing evictions and other images of economic devastation on film for all to see.

For instance, Hal Hinson lauded the way in which the eviction scenes “work as dark counterpoint to the generally amused tone; they’re the movie’s dire bottom line.

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<sup>98</sup> The tendency for the popular press to exoticize *Roger*’s working class themes is perhaps best exemplified by the party thrown in Moore’s honor by the organizers of the New York Film Festival at a posh, Upper East Side townhouse. As Kathleen Glynn, Moore’s wife, tells it, she and Moore were horrified to discover that they were not only the guests of honor, but a kind of working-class main attraction for the New York aesthetes gathered to meet them. As she explained to Larissa Macfarquar: “‘It was our big giant night out in New York. It was like, Wow, isn’t this exciting,’ Glynn says. ‘This town house was all marble and everything, and paintings on the wall, and carpets were rolled up.’ But it turned out to be a kind of radical chic—the fancy party that Leonard Bernstein threw for the Black Panthers—in reverse. ‘They served beans and franks,’ Glynn says. ‘We were from the working class, so they thought that was cool. But we knew better than that. When you throw a party, you throw a party. I’ve never been able to shake it.’”



Without them, it might come across as a glib radical cartoon” (“*Roger*” D1). Gene Siskel sounded an identical note in his TV review: “we’ve had a lot of funny things happening, and you see [Moore] making fun of some, quote, ‘hick’ kind of situations, and then, whammo! – we start to *look* at Flint being devastated, and he gives us a sort of tracking shot going down the street, and it looks like its bombed out, and we see the real devastation that the lay-offs occurred [*sic*].” In a similar vein, John Stanely extolled Moore’s ability to mix humor with pathos: “You laugh, but sometimes you feel downright sad and depressed as you listen to the people of Flint airing their disgust, their confusion, their anger and their hopes, or watch them being thrown out of their homes” (“Gutsy” 19). And Mike Perry praised Moore’s ability to show us images “we’d” likely never seen before:

Moore revels in the fact that all he has to do is pan his cameras around his hometown to make his audience uncomfortable, sad and perhaps even a little angry. ... He sides with these common folk who lost their jobs, and takes no prisoners in going after celebrities and public figures who fail to grasp the extent of Flint's demise.

“Moore” 7

In these examples, reviewers invoke the “tradition of the victim,” as defined by Winston, describing these scenes in a way that elicits sympathy, but also reinforces the notion that “the common folk” with which Moore sides are not “the audience” to which Moore, and his reviewers, are speaking. Indeed, what seems to bother reviewers most about Moore’s “cheap-shot” mentality is the way in which it sometimes gets in the way of the voyeuristic and patronizing pleasures offered up by his more “serious” and “important” subject matter. As Perry puts it: “These scenes are funny, but that's all they

are. It's Moore's idea of comic relief, and the picture would be much better served by more Flint footage" ("Moore" 7). In the end, Moore's satiric tone seemed to be deemed praise-worthy only so long as it didn't interfere with the good feelings one got from engaging in the fantasy of advocacy on offer.

### **Politics For Sale: Marketing *Roger & Me***

No one seemed to be more aware of the contradictions engendered by the tendency to interpret Moore's populist, political documentary as an "independent" art film than Moore himself. While he was often at pains to defend *Roger* against accusations that it wasn't a "real" documentary, he was also at pains to deflect the notion that his film was a piece of cinematic "art." "I live in the real world and I wanted the movie seen by as many people as possible," Moore told the *Boston Globe* in 1989. "I didn't make the movie for an art house crowd." (Carr "A Filmmaker" 69). However, despite this stance, Moore also seemed cognizant of the fact that, in many ways, the discourse of independent film was a necessary evil. As the controversy over *Roger's* documentary status began to develop, Moore was hardly in a position to denounce his supporters, even if they did employ the "art defense." In many ways, Moore's "indie credibility" became his only saving grace. But more than this, it was the independent film industry, through its circuit of film festivals and awards, that provided Moore with a chance to get his movie "seen" at all. As such, Moore was forced to play a precarious balancing act.

Take, for instance, two seemingly similar quotes.

"I wanted to make a film that people would watch Friday nights at the mall, to enjoy with their Goobers," says Moore. "I like to see movies like *Die Hard*, *Robocop* and *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, not *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. I didn't want to make a film for the art-

house crowd."

Graham, "Moore" 4D

"I never imagined Warner Bros. would be distributing it, but I like mainstream movies like *Robocop* and *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and *Die Hard* – the sorts of things you go to on a Friday night. While I do see things like *Jean de Florette* and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, I don't find myself telling other people to see them."

Hartl, "Michael and Me" G1

Here, Moore seems to edit the manner in which he dismisses art cinema according to the source he is addressing. In the first quote, Moore is giving an interview to *USA Today*, and is emphatic about the difference between his movie and art films. Referencing contemporary releases, Moore states that he likes to see low-brow, entertaining fare like *Robocop*, not high-brow stuff like the films of Pedro Almodovar. However, in the second quote, Moore is addressing John Hartl, who writes about film from a more "critical" perspective for the *Seattle Times*. Here, Moore finesses his response carefully, arguing that while he likes films by Pedro Almodovar and the like, he *also* enjoys Pee-Wee Herman. Thus, here, we can see a desire to describe *Roger & Me* as a film "for everyone," but also a concerted effort not to offend the very "art-house crowd" he dismissed in *USA Today*. For, as Moore well knew, the art-house crowd was *critical* to *Roger's* success. And despite his frequent claims to the contrary, Moore never eschewed this audience at all. Quite to the contrary, he *embraced* it. From the outset, *Roger & Me* was marketed solely as an "indie film."

This strategy entailed it's own set of concerns. Warner Bros' handling of *Roger & Me* must be understood within the context of the industry hooplah surrounding *sex, lies and videotape* in 1989. The financial success of Soderbergh's low-budget film – which grossed \$25 million (Pierson 138) – led to the realization within the film industry that, if

marketed properly, art films, or “indies,” could use their critical stature (achieved via success on the art-house circuit) to “cross-over” and into mainstream theaters. Even a modestly successful run in mainstream theaters had the potential to translate into major profits, given the comparatively small production budgets of most independent films. Thus, Warner’s decision to purchase *Roger & Me* was not an indication that they saw Moore’s populist politics as fodder for mainstream success; it was instead an attempt to cash in on a newly developing trend based upon the construction of an “indie” brand. As Pierson puts it, major distributors “were suddenly staring straight in the face of a \$25 million gross and a mushrooming cottage industry in more little indies like Steven Soderbergh [*sic*]” (138).

Thus, while *sex, lies and videotape* is usually understood to have set the template for indie film marketing in the contemporary era (Perren 37), *Roger* was one of the earliest test-cases. In fact, despite being distributed by Warner Bros., a major Hollywood studio, it was never marketed as a mainstream entertainment; a “Friday night movie” to be “enjoyed with your Goobers.” It was, instead, packaged as what Alicia Perren calls a “quality indie blockbuster” (30). Pioneered by Miramax during the 1980s (and solidified with *sex, lies* in 1989), this niche-based marketing strategy sought to first sell a film to an art house audience, and *then* broaden its appeal through exploitation tactics that promoted both the film’s critical acclaim and (often) “edgy,” or controversial, elements.<sup>99</sup> In this context, “independence” itself had become nothing more than a “discursive tool employed by the press and the industry,” rather than a term denoting some kind of substantive difference from mainstream fare (Perren 37). According to Perren, this strategy was marked by three main tactics: attaching a sense of “quality” to the film in an

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<sup>99</sup> Perren; Wyatt, *The Formation*.”

attempt to attract an art-house audience; emphasizing its “edgy,” unconventional subject matter and/or style in an attempt to simultaneously court younger, educated youth (typically college students); and finally, finding some kind of controversial “hook” that might propel the film into mainstream consciousness, thus helping to transition it to a broader market (Perren 31). A brief look at *Roger*’s marketing and distribution campaign reveals the deployment of all three tactics.

As Pierson notes in his autobiographical re-telling of the *Roger & Me* campaign: “The big bucks didn’t come by accident. You must first devise a campaign ...” (139). The first goal of that campaign was to attract the positive attention of film reviewers. Critical acclaim garnered at film festivals is one of the most typical ways in which an independent film is sold to a distributor; film festivals such as Sundance are essentially marketing showcases where “independent producers hope that ‘festival fever’ and positive ‘buzz’ will propel their modest efforts to greater-than-expected sales numbers” (Schamus 95). Most independent distributors would agree. As Triton Pictures’ Bob Berney has argued: “It’s the consensus of respect that makes a film work. The marketing executives wait for reviews, lay out the quotes they want and the result is a blurbfest” (Parker).

This was precisely the strategy laid out by Pierson for *Roger & Me*, which premiered on opening night at the 1989 Telluride Film Festival, and then went on to screen at the Toronto and New York Festivals. The main goal was for *Roger* to capture the attention of major film critics and, in fact, Pierson went so far as to target specific individuals: Roger Ebert, who was the biggest critical presence at Telluride, and Vincent Canby at the New York Film Festival. Indeed, attaining Ebert’s attention at Telluride was

deemed so important that Moore sought him out in person, convincing him to skip a Peter Greenaway tribute to see *Roger*'s premiere (Pierson 141). Ebert's glowing review appeared the following week, just in time for the Toronto Film Festival, and helped engineer a spate of sold-out screenings. The combination of Ebert's praise and the film's exuberant reception led to attention from the *New York Times*, who sent reporter Glenn Collins to Toronto "on assignment to follow Michael around for twenty-four hours" (Pierson 142). By the time *Roger* arrived at the New York Film Festival, the critical buzz was in full swing, and Canby's endorsement was all they needed to solidify the film's financial viability (Pierson 146). When Canby "raved even more than expected, comparing Mike to Mark Twain for the literate crowd," the film industry came calling (Pierson 149).

The subsequent ad campaign for *Roger & Me* emphasized this critical buzz. In the film's first week of release, Warners ran a full-page spread in the *New York Times*. The left side of the page depicted the now-famous image of Moore, wearing ball cap, blue jeans, and a flannel shirt, holding a microphone out to an empty, leather office chair. The right side of the page depicted nothing but review quotes. Virtually every one of the quotes focused on Moore's "genius," and the film's potential place in film history. Siskel and Ebert describe the film as "an American classic" in the first review on the page, while Ebert is quoted a second time further down, describing *Roger* as "a great American comedy." The ad prominently displays Canby's assertion that "America has an irrepressible new humorist in the tradition of Mark Twain," while various reviewers reiterate claims of cinematic brilliance: "Savagely witty;" "Scathingly funny;" "Brilliant."

Importantly, these review-quotes upstage the imagery of the ad itself. In fact, the ad is conspicuous for its *scarcity* of visuals. Apart from the image of Moore, the *Roger* ad is a blank, white space which seems to emphasize the fact that all this empty room is literally “filled to the brim” with rapturous praise. As the weeks rolled on, the image of Moore got smaller and smaller in each subsequent ad, while the critical praise took over more and more space. By the 6<sup>th</sup> week of *Roger*’s release, Moore’s image had been reduced down to a miniscule size, placed underneath an enormous #10 that dominated most of the ad. The ten connoted that the film had been designated “One of the Year’s Ten Best” by an inordinate amount of critics, 21 of whom were listed inside the zero. In this ad, Moore himself seemed squashed beneath the weight of his own critical acclaim.

Thus, despite Moore’s claims to the contrary, *Roger* was not marketed as a “popcorn” movie, but first and foremost as a “quality independent.” As Perren describes it, this quality discourse was aimed specifically at:

the art-house audience – a group consisting of cine-literate baby boomers who had grown up on a blend of international art cinema and New American Cinema. This niche, which was presumed to be knowledgeable of the status of film festivals as sites for the celebration of global cinema, was sought through text of the advertisement ... [via] the list of awards ...[and] opinions from some of the best-known reviewers ...

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Of course, as Perren points out, the very notion of “quality” bears ideological implications, inviting elite audience members to separate themselves out from the mass audience.

More than simply relying on the discourse of quality, however, the *Roger* ads also courted a young, hip crowd by focusing on the film's attitude of rebelliousness.<sup>100</sup> Quotes emphasized words such as: "Rude," "Gutsy," and "Outrageous," while the tagline positioned Moore as an iconoclastic figure: "The story of a rebel and his mike." The film's trailer solidified this "rebellious" image. It begins with Moore telling us about the GM layoffs and that he made the film to "cheer up" the people of his hometown. However, despite this brief contextualization, the trailer offers virtually no specification that *Roger & Me* is a meditation on class inequality in America, a strident critique of corporate capitalism, or even an exposé of GM's social malfeasance. Instead, the trailer repositions *Roger & Me* as a movie about a rebellious, indie filmmaker stirring up trouble. We get a montage of clips depicting various GM personnel rebuffing Moore on film, and a second montage depicting some of the more self-incriminating quotes by various "characters" (such as Deputy Fred shouting "Sheriff's Department!"; Janet telling us she's discovered she is another "season"; and Bob Eubanks saying he was born in Flint but doesn't "know anything about it"). Moore then addresses Roger Smith, himself, repeating many of the same review-quotes depicted in the print ad and saying: "So Roger, if you're out there, listen to the critics! See this movie! Thousands have. You'll enjoy it. After all, I made you a star!" This last line is accompanied by a close-up of Moore, wearing a pair of Jack Nicholson-style sunglasses and grinning into the camera, while an animated special-effect makes one of his teeth appear to sparkle.

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<sup>100</sup> Indeed, Moore's films have continued to be marketed towards a younger, college-based audience, as evidenced by the college crowds on display in *The Big One*; his use of popular indie rock music, such as "Take the Skinheads Bowling" by the 80s punk-folk band, Camper Van Beethoven, as the theme for *Bowling for Columbine*; and his "Slacker Uprising Tour," in which Moore visited college campuses around the country during the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11*.



Thus, *Roger*'s marketing campaign worked to construct Moore as an "indie maverick," a tried and true trope of indie marketing strategies (Wyatt, "Revisting" 230-6). Here, the political context of Moore's film is significantly rearticulated. Rather than social critique, *Roger & Me* becomes a story of personal hutzpah, as an amateur filmmaker dares to take on the head of GM, and in such a brazenly irreverent manner. This rebellious attitude worked to define the film as an experience that would be exciting and controversial, perhaps even dangerous. *Roger & Me* was not only selling itself as art, but as "radical chic." Thus, the *Roger* campaign worked in a fashion very similar to many indie film campaigns, in which the political elements of a film were utilized to give it a sense of social urgency – and a whiff of controversy – but never anything more.<sup>101</sup> Ads for *Roger & Me* used Moore's "courageous" stance against a major corporation to tap into the energy and publicity often engendered by public controversies, but then tempered the film's political implications by rearticulating it as a narrative of individual rebellion.

Nowhere is this strategy more obvious than in the ways in which the "controversy" surrounding *Roger & Me* became less about Moore vs. Roger Smith, and more about Moore vs. Hollywood. The single most distinguishing feature of independent film is its perceived difference from the mainstream film industry, and the *Roger* campaign was not remiss in exploiting this distinction. Rather than tell the story of one man's attempt to shame a corporate giant, the print ads repositioned *Roger* as a story about one *filmmaker*'s quest to win an Oscar. Thus, the ads highlighted quotes such as,

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<sup>101</sup> For instance, in his analysis of the Miramax marketing strategy for *The Crying Game*, Justin Wyatt argues that the film *could* have been marketed primarily as a movie about sexual identity with a strong gay subtext. However, Miramax "wanted to stay away from the film's political elements and instead position [the film] as a thriller based around a core secret" ("The Formation" 81). Thus, the issue of sexual identity was emphasized only in relation to the film's "mysterious" narrative. In this way, the film tapped into the controversy surrounding the then-current "national debate over homosexual rights, specifically the proposal to end the ban on gays serving in the military," while not actually engaging the issue.

“An Oscar looms as a strong possibility,” and “It has a chance at being nominated for one of the best pictures of the year.” Indeed, critics picked up on this narrative line, too.

Despite the fact that GM was running a smear campaign against the film,<sup>102</sup> or the fact that many of Moore’s allies on the Left were *also* repudiating *Roger* for different reasons,<sup>103</sup> the only “controversy” the press truly focused on was the thrilling battle between an independent auteur and the Hollywood establishment.

John Hartl’s description of the controversy serves as a good example of the way in which *Roger*’s Oscar ouster was articulated by many in the popular press:

The standard explanation for Moore's failure to please the academy is the flap that developed last December after *Film Comment* magazine's editor, Harlan Jacobson, accused Moore of playing fast and loose with the sequence of events in his portrait of the economic devastation of Flint, Mich. There have also been hints that General Motors, the corporate villain in *Roger & Me*, put pressure on the academy.

Nonsense. If Jacobson had never interviewed Moore, if General Motors didn't give a hoot about *Roger & Me*, the picture still would not have been nominated. To the academy, this movie just doesn't qualify as a documentary.

At the same time that independent filmmakers have been pushing the boundaries of nonfiction films, creating personal, humorous, meaningful documentaries, the academy has been getting stickier about its rules and stricter about what makes a documentary. Unless it's so dry no distributor will touch it, unless it has no point of view and no distinctive style, the movie faces an uphill battle with the voters.

“Oscar” L8

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<sup>102</sup> GM distributed “truth packets” to the media attacking Moore’s “appalling lack of objectivity,” and pulled its advertising from television programs on which Moore appeared (Bullert 158-9).

<sup>103</sup> Both Ralph Nader and Jim Musselsman, a lawyer involved with many of the union actions taken against GM during the 1980s, criticized the way in which Moore left many of the working class activists who had worked tirelessly over the years to combat GM, out of the story entirely (Levin 12).

Here, Hartl makes note of the political implications surrounding *Roger*'s censorship from a major award,<sup>104</sup> but brushes them off, arguing that what is really at stake here is the development of an art form; what is *most* disconcerting about this whole incident is the fact that the Academy is standing in the way of personal, artistic expression. It's Moore-the-auteur, not Moore-the-son-of-an-Autoworker, that Hartl and others were keen on defending. Indeed, it is important to note that the only form of social protest *Roger & Me* provoked was one by *filmmakers* against *the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences* – not workers against GM, or any other corporate or governing entity. In the end, the “Art Defense” was Moore's *only* defense, as *Roger & Me* became more important as a martyr for the cause of Documentary-as-Art than it did as an act of radical journalism.

Thus, by the time *Roger* had run its course within the public sphere, its meaning, importance, and even its intended *audience* had changed. Far from the populist, and “popular,” call to arms that Moore had initially imagined, *Roger & Me* had become a triumphant chapter in the history of independent cinema; one that would be remembered as much (if not more) for the way it changed documentary aesthetics as for the way it challenged the status quo.

Of course, the film industry understood this all along. As Pierson tells it, despite the fact that *Roger* was, for the most part, handled like an art-house film,<sup>105</sup> at Moore's insistence Warner Bros. did actually try to go beyond the typical art-house market. On its

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<sup>104</sup> Indeed, whether GM “pressured” the Academy or not, the Academy's decision to stay away from a film that openly criticized a major American corporation and questioned the ethical implications of capitalism, itself, is indicative of the ways in which Hollywood and most major media industries work to reinforce the status quo.

<sup>105</sup> *Roger* was released according to a “platform” strategy, in which it started out on a small number of screens, mainly in urban areas like New York and LA, and then expanded slowly once critical praise and word-of-mouth caught on.

fourth week in release, Pierson explains, “Warners made a bold attempt to test the wider working class appeal of the film by going onto twenty-one screens and buying television ads across Michigan.” However, the results were not so positive:

... undeniable bad news from the weekend of January 12 came from the Rust Belt, the heartland, the home state, Michigan. ... By 8pm Friday the jig was up. This was not a general audience “this is your life” theatrical release. Everyone opted to spend their night at the new Steven Seagal flick. Someone like Michael, or me, would see both. However we don’t install rocker panels for a living.

170-1

Thus, at the end of the day, despite Moore’s lofty aspirations, *Roger & Me* remained mired in the problems of the documentary tradition. It was articulated as a film *about* the working class, but not really *for* them. And, as such, it remained a documentary experience that tackled serious issues but, nonetheless, ran from social meaning.

### **Infotaining the Masses, or, Michael Moore Loses “Weight”**

In the years following *Roger & Me*, Moore seemed to make a concerted effort to reclaim the “popular” audience that *Roger & Me* overlooked. His next major project was not an auteurist follow-up to *Roger & Me*, but a move to the more populist, “low-brow” venue of television. Describing his series, *TV Nation*, as “*Sixty Minutes* if it had a sense of humor and a subversive edge” (Kolbert), Moore talked about the program in populist language. He told the *New York Times* that, in his opinion, average Americans are more politically sophisticated than the television industry gives them credit for: “I don’t have that attitude, that looking down on the American people like they’re a bunch of dopes” (Mifflin). He continuously argued that *TV Nation* spoke to a working-class audience, claiming for instance, that his series was watched by: “people in places where they

actually have to work – St. Louis, Milwaukee, Phoenix and Orlando. Those places were our top cities – not New York, L.A., Seattle, not the smarty-pants places” (Knott).

Despite some initial positive reviews by the popular press, however, *TV Nation* never really got a serious shot at building a broad, working class audience – or *any* audience, for that matter. The mainstream television industry, it seemed, was not inclined to give Moore the commitment he needed to try and make his project work. *TV Nation* was initially picked up by NBC in 1994 as a summer-replacement series only (Biddle 51). Moore’s contract was for a spate of TV “specials,” rather than a regular, ongoing series (Curtwright C7). When the fledgling FOX network guaranteed Moore a regular, weekly slot, he left NBC, but low ratings (which are not surprising in the summer months) caused FOX to cancel the series after a brief run (Bash 3D). In the television industry, instant-ratings count for more than critical acclaim, and *TV Nation* was a short-lived phenomenon.

While Moore was being shunned by network television, however, he never lost his standing with the independent film community. In 1992 Moore made the rounds at indie film festivals, such as Telluride and New York, with his *Roger* “sequel,” a short film entitled *Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint* (Tourmarkine, “*Olivier, Night*”; Denerstein, “Telluride”).<sup>106</sup> Moore continued his relationship with the independent film world throughout the nineties by appearing as a guest speaker at indie film events (Tourmarkine, “New York’s”), serving as a juror at film festivals (Ricapito), and sitting as a panelist with indie auteurs such as Gus Van Sant, Philip Haas and James Mangold at Cannes (Honeycutt). When the *Bravo* network broadcast interviews with indie

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<sup>106</sup> So established was Moore’s status as an indie auteur that *Pets* was picked up by indie distributor October Films at The Show East independent film market and packaged for sale with “A Sense of History,” a short by British indie stalwart Mike Leigh (Tourmarkine, “Good Times”).

filmmakers at the Independent Spirit Awards during the commercial breaks of ABC's 1995 Oscar Broadcast, they chose Moore to be their on-air interviewer.

Given this relationship with independent film industry, when Moore's first attempt at television failed, the indie film world was there to welcome him back with open arms; Miramax bought the rights to his second feature length documentary, *The Big One*, in 1997 (Steuer). However, this time around, Moore was clearly looking to shake the art-house label. While *The Big One* still bears Moore's problematic, patronizing mode of address, it is much more focused on broad-based "entertainment" values, incorporating a slew of Moore's trademark pranks and stunts, as well as light-hearted moments such as Moore's dalliance with a Cheap Trick guitarist and numerous clips of his stand-up comedy routines. Whereas *Roger* leaned towards satirical irony, *The Big One* pulls no punches in its political arguments or its humor, both of which are obvious. As Moore put it, during a promotional stop for the film:

The content (is) 100 percent entertainment, what's motivating it (is) 100 percent message. But the message can't be all that ends up there. Because that's a sermon, and this isn't church, it's a movie theater. I'm not asking people to come to hear a preacher preach at them. I'm asking them to pay \$7 and sit in the dark and have an entertaining experience at the end of a long, hard week. So, as a filmmaker, my first responsibility is to make sure that this film is entertaining ...

Sherman 47

With *The Big One*, Moore seemed to be trying to put his money where his mouth was; making a concerted effort to live up to his goal of merging political documentary with mainstream entertainment in a way that would bring a progressive political message to an audience that extended far beyond the art-house niche.

For their part, Miramax seemed on board. Despite distributing *The Big One* as they would any art-house film,<sup>107</sup> the Weinsteins' marketed the movie as something entirely different: a mainstream comedy. The initial print-ad for the film featured only three critical appraisals: "Wickedly Funny!" (*Newsweek*); "*The Big One* is Witty and Savagely Intelligent!" (*Entertainment Weekly*); and "Fearless, Unrelenting and Very Funny!" (*Los Angeles Magazine*). While these quotes may still speak to an art film audience's desire for something "intelligent" and "fearless," the focus in these quotes is on the comedic pleasures offered up by the film. Gone are the names of specific critics, such as Vincent Canby and Roger Ebert, who adorned the ads for *Roger & Me* in spades. Instead, the ad feels more like that for a summer comedy.

This was a fact further signified by the image of Moore, himself. The ad depicts him wearing a black suit and tie and a pair of ray-ban sunglasses, while holding a giant microphone as though it were a gun. At the top of the ad ran the tagline: "The Creator of *Roger & Me* and *TV Nation* is now PROTECTING THE EARTH FROM THE SCUM OF CORPORATE AMERICA." This was a reference to the tagline from the popular action comedy, *Men in Black* (1997), which had its theatrical run the previous summer. Moore's suit-and-shades get-up mimicked that of Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones, who starred in the film and appeared in ads striking similar poses. By playfully invoking a popular, summer action-comedy, the Weinsteins were attempting to reposition Moore as a mainstream, comedic movie star, rather than the indie-auteur of his *Roger & Me* days.

The trailer for the film is a case in point. It is devoid of all the "critical acclaim" recapitulated by Moore in the *Roger* trailer and, instead, runs like a light-hearted version

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<sup>107</sup> The Weinsteins' distribution strategy began in typical indie-style: they released *The Big One* on a platform schedule that opened the film in a limited amount of theaters to start ("Players Club").

of a *Saturday Night Live* spoof on *Men in Black*. It is also much more explicit about its political commitments. Rather than aliens bent on the destruction of the Earth, Moore's trailer features over-the-top caricatures of fat-cat CEOs sitting around a boardroom table in leatherback chairs, chomping on cigars and burning money, while a digital counter keeps instant track of the "Number of People Fired Today." While the head CEO tells his colleagues that "we have never seen better times" and "executive salaries are up 250%," we get at parallel montage of Moore "suing up" to do corporate battle (putting on shades and readying his weapon while munching on a donut). "For working Americans he is the best, last, and only line of defense!" the trailer explains, as Moore kicks open the door to the corporate office, shocking, the CEOs. "Damn, I make this look good!" he says, mimicking Will Smith's trademark line while a facsimile of the *Men in Black* theme music kicks in.

By deploying such a marketing strategy for *The Big One*, Moore seemed to be making good on his initial goals for *Roger & Me*: making a popcorn movie with a political message. The trailer for *The Big One* certainly does not portray the film as another "stately dirge" from the Griersonian tradition, and nor does it tout any auteurist pretensions for the art-house crowd. Instead, the trailer makes the film's politics clear ("They tell Big Lies. They order Big Layoffs. They Make Big Profits," declare the ad), and wraps them in a broad, populist form of comedy ("Oh by the way, which one you boys keeps raising the price of movie tickets?" Moore asks, playfully cocking his oversized machine gun). In *The Big One*, Moore and Miramax made a concerted attempt to bridge the gap between political documentary and the multiplex.



Unfortunately, the attempt was, for the most part, a failure. While *The Big One* opened strong (\$146,909 on 33 screens), it barely made it on to the list for the 100 top-grossing documentaries of all time (coming in at 94, with \$720,074 total box office).<sup>108</sup> Considering the fact that Moore also holds the spots for 1 (*Fahrenheit 9/11*), 3 (*Sicko*), 5 (*Bowling For Columbine*) and 13 (*Roger & Me*) on that list, *The Big One* rates as a personal low for Moore. The problem was that after its initial take, *The Big One* failed to continue to draw audiences, eventually expanding to only 53 theaters, less than half of the screens his previous film (*Roger*: 265), or his next film (*Bowling*: 248), would reach.<sup>109</sup> It would appear that the attempt by Moore and Miramax to sell *The Big One* as a mainstream comedy was a commercial mistake. As reviews for the film indicate, this may have had much to do with the interpretive context within which the film was articulated.

### **The “Art Attack”**

While *The Big One* had its supporters, it certainly did not garner anywhere near the critical acclaim that *Roger & Me* managed. Quite the contrary. At best, critics labeled Moore’s sophomore effort amusing; at worst, they argued that it was an abysmal failure. The problem this time, however, was *not* the fact that Moore failed to live up to “true” documentary standards. By this point in time, Moore was a known quantity and his muckraking style didn’t seem to touch the same nerve it had in 1989. Instead, critics found Moore to be guilty of a much bigger sin: he’d sold out his *art*.

One of the main problems critics had with *The Big One* was its purported lack of “originality.” The comments of Roger Ebert, historically a fervent Moore-supporter,

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<sup>108</sup> Figures from: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>

<sup>109</sup> Figures from: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>

exemplify this argument. Under the headline, “*Roger & Me Redux*,” Ebert wrote: “The movie is smart, funny and edited cleverly; that helps conceal the fact that it's mostly recycled information. There is little here that *Roger & Me* didn't say first, and more memorably” (35). Here, once again, we can see the art discourse at work, only now it was backfiring on Moore. Held up to the standards of originality, innovation, and auteurist vision, Moore’s committed stance on working-class issues became a detriment to his art: he wasn’t saying something *new*.

According to Pribram, this is an attitude that often undermines independent film’s political commitments. What she calls the “it’s-been-done” mentality is often applied by the film industry to films by and about members of marginalized communities, and mitigates against any kind of sustained political commitment to various social groups and their causes:

The it’s-been-done plea may be applied within an individual distribution company or across the industry. That is, a film may be turned down because a company has already done “its” women’s, gay, or black film or because the market for that “type” of film has already been saturated by other companies or because it fails to add anything “new” to our understanding of that particular social category from what’s already available.

84

According to this logic, artistic notions of originality and personal vision are emphasized over political causes and constituencies.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Of course, as Pribram points out, not only does this logic relegate “politics” to the background, but it implicitly serves to reinforce the status quo by further marginlizing minority voices: “All are arguments that would be unimaginable if applied to films by, about, or for the dominant market group (‘Sorry, we’ve already done our straight white male film for the year’)” (84).

In Moore's case, this same attitude was applied by reviewers and journalists to *The Big One* as an evaluative measure. Viewed through such a lens, the political efficacy of Moore's arguments are devalued by their "obviousness." The condemnations were endless. The Houston chronicle wrote: "Michael Moore's heart seems to be in the right place. But someone should tell the maker of *Roger & Me* and the creator of *TV Nation* that his basic tactic for social reform is turning into schtick" ("Big" 5). And the *Seattle Times* warned viewers: "Early buzz is that the film's a disappointment – familiar territory, but with less energy and wit than ... *Roger*" ("Coming" G31).

Many reviewers felt that Moore was attempting to recycle his own artistic ideas. They read *The Big One* as a sign that Moore's genius was short-lived. "Clearly he's imitating his favorite filmmaker, himself," quipped Stephen Hunter of the *Washington Post*. "In his hunt for an exec, he mirrors the success he had in *Roger & Me*, a much better film" (B07). Critic after critic agreed. Moore, we are told, is a "one-trick pony" who "needs a new act" (Sykes 1). He "plays an old game" and "rehashes the concerns of *Roger & Me*" (Denerstein, *Big* 9D). Thus, "Artistically," *The Big One* is nothing more than "an extension of *Roger & Me* ... [that] develop[s] that 'been there, done that,' feeling" (Holleman E8). It "lacks the element of surprise that sparked the 1989 art-house hit" (Clark, "Vigilante" 6E). The result is a cinematic vision whose "novelty has faded" (Maslin, "A Sly" E1) and, ultimately, provides us with "nothing new" (Sherman, "Corporate" 47). In the end, *The Big One* is found to be deficient in performing the one basic goal of any art film: "to tell the truth in an original way" (Staiger, *Interpreting* 191).

In fact, for many reviewers, the great disappointment of *The Big One* is that Moore seems to have given up on his aesthetic vision altogether, putting politics above

art. Joe Holleman, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, criticized Moore for revealing *too many* instances of corporate malfeasance in his film, thus destroying its narrative impact:

Because there are different companies and execs being bashed, there is not the central "villain" that there was in *Roger and Me* ... Therefore, we don't have that sense of the chase. And with this movie broken into segments, Moore's executive ambushing in corporate lobbies gets a bit tiresome. ... The beauty of Moore's first movie was his look at Flint, Mich., the town and the people who all, somehow, were tied to GM. There is less of that personal look, again because of its construction, in this movie.

E8

Stephen Hunter, of the *Washington Post*, agreed: “[The] single mission [of *Roger & Me*] had resonance and gave shape to the movie. This film, by contrast, is helter-skelter, pick-me-up, what-have-we-here? Why, he must have spent at least two and possibly as many as four hours editing it” (B07). Here, what might be called a sincere dedication to his cause is seen to be getting in the way of Moore’s aesthetic ambitions. His political commitment to the labor issues – and diligent effort to make as strong a case as possible –is undermining the film’s *cinematic* experience.

Reviewers inclined to support *The Big One* hardly helped matters. While their reviews of the film were positive, they also seemed to diminish the sense of *gravitas* with which *Roger & Me* was frequently adorned. For these critics, *The Big One* was nothing more than a comedy, simply offering up more trademark antics for Moore’s fans to enjoy. Thus, they seemed to argue, while it might provide some light laughs, it was nothing to take too seriously. For instance, Moore was now being described not as an auteur – and certainly not as an activist, journalist, or documentarian – but rather as a *comedian*; a “merry prankster” (Ross 6); a “puckish pest” (Clark, “Vigilante” 6E) and a

“documentarian with the heart of a stand-up comic” (Bernard, “Corporate” 62).

According to this logic, what’s best about Moore is the way in which he turns serious issues into light laughs. His movie is an “indignant but breezy ... amalgam of crusading, informing and just plain kidding around” (Maslin, “A Sly” E1); “an absurd take on ... economic realities” (Sherman 47); by a filmmaker who “works in the semi-queasy tradition of less socially conscious predecessors: *This Is Your Life*’s Ralph Edwards and *Candid Camera*’s Allen Funt” (Clark, “Vigilante” 6E). Here, Moore’s comedic gestures are not read as aiding his political goals, but softening his political punch. Moore may be serious about politics, they seem to say, but he’s mainly out to cause some trouble and have some fun. Thus, one reviewer could actually rave: “Politics aside, Moore’s new film ranks among the smartest, funniest documentaries since – well, since *Roger & Me*” (Ross 6).

Politics aside, indeed. For many reviewers, Moore’s pranks, stunts and ambushes became the main highlight of *The Big One*, not the issues, causes and critiques they were meant to illustrate. Many of Moore’s positive reviews simply catalogue his outrageous stunts and extol the playful roguishness of his gadfly-persona, leaving the working-class issues – and more often than not his working-class subjects – out of the picture entirely. For instance, in her review for the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin seems at first glance to understand Moore’s desire to use mainstream comedy as an entertaining means towards a political end. “*The Big One*,” she argues, “is the rare mainstream American film about real issues, and the too-rare documentary with a reasonably commercial future” (A Sly” E1). The problem is that those “real issues” hardly get an airing in her article. Instead, Maslin’s review focuses on Moore’s playful stunts: his stand-up routines, his jabs at

presidential candidate Steve Forbes, his visit with Cheap Trick, and of course, his confrontation with Phil Knight. But other than a vague reference to the idea that Moore's "guerilla tactics" can "prompt thought or even get some jobs back," the issue of corporate capitalism's disastrous effects is never raised at all.

Thus, in a kind of inversion of the schtick-critique, for many reviewers the only thing to praise about *The Big One* was that Moore had "done it again." Jeff Strickler described *The Big One* as "another spirited – and highly entertaining – assault on corporate greed" ("Politicians" 1E), while Joe Holleman assured readers that there were "enough of those Moore moments to make it worthwhile" (E8). "Anyone who enjoyed Michael Moore's broadside blasts at corporate greed and citizen abuse in *Roger & Me* or *TV Nation*," declared Steve Persall, "will love his latest documentary" ("Even" 1D). Thus, even Moore's supporters downplayed the "seriousness" of his message, diminishing the import of his critique by describing the film as a second installment of political gaffaws for fans of Michael Moore. Indeed, some reviewers argued that true "fans" were the only people likely to get anything out of the film. The *Seattle Times*'s brief description of the film labeled it "a disappointment ... But for fans of Moore's work, it'll be a must-see" ("Coming Attractions" G31) And Robert Denerstein's review in the *Rocky Mountain News* ran this warning at the top: "Who's it for? Moore fans" ("Big" 9D). Thus, whether praising or disparaging Moore, critics all seemed to agree that *The Big One* was *not* an important film to be taken too seriously.

### **The Discourse of "Infotainment"**

This tendency to rearticulate *The Big One* as a kind of breezy, political diversion, makes sense when viewed within the context of the discourse of documentary and,

specifically, the changes that were taking place around the documentary format at the time of the film's release. According to John Corner, changes in the media industries beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s have given rise to what he calls a "postdocumentary" culture, a context marked by increasingly blurred boundaries between reality/fiction, and serious fare/entertainment. In such a context, Corner argues, the definitional parameters of "documentary" itself have become increasingly unstable, thus resulting in a general devaluation of the documentary as a useful form of public discourse:

Extensive borrowing of the 'documentary look' by other kinds of programs, and extensive borrowing of nondocumentary kinds of look (the dramatic look, the look of advertising, the look of the pop video) by documentary, have complicated the rules for recognizing a documentary. They have thereby contributed to a weakening of documentary status.

"Performing" 263

Released in the spring of 1998, *The Big One* was situated within the beginning stages of this "postdocumentary culture" and, as such, was subject to the anxiety that was infecting popular understandings of the documentary form.

Corner argues that this postdocumentary moment has been occasioned by the advent of "popular factual entertainment" ("Performing" 260). The rise of "popular factual entertainment" is usually tied to the beginnings of tabloid journalism and other forms of reality TV (Hill 15). Programs that mix entertainment values with factual programming, of course, have always existed, but the economic context of the television industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s pushed this type of programming to the forefront. At a time when deregulation was rampant, and the television marketplace was

expanding exponentially with the birth of cable, popular factual entertainment proved to be a viable economic strategy as it was cheap to produce and eminently marketable (Hill 39). In terms of documentary, these developments have meant a lessening of documentary's "use value" and a growing emphasis on its "exchange value" (Corner, "Performing" 260). As documentary has embraced a more "entertaining" ethic, it has "become suffused with a new 'lightness of being.'" In the contemporary context, Corner argues, "documentary is no longer classifiable as a 'discourse of sobriety'" ("Performing" 264).

For Corner, this move towards the entertaining is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. Indeed, he argues, it is in many ways a necessary accommodation to "an audiovisual culture where the dynamics of diversion and the aesthetics of performance dominate a greatly expanded range of popular images of the real" ("Performing" 267). In such a context, Corner argues, "producers with a commitment to the popular audience that goes beyond profitability but that can nevertheless also generate profits will clearly be an important factor in documentary's survival" (267). However, this blurring of entertainment values with "serious," social content *has* been met with resistance within both the popular press *and* a large segment of the scholarly community. Indeed, at times, it has been met with outright disdain, most emphatically when *political* content, specifically, is on the line. The tendency for entertainment values and political content to mix has given rise in the past two decades to what I will call a "discourse of infotainment." The discourse of infotainment refers to a pointed anxiety about the way in which entertainment values have degraded the character of news and, specifically, factual media depicting political issues (Brants; Delli Carpini and Williams; Van Zoonen). It is



based upon a long-held assumption that factual media and entertainment media are mutually exclusive domains.

As Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams put it: “*Politics*, in this view, is a distinct and self-contained part of public life, and *citizen* is one role among many played by individuals” (“Let” 161). From this standpoint, the traditional news media are assumed to serve any number of functions – to institute “meaningful agenda-setting”; to provide a platform for politicians and other spokespersons; to inculcate dialogue across a diverse range of views on important matters of the day; ultimately, to provide citizens with the information they require to participate effectively in political life (Brants 315-317). Entertainment media, on the other hand, speak to the viewer not as a *citizen* but as a *spectator*. As such, they are geared towards the production of drama and personality, not facts and information. Thus, when news “content” is filtered through entertainment formats, analysis and discussion get “shortchanged” (Brants 317).

Sound bites, immediacy, symbolism, emotions, face, personality, celebrity, ‘deep reads,’ sensationalism, and what have you are alleged to guide television journalism. They are considered unmistakable evidence that television provides infotainment instead of serious information, reasonable debate, and sound opinions that citizens require to make sense of politics. The undesirable outcome is considered to be a citizenry that is uninformed, misguided, and manipulated but nevertheless completely confident about its own judgment and choices.

Van Zoonen 11

However, as Delli Carpini and Williams argue, this distinction between informative media and entertaining media is a false one. For one thing, they argue, “news” and “entertainment” are not, and never have been, polar opposites in form or practice. The news is often amusing and, indeed, “diverting,” whether it means to be or

not. And “entertaining” media are very often *not* diverting, amusing, or “light” in any way. In fact, it would be impossible to argue that the news media deal only with content that is politically serious and “relevant” and that entertainment media do not. More often than not, both forms of media cover the same issues and events, albeit in vastly different ways (“Let” 161). In the end, Delli Carpini and Williams argue, it is virtually impossible to articulate a useful distinction between the “news” and “entertainment.”

Van Zoonen looks to Bourdieu, who argues that the very act of “limiting the universe of political discourse” is, in essence, an act of censorship that works to maintain power relations in society (5). By narrowing what does and does not count as “appropriate” political discourse – and in so doing, delineating who can and can’t produce it – the political field is open only to those with the cultural capital (i.e. the sanctioned “right”) to articulate such matters. From this perspective, the discourse of infotainment becomes one way in which social elites police the boundaries of who gets to define the world in what way.<sup>111</sup>

Here we can see the connection between the art discourse, discussed previously, and the discourse of infotainment. Both logics are part and parcel of an ideological terrain geared towards maintaining the current political hegemony. And both served to dull the radical edges of Moore and his work. As long as Moore’s films could be defined as “high art,” he could be seen as part of the cultural elite, perhaps advocating from above for benevolence towards the working class, but in no way actually threatening the status quo.

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<sup>111</sup> Delli Carpini and Williams also situate the discourse of infotainment within a broader, class-based attempt to distinguish “elites” from the “masses” on any number of cultural fronts; construction of a rigid distinction between “real news” and mere entertainment is nothing more than a “social constructio[n] that tell[s] us more about the distribution of political power than about the political relevance of different genres” (163).

However, once Moore made clear his allegiance to the “popular,” sacrificing “art” for populist political commitments, his work was rearticulated, by both detractors *and* supporters, as trivial and simplistic – “mere entertainment.”

This discourse of infotainment, deployed by critics to mark *The Big One* as trivial, often relied upon what Susan Murray calls the concept of “social weight.” Ostensibly, the concept of social weight refers to the manner in which “real” documentaries eschew the pleasures of entertainment to focus on issues, events and people of serious historical and/or social significance (43). While this concept appears to illuminate generic differences between serious and entertaining programming, Murray argues that it is nothing more than a rhetorical strategy geared towards producing the perception of social relevancy:

Social weight is not something that can be empirically measured, nor is it necessarily an inherent textual characteristic. Rather, it is a rhetorical stance that can be mobilized in an effort to endorse or authenticate a particular television text and attract an audience who cherishes liberal notions of social responsibility or public service.

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The concept of “social weight,” then, is just another version of the “discourse of infotainment”; a way to mark *some* programming (namely, programming that eschews the “entertaining”) as “important.”

Indeed, it was the concept of “social weight” that undergirded the critical assessment of *The Big One*. What some critics found most appalling about *The Big One* was that Moore could represent “serious” issues in such a cavalier fashion. For instance, some critics questioned Moore’s professionalism – essentially accusing him of being

immature. “Some of *The Big One* is simply adolescent oneupmanship” (“Moore” D4), wrote Peter Howell in the *Toronto Star*, arguing that, despite making some good points, Moore’s film was often bogged down by “juvenile pranks” that are “sophomoric and pointless.” Referencing the Random House media escorts that Moore hounds throughout the film, Stephen Hunter sneered: “No wonder he has so much contempt for them: They actually expected him to act like a professional” (“Retch” B7). Robert Denerstein reiterated this criticism, openly mocking Moore’s attempts to make complicated political arguments via silly and amusing stunts:

At one point, he attempts to give an 85-cent check to the head of a Milwaukee company that's relocating to Mexico. The check, Moore says, should cover the first hour's work by the company's first Mexican employee. Take that, corporate America, a swift kick in the image! If you're looking for subtle analysis of the perils of downsizing, forget it.

*Big One* 9D

From this view, Moore’s mixing of broad comedy with political content can only be seen as a diminishment.

Thus, many critics argued that Moore would be better off staying away from “serious” political commentary altogether. For instance, Peter Howell argued that: “When Moore is fired up with righteous humour, there is no finer or funnier critic of the downside of supply-side America. He falters when he begins to take himself too seriously ...” (“Moore” D4). And radio host Charles J. Sykes wrote:

None of [the film’s shortcomings] would matter if Michael Moore was content to be a comedian. But he has larger pretensions. Michael Moore takes Michael Moore very, very seriously ... That's too bad, because

Michael Moore used to be funny, before he became a poster child for economic illiteracy.

1

According to this logic, Moore's ability (and willingness) to make us laugh cancels out his ability to tackle important social matters. "Stick to the comedy" became the consensus conclusion.

In this way, critics dismissed Moore's political commitment, without ever having to tackle, interrogate or assess his political *arguments*. A simple, derisive mention of his dumbed-down attempts to pander to the lowest common denominator was all that was needed to prove that *The Big One* lacked the "social weight" required to be taken seriously. For instance, Jami Bernard complained about Moore's decision to focus on his own comic persona rather than the serious issues at hand: "The outrage you might feel is immediately dissipated into a cloud of audiences wildly applauding the best-selling author. *The Big One* feels like some ancillary benefit of a book tour, an auteurist infomercial rather than a guerrilla roar from the heart" (62). Meanwhile, Stephen Hunter wondered what might have been, had a more "earnest" documentarian handled the same material:

Think of the movie Barbara Koppel (*Harlan County, U.S.A.*) could have made about this poignant, treacherously complex situation. Then think of the movie Michael Moore has made. And weep, for the lost opportunity and the sense of ego gone so pyrotechnic that it scorches all it touches.

B07

Even Moore's supporters invoked the discourse of infotainment. For some, the film was praised for tackling important issues, but denied the ability to actually have any

kind of real, political effect. “If *The Big One* can't lift your hopes in these depressing times,” wrote Shawn Levy of *The Oregonian*, “at least it can help you laugh your way through the darkness” (“Just” 22). Melanie McFarland of the *Seattle Times* ascribed a similarly diminished role to Moore’s film: “... for all of the filmmaker's efforts, things aren't likely to change soon. At least *The Big One* encourages laughter in the face of adversity, and in the end, the truth and a smile seem to be Moore's best defense” (G1). According to this line of reasoning, *The Big One* was nothing more than a politically-tinged version of the “diversion” documentary Corner describes.

Thus, Moore found himself trapped in a discursive realm with no path towards legitimacy. Too low-brow to be considered “art,” but too entertaining to be considered “proper” documentary, *The Big One* was utterly devalued as a political documentary. Ultimately, the box office concurred, saddling Moore with the least successful film of his entire career.<sup>112</sup>

This was a trap Moore, it seemed, would not fall into again. Having lost the battle to bring committed documentary to the multiplex, Moore rushed back into the arms of the world that once embraced him: the indie media sector.

### **Bowling for Legitimacy: The Portrait of an Indie Artist**

#### **The Awful Truth**

On the heels of *The Big One*’s subpar performance, both critically and at the box-office, Moore tried to reinvent himself by embracing the very image that made *Roger & Me* such a success, that of the rebellious, indie-auteur. In November, 1998, just months after *The Big One*’s theatrical run ended, Moore signed a deal with the cable network, *Bravo*, to produce twelve episodes of a new television series entitled *The Awful Truth*

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<sup>112</sup> Excluding his one, failed foray into fiction filmmaking with *Canadian Bacon* (1995).

(Bernstein, “Moore”). The series was similar in concept and content to *TV Nation*, with Moore tackling a variety of hot-button political issues via his usual mix of sarcastic comedy and political commitment. However, while the content was similar, the packaging was entirely different. Moore’s second foray onto national television heralded a re-tooled image that would prove wildly successful when *Bowling For Columbine* hit theaters three years later.

Moore’s new TV “home” spoke volumes about the way in which he was attempting to reposition himself within the media landscape. The *Bravo* channel was not NBC or FOX. Launched in 1980, *Bravo* was conceived as a premium cable channel dedicated broadly to the arts, including film, music, theater, etc. In the Fall of 1998 (at the same time that it signed Moore to a 12-episode deal) *Bravo* had recently made the switch to an advertising-supported network. The idea was to utilize the channel’s high-culture fare to attract upscale audiences and the “blue-chip” advertisers that would inevitably follow (Dempsey, “Mad Av.” 1; Friedman, “Small Studios” 40; Cleland, “*Bravo Steps Up*” S14).<sup>113</sup> In the words of one journalist, *Bravo* was attempting to market itself as “the highbrow of premium cable networks” (Friedman, “Small” 40). Moore’s signing was part of this strategy.

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<sup>113</sup> For instance, the network showcased second-run, highbrow fare such as foreign films and opera and ballet productions (Dempsey, “Mad Av. 1). When the network also began to purchase the rights to air previously-run television programs, they focused on critically-acclaimed series, such as *The Larry Sanders Show* and *The West Wing*, both of which ran as part of a showcase format entitled, “The Art of Television” (Dempsey, “*Bravo*” 8). The network’s own original programming usually focused on shows that married mainstream formats with decidedly intellectual tastes. Thus, *Inside the Actor’s Studio* took the typical celebrity chat show and focused the discussions around the “craft” of acting rather than the sensationalism of celebrity, setting the program within an educational setting in front of a live studio audience literally made up of acting students. *Aria and Pasta* gave the cooking show a highbrow twist, featuring opera singers cooking dinner while listening to their favorite scores (Clark, “*Bravo*”). Even when the program later looked to follow the zeitgeist and compete in the crowded reality-TV market, it produced shows with an explicitly upscale bent, such as *Top Chef*, which features high-end cooking, world renown chefs and food critics, and gratuitous plugs for such fare as *Food & Wine Magazine*.

Not surprisingly, *Bravo* had strong ties to the indie film world. The Bravo Cable Network originally distributed the fledgling Independent Film Channel (Dunning), and the channel was a favorite place for independent distributors to purchase ad-time. Indeed, *Advertising Age* reported that *Bravo* was “the darling of specialty, small or boutique film-production companies ... because its highbrow audience ideally matches their own moviegoing audience profiles” (Friedman, “Small Studios” 40). As such, Moore’s new relationship with *Bravo* signaled a decisive shift back towards the art/indie discourse that made *Roger* such a rousing success.

Of course, the move to *Bravo* also invited the problems associated with this discourse, in regards to Moore’s political commitments. In signing Moore to a regular series deal, *Bravo* was hardly espousing a commitment to his populist aspirations. Quite the contrary. The network was positioning itself as a specialty-channel; one that had no intentions of speaking to an audience broader than the “art-niche” (Clark, “*Bravo*”). As Ed Carroll, executive VP and GM of *Bravo* and the *Independent Film Channel*, put it in 1998: “Mass audiences are not going to flock to a network with programs like ‘Kiri Te Kanawa: Opera in the Outback,’ and ‘*Bravo* Profiles: Salvador Dali.’ Our ratings are not going to topple Monday night wrestling on *USA* ...” (Clark, “*Bravo*”). However, the “art-niche” marketshare *would* bring in the kind of advertising dollars *Bravo* was after; a small audience of “choice” viewers who, on average, made \$58,000 a year (higher than every other major cable network). In fact, *Bravo* was first in drawing professional/managerial adults, people with college degrees, and people making \$75,000 or more (Clark, “*Bravo*”).



Hence, Moore's brand of political rabble-rousing was co-opted for a decidedly *un*-populist cause. Just as the independent film industry often uses Left-wing politics as a marketing strategy geared towards differentiating itself from the "mainstream," so did *Bravo* sign Michael Moore as a way to create hip, edgy programming that would speak to their art-niche base. *The Awful Truth* ran as part of a weekly showcase that *Bravo* called "Counter-Culture Wednesdays," a format that would demonstrate what Ed Carroll called the "edgier side of *Bravo*" (Cleland S14). In this way, Moore's new contextualization within the *Bravo* "package" meant that, once again, the radical edge of his political commitments was being dulled.<sup>114</sup>

With *Bravo*'s discursive-framing in high-gear, the popular press followed suit. Unlike the critical drubbing his populist "schtick" took in reviews of *The Big One*, critics loved the image of Moore-as-auteur. *The Hollywood Reporter* gushed:

Moore's blend of irony, perverseness and irreverence deserves wide exposure. In this new outing, a 12-episode commitment, he is at the top of his zealous and outrageously funny game. There are plenty of sincere news types on TV who know how to comfort the afflicted, but only Moore has the genius and courage to afflict the comfortable.

Garron

*Variety* agreed:

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<sup>114</sup> In fact, the inclusion of *The Awful Truth* within *Bravo*'s art-niche programming schedule was reminiscent of the way in which PBS incorporated radically-tinged political programs, such as *The Great American Dream Machine*, within their typical schedule of arts and educational fare during the 1960s. For instance, in her analysis of *Public Broadcast Library*, which ran on PBS in the late 1960s, Laurie Ouellette describes the ways in which this program, and others like it, rearticulated political commitment as just another marker of social distinction, separating PBS off from the "vast wasteland" of mainstream television. PBS programs that dealt with political issues were "interspersed with cultural segments addressed to intellectuals and highbrows" (190). As such, she argues: "The surrounding context softened their 'radicalism' along the lines of a leftist film screened at the Harvard Faculty Club or an art-house theater in an upscale white neighborhood" (188-89).

Like an ultra-liberal superhero out to fight the bad guys, Moore claims to use the power of TV for good instead of evil, and the result can only be described as manic. *The Awful Truth* is a roller-coaster ride of biting commentary, gut-busting humor and disturbing investigative journalism. ... *The Awful Truth*, like Moore's previous effort, *TV Nation*, is guaranteed to offend, but once again sets the bar for the most daring show on television.

Fries 72

Having embraced the art world once again, Moore was being positioned within the relatively “safe” confines of the indie-maverick tradition, providing well-placed audiences with a weekly dose of political “edginess.” It was a strategy that he would use again two years later to launch *Bowling For Columbine*. The results were, to say the very least, better than those for *The Big One*.

#### **Auteur du Jour: Marketing *Bowling For Columbine***

There can be little doubt that *Bowling For Columbine* was marketed primarily as an indie/art-house film. Indeed, *Bowling* began its theatrical life where most indie films do: at a major film festival. Cannes festival director Thierry Fremaux invited *Bowling* as an official selection, making it the first documentary to screen in competition at Cannes since Jacques Costeau and Louis Malle's *Le Monde du Silence* won the *Palme d'Or* in 1956 (“*Bowling*”). The unique invitation caused an industry stir, resulting in a fierce round of bidding among United Artists, Lions Gate Films and Miramax (Gardner and Kilday). United Artists finally landed the distribution rights, shelling out \$3 million for the film in an effort to “neutron bomb” the competition (in the words of UA chief Bingham Ray) (Bloom 5).

Despite being a major production company usually dealing in mainstream fare, UA proceeded with a distribution and marketing campaign that explicitly positioned

*Bowling* as an indie/art-house film. *Bowling* made its North American bow at the Toronto Film Festival, then moved on to Telluride (Gardner, “Telluride”). After building strong word of mouth on the festival circuit, UA then followed a platform release pattern, starting it out on only 8 screens in the US (Snyder, “Moore Doc” 10). The following week bookings expanded to 46 theaters, then 51 theaters two weeks later, with *Bowling* ultimately playing in only 248 locations at its widest point (Spector, “*Ring*”; Fuson, “*Santa*”; Snyder, “Moore Doc” 10). Throughout its run, *Bowling* played primarily in art-house theaters (Snyder, “Moore Doc” 10).

UA matched this distribution strategy with a marketing campaign that emphasized the film’s indie appeal. Moore’s political views, of course, were a part of that appeal, but only in so far as they marked the film as potentially “controversial.” Connecting a film’s subject matter to timely, sensitive issues is a staple technique of independent film marketing (Wyatt, “The Formation” 81) and UA was quick to take advantage of Moore’s “provocative” image. “The entire United Artists team,” Bingham Ray told journalists shortly after the distribution deal was made, “strongly feel this provocative work is destined to be one of the most talked-about films of the year, stirring debate, controversy and dialogue on this most timely topic” (Garnder and Kilday). Moore seemed willing to play along, telling MSNBC in June (a month after the previous statement) that he doubted UA would ever release the film in the US, owing to its “controversial” content (Bloom, “As UA” 5). When the film did, of course, open in the US, the print ads highlighted the controversial nature of the film’s subject matter. The words, “Provocative”; “Incendiary”; “Rambunctious”; “Disturbing”; and “Infuriating” were

highlighted, along with the usual claims that it was “Terrific!”, “Riveting”, and “A Must-See!”

While the controversial *nature* of the subject matter was emphasized in the ads, just what that subject matter *was* remained vague. Apart from the reference to Columbine in the title, and longer quotes testifying to the film’s potential status as a hot-button topic of debate, no where in the ads is there any reference to what arguments Moore makes in the film, or for what political agenda he is advocating. Viewers are made aware that this is a film about “guns,” and that Moore will likely take some kind of “courageous” stand in terms of the gun-control debate. But beyond that, nothing is made explicit. The ads feed off the affective energy invoked by a hot-button, political issue, without making Moore’s political commitments or agenda immediately clear.<sup>115</sup>

The theatrical trailer for the film serves as a good example of this tendency to play up the film’s political “edginess” while, simultaneously, remaining vague about its political commitments. Rather than delve into the issues of race and class that Moore tackles in the film, the trailer simply emphasizes Moore’s status as an incendiary filmmaker with a knack for stirring up controversy: “He’s Michael Moore, America’s favorite whistleblower, the man in everyone’s face. The guy asking the question: Are we a nation of gun nuts ... or just plain nuts?” The ad is mostly a montage of some of the more provocative lines in the film; one of the Oscoda kids tells Moore he wishes he was number one on his school’s bomb-threat list; a *South Park* character strokes his rifle while saying “I loves my gun!”; a bank manager tells Moore if he fills out some paper

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<sup>115</sup> For instance, the *New York Times* ad for October 18, 2002 included this quote, from A. O. Scott: “I hope the movie is widely seen and debated with appropriate ferocity and thoughtfulness.” The *NYT* ad that ran on October 25, 2002 included a quote by Michael Wilmington which read: “It’s unnerving, stimulating, likely to provoke anger and sorrow on both sides.” Of course, these ads includes no clear indication as to *why* the film should be debated, or indeed, which “side” it even stood on.

work they'll hand him a free gun, and so forth. "Now," continues the voice-over, "He's taking aim at America's most controversial subject," after which we hear Moore ask: "Why do you think there are so many gun murders in America?" The most one can glean from this trailer is that Moore's film is "anti-gun"; a summation so oversimplified it could almost be described as a complete mischaracterization. Moore's more complicated arguments about class, race and the "culture of fear" are left out of the summation. Thus, the ad campaign for *Bowling* had its cake and ate it too, profiting from the edgy energy offered up by Moore's politically "controversial" material without once referencing his commitment to issues of race and class, which are so prominent in the film.

In fact, for the first time in Moore's career, the concept of "class," itself, appears to have been muted, in terms of the way in which his own, star-image was being portrayed. While Moore is still pictured in the ads wearing his trademark jeans and baseball cap, they are both jet-black, and the cap itself bears no sports-team logo or working-class cliché (such as the colloquialism, "Out For Trout," which adorned the cap he wore in *Roger*). Gone too is the familiar blue-collar flannel shirt, replaced now by a hip black T-shirt and matching zippered "hoodie." Even Moore's eye-glasses have been transformed, from the oversized, slightly nerdy lenses of his *Roger* days to a pair of sleek, dark-rimmed glasses that give him a subtly "intellectual" look. Together, the all-black ensemble endows Moore with the younger, hipper sensibility befitting of an indie auteur; more "beat poet" than "meat and potatoes."

The ads for *Bowling* also worked to endow Moore with a different sort of demeanor. The poster art for both *Roger* and *The Big One* emphasized Moore's persona as populist jokester. The ad for *Roger* famously depicted Moore holding out a

microphone to an empty office chair, while the cover art for *The Big One* DVD depicted Moore, microphone in-hand, about to be squashed by a giant foot wearing expensive leather shoes and socks lined with dollar-signs. Both ads played up Moore's little-guy image, a smart-alec average joe standing up to corporate giants who either ignore him or try to stomp him out. However, the ad for *Bowling* is entirely devoid of this populist, self-effacing humor. Instead, what we see is Moore standing on top of a giant road atlas depicting the town of Littleton, CO, signifying the weighty nature of the film's subject matter. The microphone Moore usually grasps has now been replaced with a tiny globe, which Moore holds aloft with grave import, as though the very world hangs in the balance. Meanwhile Moore, who in the past sported a wry, sarcastic grin, now stares solemnly out at the viewer. No gratuitous mugging here. In the *Bowling* ad, Moore's depiction bespeaks the demeanor of someone who is more serious about himself, his mission, and his art.

Hence, the marketing strategy for *Bowling* works to rearticulate Moore as an important, serious filmmaker, leaving all traces of his previous infotainment-antics behind. Indeed, the ads spin a narrative of artistic *development* that attempts to erase *The Big One* from memory, and place *Bowling for Columbine* at the pinnacle of Moore's "oeuvre." Most ads ran a quote from Michael Wilmington of the *Chicago Tribune* describing *Bowling* as, "His best film, surpassing *Roger & Me* in its blend of sharp satire and humor." The trailer described Moore as "The director of *Roger & Me* and the author of *Stupid White Men*" (thus strategically omitting *The Big One*). And while Moore's trademark humor was still invoked in the ads, it is now a dark and biting humor that belies the film's serious tone; "funny and abrasive"; "volcanically funny"; "disturbing

and often hilarious”; “Savage. Hilarious.” Thus, above all else, the ads tell a story of *maturation*; this is a more “adult” Michael Moore, and this is a film that goes beyond the display of mere comic genius. This is a “maddening film that demands attention.”

“Decades from now,” declared one ad, quoting Jonatho Curiel of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “historians will look back and say it captured the zeitgeist.”

Thus, the marketing campaign for *Bowling* told the story of a filmmaker who not only had “returned to form,” but had elevated his art to a new level. And to substantiate such a claim the ads emphasized the high-art praise lavished on *Bowling* at Cannes. Every ad included the Cannes symbol, announcing *Bowling for Columbine* as the winner of a special jury prize. The full-page ad that ran in the *New York Times* on its opening weekend highlighted the word: “UNPRECEDENTED!” in caps at the top of the page as a way to announce Moore’s surprise win. Two of the ads also incorporated explanations of Moore’s critical success that were unusually lengthy for a typical broad sheet. The first made sure to fill the audience in on the *historical* importance of Moore’s Cannes victory:

For the first time in nearly 50 years, this year’s Cannes film festival accepted a documentary, Michael Moore’s *Bowling For Columbine* as an OFFICIAL ENTRY in competition. The film received a fifteen-minute standing ovation and won the Special Jury Prize UNANIMOUSLY!

The second was a quote by Glenn Lovell of the *San Jose Mercury News*, referencing *Roger*’s Oscar snub (over a decade previous), and speculating on *Bowling*’s own potential Oscar chances:

There has been talk of making up for the slight of *Roger & Me* in 1989 by nominating *Bowling* for a Best-Documentary Oscar. It would be much better served by a Best-Picture nomination – or a Nobel Peace Prize.

The *Bowling* ads represent a conscious attempt to elevate Moore above his debased, “popular” image, bringing him back into the art-cinema fold. Altogether, the ads transformed *Bowling For Columbine* from a political documentary criticizing the way institutionalized racism and class inequality cultivate a culture of violence, to an incendiary work of cinematic daring by a provocative, indie auteur that had rediscovered his artistic voice. The strategy was a rousing success.

#### **A Certain Lack of Commitment: Reading *Bowling for Columbine***

To be sure, Moore still had his critics. And most attempted to slap Moore with the same infotainment critique that so devalued *The Big One*. While Moore is an accomplished entertainer, many argued, he tends to dumb-down the issues. Or, as A.O. Scott put it, Moore too often “give[s] in to his own urge to simplify” (“Seeking” E13). Thus, for some critics, Moore’s analysis of the way in which the news media depicts violent crime through a racially tinged lens is nothing more than a bit of lazy scapegoating. Jami Bernard of the *New York Daily News* argued that Moore “shows how silly, simplistic and inflammatory our media is, but fails to make a reasoned connection between media hype and outbreaks of murderous rage. ... One only wishes Moore had gone further, with more investigative rigor” (“He’s Out” 55). For Richard Corliss and Andrea Sachs, Moore asks good, tough questions but is unable to deliver serious, thoughtful answers:



While Moore may have no answers to U.S. violence, he does offer some scapegoats. He blames TV news for creating a climate of unjustified fear (reports of killings have risen 600%, he says, while the murder rate has decreased 20%) and the Executive Branch for an us-vs.-them foreign policy. All this agitating has made Moore rich.

“Blood”

Here, Corliss and Sachs argue that Moore’s desire to entertain undermines his ability to analyze. His “simplistic” arguments make for good drama – a fact that has made him wealthy – but they hardly constitute “serious” analysis.

The way in which the press breezily dismissed Moore’s analysis as nothing more than dumbed-down hyperbole and specious reasoning actually belies *their own* failure to offer the same kind of “deep, rich and insightful” analysis they demanded from Moore. In fact, claims that Moore dumbs-down the topic of the media’s depiction of race and violence are, themselves, gross over-simplifications. In fact, the connections Moore draws between media representation, racism and the ‘culture of fear’ aren’t even his own; Moore is simply re-presenting the work of sociologist, Barry Glassner, whom one could hardly accuse of “over-simplifying” matters. However, hardly *any* reviewers mentioned Glassner or his book, *The Culture of Fear*, upon which much of *Bowling* is based. Indeed, Corliss and Sachs go so far as to scoff at Moore’s statistics (on the rate of murder reports compared to actual murders), seemingly unaware that what they are actually scoffing at are *Glassner’s* statistics (which are, in fact, quite sufficiently “backed up”).<sup>116</sup>

Instead, Moore’s entertaining flourishes licensed critics to accuse Moore of “slippery logic” (Scott, “Seeking” E13); “specious reasoning” (Nesselson 24); and “half-baked conjecture” (Morris C1). For some, his penchant for narrative asides and comic relief keep pushing him off-point: “He has the habit of going off on tangents that drag

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<sup>116</sup> See Glassner (109-127).

him far off the subject,” complained Jeff Strickler in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (“Moore” 12E). For others, his attempt to tie his arguments together thematically leads to the positing of connections where they don’t really exist: “... the weakest parts of the film arrive when Moore tries to shove disparate observations under the same umbrella” wrote Robert Denserstein of the *Rocky Mountain News* (“Bowling” 8D).

But despite a tendency for some critics to lament Moore’s brand of infotainment, for the vast majority of critics, *Bowling For Columbine* represented an unparalleled success. However, it is deeply telling that what these critics found so praise-worthy (indeed, *rave*-worthy) about the film was the very same trait that his critics denounced: Moore’s purported inability to come up with any specific, concrete answers to the questions his film posed. An early review in the *Hollywood Reporter* set the tone. According to the review, *Bowling* was “a flat-out brilliant cinematic essay” and “a kick in the butt no matter where you stand on the role guns play in American culture” (“Bowling”). However, despite the allusion made here to some kind of political import, we quickly learn that what makes *Bowling for Columbine* so “flat-out brilliant” is that Moore doesn’t appear to take any specific “side” on the issue of gun control at all:

Once you realize Moore is a member of the National Rifle Association, you know this isn't going to be the usual harangue about gun control from a leftist kook. ... "What is it about Americans, guns and violence?" Moore asks. The usual answers range from the bloody history of the United States to the negative influences of the media, a broad-ranging group of scapegoats that include Marilyn Manson and video games. Yet ... [a]s Moore digs deeper and continues to ask hard questions that stump everyone, a grim reality sets in for those of us who live in a nation that has armed itself with a quarter of a billion household firearms. In *Bowling*, there are no easy answers and often no answers at all, just a number of very uneasy questions.

Here, what the writer finds most laudable about *Bowling For Columbine* is a latent ambiguity at its heart. Moore, we are told, delves into the complexities of America's culture of violence and finds just that ... "complexity." The audience is thus left with a difficult and important set of questions with which to wrestle; questions that Moore, laudably, doesn't answer for them. Anything "less" would have been too simple, too obvious, and too politically one-sided; nothing more than the mere ramblings of another "leftist kook." But in this case, Moore has risen above his partisan sentiments to present us with an honest and enlightening depiction of an issue too complex to come down on any one side at all. In short, the reviewer seems to be saying – Moore has achieved something great by creating a political documentary that is not, in any way, *committed*. True to the tenets of the art-film experience, Moore has created an intellectually challenging cinematic experience that bears a strong sense of real social import; but one that doesn't require much more political action on the part of the audience beyond feeling appropriately concerned.

I would argue that even a brief look at the film reveals something entirely different. Despite its rhetorical flaws (discussed in the previous two chapters), *Bowling* is, in many ways, Moore's *most* committed film. Despite the fact that it takes on the seemingly peripheral issue of gun control, Moore still manages to contextualize the topic within his core-critique of American social/economic policy and, specifically, working-class issues. All of this goes by the wayside, however, in reviews that reveled in the indie-chic and art-cinema cache that the "return to form" narrative (perhaps initiated by Moore's Cannes-victory) provided.

Thus, for instance, in an early review for the Toronto Film Festival, Roger Ebert

compared *Bowling For Columbine* favorably to *Roger & Me*. What Ebert found more compelling about *Bowling* was that Moore “is a little kinder and gentler, and a little less certain than usual” (“Moore Hits” 22). For instance, Ebert explains, Moore asks why Canada has a rate of gun ownership comparable to the United States, but only a fraction of the shootings. “This is a question Moore does not and probably cannot answer,” Ebert explains, incredibly, “and so his movie lacks the moral clarity of *Roger & Me* ...” (22). This is a deeply puzzling claim, since it is during the Canadian segment that Moore puts his “moral clarity” front-and-center.<sup>117</sup> However, for Ebert: “In *Bowling for Columbine*, [Moore] is not so sure of the answers as in the popular *Roger & Me*, a film in which he knew who the bad guys were, and why. Here, he asks questions he can’t answer ...” (“*Bowling*”). As such, Ebert reads *Bowling for Columbine* according to the art-film discourse that was so prevalent during *Roger & Me*, and through which it was being positioned by United Artists. According to this logic, Moore’s main goal was not to make a specific critique of US policy, but to raise provocative questions about social issues, and to encourage his audience to “think.” The key here is that Moore is providing his viewers with an intellectual experience by allowing them some “interpretive freedom.” He’s not insulting us with easy answers and solutions, but rather presenting us with a realistic portrayal of a dismal scenario about which *we* are meant to decide.

Claims of – and enthusiastic *praise* for – Moore’s purported new-found sense of

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<sup>117</sup> Blatantly comparing Canada’s social-welfare philosophy of governing to America’s individualistic philosophy (symbolized by the welfare-to-work program), Moore makes no bones about where the blame for America’s culture of violence lies, and what steps we might take to fix the problem. In fact, far from the ambiguity Ebert seems to find in the sequence, Moore’s juxtaposition of Canadian social welfare policies with those of the U.S. is possibly more obvious in its political commitments than even Moore’s sarcastic cross-cutting between Roger Smith’s annual Christmas address and the Flint home evictions in *Roger & Me*.

political ambiguity were ubiquitous throughout *Bowling*'s premiere at Cannes and its theatrical run in the States later that fall. For instance, in what was perhaps a first for Moore, Steven Rosen of the *Denver Post* argued that "*Bowling* is not a polemical film" ("*Bowling*" B4). It was instead, Rosen argued, "a movie about its questions rather than its answers." Critic after critic agreed, often employing similar language. Jeff Strickler of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* concluded, "It's clear that Moore sympathizes with gun control advocates. But at the same time, he acknowledges that there are no easy answers. Just lots of very hard questions" ("Moore" 12E). Shawn Levy, of *The Oregonian*, praised Moore for his "refusal to accept easy answers" ("Two" 20); while Joe Williams raved that, "This time, the diehard documentarian ... introduces a wildcard of doubt" and "eschews easy answers" ("Ambush Documentarian" D5). And despite a fairly less-than-stellar review, Robert Denerstein admitted, "It may surprise you to learn, though, that Moore is not reflexively anti-gun. ... Moore offers no answers ..." ("*Bowling*" 8D).

Ultimately, it was the apparent appearance of *non-commitment* on Moore's part that critics liked the best. Thus, Joanna Connors, of the *Cleveland Plains Dealer*, lauded the fact that "Moore rounds up the usual suspects – America's violent entertainment and easy access to guns – and then has to let them go" ("*Columbine* C1). Even Corliss and Sachs admitted that *Bowling* was "crisper than Moore's earlier work – it's a handsomely assembled essay in words and pictures – and less given to finger pointing than head scratching" ("Blood").

Corliss and Sach's language here is especially telling. Their use of the phrase "head-scratching" implies just the kind of intellectual-experience the art film is supposed to provide. Meanwhile, his claim that this move has resulted in a film that is "crisper"

than Moore's earlier work re-emphasizes the narrative of "maturation" evident in the ads. The implication here seems is that showing one's commitment to a particular political "side" belies a level of immaturity on the part of the filmmaker. Above all else, the art-film audience wants to be encouraged to think for themselves – and Moore, we are told, has finally matured enough to let them to do just that.<sup>118</sup>

Hence, critics described *Bowling*'s content in terms that were aesthetically laudatory, but politically ambiguous. Once again, the emphasis was on the fact that Moore had made a film that was probing, challenging, and dark. Corliss and Sachs described *Bowling* as "a road movie in search of the troubled soul of America" ("Blood"). Wesley Morris called it a "mentally exhausting ... documentary with the heft of a saga" that "leaves you with a sinking feeling" (*Bowling* C1). Completely missing the point, James Veniere claimed that *Bowling* "peers into the dark recesses of the American psyche and finds a well-armed gun nut dwelling there." Although, he assured, the film had "sweeping vision" ("Shooting S3). Ultimately, critics agreed that Moore had returned to form by putting aesthetics above politics: "the film feel less a polemic than a kind of creeping, middle-of-the-night form of paranoia," argued Shawn Levy ("Two" 20), while Joe Baltake raved, "[t]he documentarian makes what could have been a deadly polemic into something human and accessible" (*Columbine* TK12). In this way, *Bowling* was described in language that was just as politically ambiguous as critics often claimed his movie was.

Yet, nobody argued that Moore had abandoned politics completely. By this point,

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<sup>118</sup> In art cinema, political ambiguity has often been viewed as a sign of artistic "maturity." For instance, Barbara Wilinsky argues that, when it was released, the film *No Boundaries* was praised for its depiction of race relations precisely because it "posed more questions than it answered" and did not suggest "an easy answer" for the black family at its center. As such, the film was considered "welcome proof of Hollywood's newfound willingness to treat adult subjects in an adult way" (23).

Moore had made a career for himself as an enthusiastic and unapologetic voice of the Left and critics did not downplay Moore's liberal credentials. However, as long as *Bowling* could be described in such a way that posed no real threat to the status quo, then Moore's politically-charged persona could be emphasized without causing too much of a stir. With the specific political commitments of the film curtailed by the art discourse, it was safe for critics to emphasize Moore's politically-controversial *image*. Thus, in true indie fashion, critics were quick to play up the edginess of Moore's attitude, and the "daring" involved in tackling a controversial subject such as guns.

For instance, critics often described Moore in a way that marked him as controversial, but politically benign. Thus, we are told he's a "cheerful rabble-rouser" (Scott, "Seeking E13); a "jolly-populist rabble-rouser" (Ebert, "Reason" 24); a "good-natured and outspoken rabble-rouser," (Reid, "Director TK20); and a "master instigator [who] ... rouses rabble on both sides of the fence" (Persall, "Converting" 6W). He's a "master of ceremonies and chief provocateur" (Denerstein, "*Bowling* 8D) and a "master of polemic facetiousness" (Simon, "*Bowling*" C1). He's a "puckish muckraker" (Clark and Puig 6E); and a "gadfly, provocateur, muckraker, authority-questioner ... a latter-day *Candide*" (Hornaday, "*Columbine* C5). And he's created a "provocative, sure-to-be-controversial documentary" (Schaefer, "*Columbine*" 26), that's "locked and loaded" (Elliot, "*Bowling*" 7), "fast-paced and edgy, humorous one minute and touching the next" (Strickler, "Moore" 12E).

All of this language works to rearticulate the radical edges of Moore's politics as evidence of his "independent" nature and artistic hutzpah. While Moore may have a political point-of-view, what he is most interested in is simply shaking us out of our

complacency by being provocative. Or, as Wesley Morris put it: “What rescues him from ideological cheapskating is his unwavering devotion to rattling America’s insidious corporate structure - its “stupid white men,” according to his recent bestseller – like an inmate rocking the bars of his cell” (“*Bowling*” C1). Here, while Morris flirts with Moore’s radical perspective, he ultimately softens its punch by casting Moore as slightly-crazed, rather than right-on. This is a filmmaker who lives to stir the pot. Or, as A. O. Scott put it, *Bowling* opened in “an atmosphere of intense political polarization,” but Moore is a filmmaker who “would[n’t] have it any other way” (“Seeking” E13). Ultimately, what this framing did was transform Moore’s radicalism into a kind of daring, edgy fun for moviegoers interested in seeing something different and challenging. In this frame, *Bowling* was nothing less, but also nothing *more*, than a “rollicking, incendiary documentary that looks down the barrel at America’s love affair with guns” (Nesselson, “*Bowling*” 24).

Thus, in inverse relation to the infotainment argument that sunk *The Big One*, critics praised Moore for the way he combined serious issues within an entertaining format in *Bowling*. The difference appeared to be what critics understood to be a more thought-provoking, highbrow style of entertainment, and a decided lack of political commitment on Moore’s part. According to this logic, the most “political” thing that could be said about *Bowling for Columbine* was that it was a daring and provocative “discussion-starter.” Here, critics paid Moore the biggest art-cinema compliment of all – that he had made a film that really made you think. The film lays out a “thought-provoking thesis” (Verniere “*Bowling*” S3), that is “there to be wrestled with” (Morris, “*Bowling*” C1); that is “designed to spark debate” (Curiel, “*Bowling*” D5); and that serves



as a “starting point for debate outside the theater” (Levy, “Two” 20). “Watch it, argue about it, embrace it, denounce it,” concluded Moira MacDonald in her review for the *Seattle Times*, lauding Moore’s political gumption but denuding the film of its specific political meanings; “Moore’s put his finger on something we all need to talk about, before only tears remain” (“Michael H21). Perhaps A. O. Scott summed this anti-political logic up best when he admitted:

I hope the movie is widely seen and debated with appropriate ferocity and thoughtfulness. Does that sound evasive? I’m sorry if it does, but at the moment, political certainty seems to me to be a cheap and abundant commodity, of much less value than honest ambivalence.

“Seeking” E13

Honest ambivalence; hardly a better term could be used to describe the ways in which critics heaped praise upon *Bowling for Columbine* while ignoring its most radical aspects.

Not once does the concept of “persuasion” – a basic, if not *the essential* – concept undergirding political documentary, make an appearance during the critical reception of Moore’s film. As such, critics managed to delegitimize Moore’s most radical arguments simply by ignoring their existence altogether. Ultimately, the political aspirations of *Bowling for Columbine* were “condemned by high-art praise” (Pribram 163).

### **“Shame On You, Mr. Moore.” Running Back Towards Social Meaning**

Two events (beyond his initial embrace at Cannes) best exemplified the way in which the press had truly welcomed Moore back into the artistic fold. The first was his unprecedented nomination, and then *win*, for “Best Screenplay,” awarded by the American Writers Guild Association. This marked the first time a documentary had ever been nominated or honored by the Writers Guild and, as such, signaled a sense of

appreciation for Moore as an artist (Lyman, “A Jumble” E3; “Newsmakers” A2).<sup>119</sup>

The second, of course, was *Bowling*’s nomination and win for the Best Documentary Oscar. As many pointed out, 2002 marked the very first time that nominees for the documentary category were chosen by a committee made up entirely of documentarians, headed that year by acclaimed filmmakers Frida Lee and Michael Apter (Ebert, “*Chicago*” 46). Their nominations included films that displayed a sense of aesthetic inventiveness, such as *Spellbound*, noted for a high level of narrative structure and characterization, and *Winged Migration*, praised for its stunning visual composition. *Bowling for Columbine* was deemed an appropriate fit.

Moore played along with his role as celebrity-auteur, and was pleased that members of the industry had taken note of his considerable talents (Lyman, “A Jumble” E3). However, by the time the winter of 2003 arrived, the political landscape had changed since *Bowling* had premiered at Cannes in May of 2002. The U.S. Congress had authorized the use of force in Iraq the previous fall. Colin Powell had delivered his infamous address to the U.N., outlining the “evidence” for weapons of mass destruction under Saddam Hussein’s control. Starting in January of that year, mass anti-war demonstrations had begun to occur across the world. And just a few days before the Academy Awards ceremony, the United States invaded Iraq. As a result of these events, Moore found himself in a precarious position. He had been embraced by the artistic community and lavished with praise for having produced a political documentary that (purportedly) eschewed oversimplified, partisan commitments for a more nuanced and

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<sup>119</sup> Indeed, to explain the unusual award, Victoria Riskin, President of the WGA West, highlighted Moore’s storytelling abilities and aesthetic vision: “Our members’ appreciation of Michael Moore’s clever, humorous, and personal storytelling is a tribute to his vision and the power of his subject” (“Guest Hosts” 2B).

ambiguous depiction of a “complex reality.” But now a global issue that went to the heart of *Bowling*’s main theme had emerged. This was an opportunity to take committed documentary to a mass audience the size of which Moore had likely never contemplated. It was an opportunity he couldn’t resist.

Ultimately, Moore could have taken the safe route and accepted his Academy Award with “grace and humility,” determined, perhaps, to fight another day. Instead, he chose to put politics above art. On the night of March 23, 2003, Moore strode to the stage of the Kodak Theater and said:

On behalf of our producers Kathleen Glynn and Michael Donovan from Canada, I'd like to thank the Academy for this. I have invited my fellow documentary nominees on the stage with us, and we would like to ... they're here in solidarity with me because we like non-fiction. We like non-fiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elects a fictitious □ president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or fiction of orange alerts we are against this war, □ Mr. Bush. □ Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you! And any time you got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up! Thank you very much.

In one fell swoop, Moore had accomplished the goal he had set out to accomplish in 1989; bringing committed documentary to a wide, popular audience, and using that bully-pulpit to air an alternative, progressive political perspective.

He was resoundingly punished for the decision.

While journalists were hardly surprised that Moore decided to go this route, they nonetheless expressed deep disappointment. As A.O. Scott put it, a day after the ceremony:

Those winners who felt compelled to make statements about the war did so for the most part with modesty and tact. The exception, predictably, was the documentary maker Michael Moore, who succeeded in making a complex geopolitical issue seem to be all about him and who was loudly booed, even, I suspect, by people who agreed with him.

“A Night” E1

Scott’s remarks exemplify the manner in which the popular press denounced Moore’s statements. First and foremost, Scott argues that Moore’s comments were a disruption to the pomp and circumstance of the ceremony; his acceptance speech was absent the proper “modesty and tact” required for such an event. In short, Moore didn’t show the Oscar telecast, or the Academy, its proper respect. Secondly, his actions were read as evidence of a kind of personal immaturity, an inability to see past his own, personal agenda and understand the “bigger picture.” By putting politics above art, Moore had proven himself unworthy of the accolades bestowed upon him by the critical community. As such, there was a drastic turn back towards the “infotainment” discourse that Moore had so recently left escaped.

Like Scott, most critics personalized Moore’s speech, reading it as a selfish, self-aggrandizing attention-grab, rather than a committed political statement of dissent. Tom Shales, of the *Washington Post*, described Moore’s speech as a “tantrum” (“This Year” C1), while most critics opted for the term “tirade,” articulating Moore’s statement as nothing more than an outburst of personal anger (Rosen, “Moore’s” 45A ). Jack Mathews, of the *Daily News*, called Moore a “self-important” and “shameless self-promoter” who had insulted the integrity of the event (“An Evening” 42). An editorial in the *Chicago-Sun Times* called Moore an “egomaniac” who took his award as a “chance to prance and strut on the stage” and deliver “a particularly vicious and no-class attack”

(“Michael Moore’s” 27). And Robert Denerstein called Moore’s speech “predictably tasteless and needlessly provocative,” amounting to nothing more than “a chance to promote his agenda” (“Moore Drew” 41A).

For many, Peter O’Toole’s speech to accept a lifetime achievement award served as the perfect antithesis to Moore’s rude and obnoxious antics. By comparing Moore’s speech to O’Toole’s, critics defined Moore’s comments as a sign of “ungratefulness” towards the Academy. Tom Shales exemplifies this interpretation:

... Moore's was the most outlandish and outrageous disruption of an Oscar program in many years. If the show contained one of the worst Oscar speeches, it also contained one of the best: an eloquent and gracious thank-you from actor Peter O'Toole, who after being nominated and losing seven times, received an honorary trophy.

“This Year” C1

Here, Shales reads Moore’s speech as a direct slap-in-the-face to the Academy. Whereas Moore used his award to “stage a tantrum” and “disrupt” the proceedings, O’Toole behaved properly by thanking the Academy for his honor. Here, Shales constructs a narrative of betrayal, in which Moore turned on the very industry who had embraced him.

This narrative of betrayal was pushed by many in the popular press, who focused less on what Moore had to say, and more on the response he received from the crowd of industry professionals in the audience. For instance, much was made of the fact that Moore initially received a standing-ovation for his award that quickly changed to boos once he started to speak. Sharon Waxman, of the *Washington Post*, noted the contrast, writing: “The Detroit-based documentarian ... won a standing ovation after winning Best Documentary ... But moments later he was booed roundly for his strident statement from

the podium” (“*Chicago Triumphs*” C1). Daniel Lyons, of the *Boston Globe* also commented upon the audience’s shift in tone:

Celebrities who gave a standing ovation as Moore took the stage began booing as his agenda became clear. Moore was ushered offstage by a decidedly mixed response from an audience somewhat shell-shocked by what one entertainment reporter dubbed Moore’s ‘hijacking’ of the Oscar ceremony.

“Michael Moore’s” A11

In this frame, Moore’s speech is rearticulated as a personal narrative of betrayal and ultimate rejection. “Who knows,” wrote Jack Mathews, “in time, the Academy may be able to forgive Moore ... who used his 45 seconds of free speech to lambaste the President and the war, and left with the sound of boos hitting him in the back” (“An Evening” 42). But in the meantime, as Mathew Gilbert, of the *Boston Globe*, put it: “He got 10 demerits for his outburst” (C13).

No one in the popular press seemed willing to acknowledge what was so blatantly obvious; that Moore’s statements were perfectly in line with the tone and purpose of the film for which he was being honored. Indeed, it would make sense to have accused Moore of hypocrisy, and possibly cowardice, had he *not* made such a statement. But, of course, most critics had not read *Bowling for Columbine* as a politically “committed” film and, as such, could only read Moore’s speech as an example of the filmmaker putting himself above his art (and their appreciation of it). Indeed, what truly seemed to anger most in the popular press was not Moore’s *mention* of the war, but his commitment to a particular *side* of the issue, and the idea that this “agenda” took precedence over the awards ceremony, themselves. This attitude can best be seen in the way that Moore’s

speech was continuously compared to that of Best Actor winner, Adrien Brody, who also mentioned the war, but in a very different manner.

Brody acknowledged the serious import of the war in a way that connected the art of film to current events and also managed to steer clear of “politics” altogether. Specifically, he personalized the war, by sending out well-wishes to a hometown buddy serving overseas. He also universalized the war by referencing the general horrors of violence and praying for peace:

My experiences making [*The Piano*, a film about the Holocaust] made me very aware of sadness and dehumanization of people in times of war, the repercussions of war. Whomever you believe in, whether God or Allah, may He watch over you. Let us pray for a peaceful and swift resolution.

Finally, while acknowledging the serious import of ongoing realities, Brody made the ceremony itself the main focus of attention, grabbing presenter Halle Berry by surprise and giving her a passionate kiss, all to a wild standing ovation. Journalists agreed that Brody “had it right” (Woodlief, “Such Odd” 31), giving “the best acceptance speech” of the night (Denerstein “Moore Drew” 41A; Saunders “Oscar” 41A); a speech that was deemed “pitch-perfect” (Hinckley “Chicago” 31), “tasteful and genuinely moving” (Denerstein), and “a quiet yet impassioned epistle” (Saunders). For many critics, Brody was simply more respectful than Moore. “It was the evening's redeeming moment and one of the more memorably graceful moments in Oscar history,” declared the *Buffalo News*. “Everyone knew it instantly. Brody had spoken for the entire room” (Simon, “Michael” D1). Phil Rosenthal, of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, agreed, comparing Moore’s “Molotov cocktail of protest” to Brody’s “more diplomatic remarks” (“Oscar” 41). Thus,

unlike Moore, Brody managed to make the Awards ceremony – and by proxy, “cinema” itself – seem politically engaged, while at the same time retaining a crucial sense of political ambiguity. He stepped right up to the line without crossing over; he was “edgy,” without being committed.

Ultimately, critics agreed that filmmakers were simply not supposed to air their political views, especially since many in the audience might not share them. As a *New York Times* editorial put it:

Americans who feel just one way about this war are easy to find, but they're probably not as common as Americans who feel two or three different ways. For them, Adrien Brody, who won the Best Actor award for his role in *The Pianist*, seemed to sum up nearly all the relevant emotions at once. He came to the stage in elation, kissed Halle Berry, who presented the award, and then reflected tearfully on what his role in *The Pianist*, which is set during the Holocaust, had taught him about "the dehumanization of people in wartime." He said he hoped for a peaceful, swift resolution to the war and sent greetings to an old friend from Queens, who is now a soldier in Kuwait. And then, having squared the circle of public opinion, he put his arm around Ms. Berry and walked off the stage.

“Oscar” A16

Here, the *Times* perfectly exemplifies the art discourse. Artists are there to demonstrate the complicated emotional realities of an event like the Iraq War, and perhaps to personalize it in a fashion that brings the “import” of such an event home for the audience. What they are not meant to do, however, is to advocate too strongly for one side or the other. As such, Moore’s greatest sin seems to have been that he decided to go the route that Winston argues documentarians in the Griersonian tradition have so often avoided. On the night of the 2003 Academy Awards ceremony, Michael Moore ran headlong towards social meaning. And for most in the popular press, it was this



willingness to take a side, and make a stand, that grated the most.

### **Shrieking to the Choir: Infotainment for the Art-House Crowd**

Despite the critical outcry after his Oscar performance, it didn't take Moore long to reemerge into the spotlight. A little over a year after his infamous Oscar remarks, Moore was once again accepting industry honors. The award was the *Palme d'Or*, the stage was the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, and the film was *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Moore's *Palme* victory, the first documentary to win since 1956, seemed to indicate that at least as far as the film industry (both national and international) was concerned, Moore's Oscar speech hadn't cost him any stature within the indie cinema world. In fact, the film's screening was received with wild enthusiasm, as audience members treated Moore to what Cannes festival director, Thierry Fremaux, called the longest standing ovation in Cannes history (Ebert, "Moore Takes" 23). After handing out the award, jury chief Quentin Tarantino immediately tried to maintain that *Fahrenheit*'s win was, indeed, about the art of cinema, and nothing more. "This prize was not for politics," he told Roger Ebert after the ceremony. "It won because it was the best film" (Ebert, "Moore" 23). For his part, at least in front of the Cannes crowd, Moore was willing to play the role of auteur. "I did not set out to make a political film," he declared, incredibly, to journalists at a news conference. "I want people to leave thinking that was a good way to spend two hours. The art of this, the cinema, comes before politics" (Scott, "Moore's" A6).

Journalists, however, saw things differently. For most in the popular press, Moore's Oscar outburst revealed that he was a politics-first/art-second kind of filmmaker. As such, they dismissed out of hand the notion that the Cannes jury had given Moore the

*Palme* for anything other than to make a political statement against an American-led war that was deeply unpopular in Europe. In fact, Moore's win was defined as a "political statement" even before it happened. Old friend Harlan Jacobson, writing for *USA Today*, argued: "If the jury wants to make a political statement, critics say, Moore's film might win the top prize" ("*Fahrenheit*" 6E). Jami Bernard, of the New York *Daily News*, described the audience response to the film's screening as "a clamorous 20-minute standing ovation," but then followed with the sarcastic quip: "Of course, this is France" ("Standing" 3). David Guarino replicated this attitude, calling the film Moore's "latest theater-filling publicity stunt" and declaring that "loose-cannon docu-critic Michael Moore has finally found an adoring audience – in France" ("Moore" 3). "Artistically speaking," wrote Collin Levey in the *Seattle Times*, "Moore likely could have submitted an anti-Bush finger-painting on camels and won at Cannes" (B7). Ultimately, while critics seemed impressed by the commotion Moore seemed able to create, they largely dismissed the legitimacy of the Cannes award itself, both artistically *and* politically. As David Denby put it in his review for the *New Yorker*: "I have some difficulties with Moore myself, and I'm not entirely impressed by the standing ovation and the *Palme d'Or* that the film received recently at Cannes, where the audience may have been all too eager to applaud its own detestation of the United States" ("George" 108). For most journalists, good art and real political commitments did not mix.

As such, when *Fahrenheit* opened in the U.S. in June of 2004 and broke all box office records for a documentary (even taking the top box office spot for that weekend overall, beating out the Wayans Brothers comedy, *White Chicks*), it inevitably sparked a rousing public debate. On one level, the critical reception of *Fahrenheit 9/11* within the

mainstream media mirrored that of *Roger & Me*. While many seasoned journalists had already been through the battle over whether or not documentary could have a “point of view,” there were still others in the mainstream media who continued to hold documentarians to the standards of objective journalism. The “discourse of documentary” arose once more.

### **The Discourse of Documentary Returns**

As Robert Brent Toplin has pointed out in his analysis of *Fahrenheit*’s reception, many mainstream journalists relied upon tried-and-true notions of neutrality and objectivity to critique Moore’s film as excessively partisan. For instance, *Washington Post* columnists Richard Cohen and William Raspberry expressed support for criticizing the Bush Administration’s policies, yet “expressed discomfort with Michael Moore’s highly partisan agenda” (Toplin 55). Network news anchors Ted Koppel and Tom Browkaw reiterated this argument, declaring that *Fahrenheit* should not be considered real journalism (Toplin 57).

This evaluative logic encouraged a form of cinematic nitpicking, in which journalists attempted to delegitimize Moore’s film by pointing out inaccuracies in the smallest of facts and most tangential of details. The result, Toplin argues, was a critical reception which tended to focus on small details while never engaging with Moore’s broader points or main argument (65). Favorite targets of such criticism were the strength of the Bush family’s financial ties with the Saudi royal family,<sup>120</sup> Moore’s use of “happy,

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<sup>120</sup> As Toplin points out, most critics were unable to denounce the specific facts as reported by Moore. What they found so offensive was Moore’s *interpretation* of those facts, which was that Bush’s financial connections might be seen as a conflict of interest with his presidential obligations, an interpretation many found to be “rude,” if not blatantly conspiratorial (Toplin 98). What critics failed to acknowledge was that Moore was basing this interpretation upon the work of journalist Craig Unger, who appears in the film. Criticism of Moore’s allegations would necessarily involve a criticism of *Unger*’s as well, but journalists failed to acknowledge this.

light-hearted” images of Iraq to emphasize the toll exacted upon the Iraqi people by the American invasion,<sup>121</sup> and Moore’s assertion that the F.B.I. was unusually lax in letting members of Osama bin Laden’s family fly out of the country the day after the attacks.<sup>122</sup>

Beyond factual nitpicking, there also existed a broader anxiety over Moore’s committed style. These critics centered on Moore’s obvious inclusion of a particular (read: partisan) point of view, and his commitment toward a specific interpretation of the war in Iraq. An episode of NPR’s *Talk of the Nation* serves as a good example. In a segment on the “rise of political documentaries,” host Neal Conan led a discussion focusing on current films, including *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Jehane Noujaim’s documentary on Al-Jazeera, *Control Room*. Central to the discussion was the juxtaposition of these two films and the different “styles” each employed. While *Fahrenheit* works within the “reflexive” tradition (broadly defined), *Control Room* works in the tradition of the Direct Cinema films of D.A. Pennebaker. As Conan explained the issue: “Most people’s idea of a documentary is more like *Control Room*, one that lets the events unfold. ... Some argue

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<sup>121</sup> Here, once again, journalists were critiquing Moore’s interpretation, rather than his factual accuracy. At the very least, they argued, Moore should have shown the “other side,” by depicting the horrors of life under Saddam’s regime. Moore, of course, scoffed at such charges, arguing that evidence of Saddam’s brutality was everywhere apparent in the mainstream media during the months leading up to the war. Indeed, by showing images of the innocent people and communities that would be harmed by the US invasion, Moore was *truly* “showing the other side” in a way the media never had (Toplin 81-2).

<sup>122</sup> Critics once again slammed Moore on minute details while evading his larger point. They quibbled with Moore’s assertions that the bin Laden family was allowed to leave before the reopening of national airspace, a detail later refuted by Richard Clarke (but largely believed at the time of Moore’s film); and they pointed to Clarke’s later admission that he, personally, gave the flights clearance to proceed, that the people on board had been interviewed and that he believed this was a good and proper decision (Toplin 94). They also pointed to the 9/11 Commission, which concluded that the FBI had determined no one on the flights was directly connected to the attacks of 9/11 (Toplin 96). As Toplin points out, however, Moore never made the argument that actual terrorists may have escaped on the flights. Instead, he questioned the brevity of the FBI interviews and the speed with which the bin Ladens were allowed to exit the country. And more to the point, these were questions drawn from “legitimate” news reports that raised similar concerns. As such, Moore “had merely raised questions about some news reports that remained the subject of intense dispute well after his movie appeared. Moore did not present a fictional story about the Saudis’ quick exit from the United States; he featured one side’s argument in a legitimate conflict of interpretations” (Toplin 97).

that Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11* is not a true documentary" ("Analysis"). The matter-of-fact way in which Conan addresses the concern – “*most people’s* idea of a documentary” – is telling. There is an assumed difference between Noujaim’s *Control Room* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* that is taken for granted by Conan and the majority of his guests. As Patricia Finneran, director of the SilverDocs film festival, explained it to Conan:

I think that they're both political films, and yet very different, very different in their take. *Control Room* takes a more neutral stance in covering the story--she let it unfold. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, I think Michael Moore set out to tell a certain story, and found real people and real stories and put them together in a very beautifully crafted way to tell the story he wanted to tell.

Of course, as argued in previous chapters, this is an entirely false distinction, as *all* documentaries construct a political, and ideological, “point-of-view.” However, for Conan and his guests, Noujaim’s decision to passively “let it all unfold” (a phrase used over and over again throughout the discussion) marks her film as neutral, objective, and ultimately more *trustworthy* than Moore’s committed argument.

The anxiety invoked by the discourse of documentary had an important effect on the manner in which each film was analyzed. In the case of *Control Room*, the discussion centered on the “content” of Noujaim’s documentary; issues such as the similarities between Al Jazeera and western news organizations and the differences between the way in which Arab and US media outlets covered the war. In Moore’s case, however, the conversation never once touched upon either the central themes of his film, or any of Moore’s central accusations. Instead, the discussion stayed focused purely on Moore’s

subjective, committed style, and the question of whether or not his film lives up to what are assumed to be the standards of “true” documentary. Indeed, even though most of Conan’s guests stridently defended Moore’s brand of committed documentary, his committed style continued to be *the issue*. Thus as it did during *Roger & Me*, the discourse of documentary often got in the way of useful and effective evaluations of Moore’s film and its importance.

### **Summer of Infotainment**

However, while the discourse of documentary was certainly a deterrent to *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s public legitimacy, it was not the only frame within which Moore’s film was interpreted and evaluated. For many journalists, the question of whether or not documentary could, or should, have a point of view was a bit old-fashioned. For these critics, what was so unseemly about *Fahrenheit 9/11* was the way in which it packaged that point of view in an enjoyable, funny, and emotionally powerful narrative that, they argued, discouraged the appropriate amount of seriousness and dispassion required to evaluate such material. Indeed, for these journalists, Moore’s success at the box office was simply a sign of the times, one more bit of proof that our civic culture had been cheapened by mass (read: crass) entertainment values. Thus, the discourse of infotainment returned with a vengeance.

Many critics reiterated arguments leveled at *The Big One*, arguing that Moore had sacrificed his considerable talents to reach a broad, mass audience. For instance, William Raspberry didn’t mind Moore’s committed stance at all, calling the film “an eye-opening exposé of a president whose inexperience and limited intelligence make him tragically unsuited for the job,” and a “masterful job of connecting the dots between Saudi money

and the business interests of the president” (“Fiery” A21). However, he laments the manner in which Moore goes about making such accusations, chiding Moore for what he sees as a tendency towards oversimplification and “overwrought” didacticism: “If Moore is afraid [his point is] too subtle for you,” Raspberry sarcastically quips, “he’ll spell it out in one of his numerous voice-overs.” Robert Denerstein, of the *Rocky Mountain News*, agreed, lamenting that “Moore leaves little room for audience interpretation” (“Moore’s” 8D).

This line of reasoning reveals certain traces of the indie/art-film discourse. Moore’s decision to try and reach a broad audience is read as a move that sacrifices intellectual complexity to pander to the lowest common denominator. According to this logic, Moore’s commitment to taking a political stance on an issue, and communicating that stance in a manner both simple and enthralling, is just cause for denouncement. For instance, David Denby compared Moore unfavorably to the “great documentary filmmakers of today – Frederick Wiseman, Marcel Ophuls, and Andrew Jarecki,” for whom “truth in an absolute sense is unattainable” (“George” 109). “[T]he great documentary filmmakers,” he explains

at least make an attempt, however inadequate, compromised, or hopeless, to arrive at a many-sided understanding of some complex situation. Michael Moore is not that kind of filmmaker. He calls himself a satirist, but he’s less a satirist than a polemicist, a practitioner of mocking burlesque: he doesn’t discover many new things but punches up what he already knows or suspects; he doesn’t challenge or persuade an audience but tickles or irritates it.

“George” 109

One gets the sense here that what truly irritates Denby, and critics like him, is not the content of Moore's arguments but the fact that Moore has insulted their intelligence.

Ty Burr, of the *Boston Globe*, had a similar reaction. Burr concludes his review by assuring readers that he has no qualms about the fact that Moore is "a maker of agit-entertainment, of cinematic essays whose express purpose is to convince" ("The Third" D1). "That's fine," explains Burr, "as long as he's respecting his audience. But when he pushes the camera into Lipscomb's weeping face and keeps it there, he's saying he doesn't trust you to think for yourself." What Burr finds so objectionable here is *not* Lila's depiction as a pitiable victim, but Moore's blatant use of an emotional moment to drive home a political argument. Lila's weeping *demands* that we agree with Moore, and strips the audience of its ability to come to their own conclusions. Once again, Moore is accused of robbing the audience of the kind of intellectual experience that art cinema is supposed to provide. Tellingly, as with Denby, Burr refers us to the true "masters" of the form, lest we make the mistake of including *Fahrenheit 9/11* in the pantheon of great documentary films:

One last thought: *Fahrenheit 9/11* is many things, but for pity's sake let's not call it a documentary. To do so abuses the word and shames the good and balanced work done by filmmakers as storied as D.A. Pennebaker and Barbara Kopple, as current as Jehane Noujaim of *Control Room*, and as hard-working and unheralded as Carma Hinton of Brookline's Long Bow Group.

In the end, what critics such as Burr and Denby seem to want are not films that encourage us to *act*, but that instead invite us to *ponder*.



For many critics, Moore's "infotainment" tendencies were indicative not just of a personal failure, but as part of a larger, "dumbing down" of the public sphere. For instance, *New York Times* columnist, Nicholas Kristof, argued that Moore's preference to "sling mud" was indicative of a broader slide in public discourse:

*Fahrenheit 9/11* marks the polarization of another form of media. One medium after another has found it profitable to turn from information to entertainment, from nuance to table-thumping. ... Now, with the economic success of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, look for more documentaries that shriek rather than explain.

"Calling" A23

For these critics, Moore's combination of entertainment values with "serious" information always meant a concomitant "tilt" towards the entertaining side of the equation. Thus, Lloyd Sachs of the *Chicago-Sun Times* criticized Moore in this way:

For all its serious moments, Moore's movie is, in the words of the president of its distributor, Lions Gate, a "broad-based entertainment." Meaning you'll cry, sure you will, or at least get a bit teary over the sad parts, but mostly you'll laugh, you'll shake your head, you'll snicker, especially if you're a liberal -- and you'll snack. ... Moore won't discourage your popcorn consumption by putting a limit on smirks and guffaws. The man may fancy himself a social activist who speaks for poor blacks and other disadvantaged Americans ... But he butters his bread as a roly-poly entertainer for whom nothing matters as much as a finely turned punch line, the more dripping in sarcasm the better.

"Having" 2

Here, Sachs implicitly invokes the notion of "social weight" to devalue Moore's film. According to this logic, any evidence at all of a cavalier attitude, "diversionary" tactics or, indeed, a "profit-motive" is enough to prove that what the film says is not to be taken seriously.

In a similar vein, Eric Harrison of the *Houston Chronicle* began his review by lamenting: “There is a moment in every Michael Moore movie – sometimes several moments – when I cringe. It’s the point when his showman’s instincts overwhelm his good sense” (“*Fahrenheit*” 1). For many journalists, analysis of *Fahrenheit 9/11* amounted to nothing more than a cataloguing of such moments. Thus, according to Robert Denerstein, it was Moore’s humorous narration that sinks the film: “The narration can be good for laughs but sometimes works against the film’s seriousness (“Moore’s” 8D). For Jami Bernard it was Moore’s found footage of Bush gaffes: “Those shots may be okay for a popcorn movie, but they don’t build a solid case. If Moore’s intent truly is to unseat a government, he’ll need more facts and footnotes, not just clips of Bush mangling the English language and looking like a buffoon” (“*Fahrenheit*” 38). And Cary Clack, of the *San Antonio Express-News*, argued that, while she agreed with his politics, Moore’s “shrillness, grandstanding and playing loose with facts sometimes detracts from his causes” (“Filmmaker 1B). These critics drew a bright line between entertainment and journalism, and then assailed Moore for crossing it.

The irony here is that, by focusing so much attention on Moore’s “diversionary” tactics, critics actually reproduced the same kind of petty and inconsequential analyses they criticized in Moore. For, by cataloguing the manner in which *Fahrenheit* engaged in entertaining jokes and “sophomoric” pranks, they left the important work of evaluating Moore’s main arguments by the wayside. The infotainment argument allowed – perhaps even encouraged – critics to evaluate Moore’s work without ever having to analyze his arguments in any kind of “serious” detail. In fact, even Moore’s admitted political *allies* refused to engage with Moore’s most potent critiques.

As such, the discourse of infotainment acted once again as a convenient way to delegitimize any political commitments deemed too radical. Rather than engage with Moore's arguments, critics could simply denounce him through vague condemnations, such as that the film is "weakest when it tries to entertain" (Elliott, "Burning" 6); that it is "Great filmmaking [but] dubious journalism" (Mink, "Great" B7); and that it "should come with a label: 'Chew before Swallowing'" (Burr, "The Third" D1). Ultimately, this logic traps Moore within a double bind: the more successful he is at mastering the marketplace and getting his message out there, the less "legitimate" that message appears to be.

### **The Art Defense (Sort of): Damning Through Faint Praise**

Ironically, it was just such a double-bind that many of Moore's most vociferous *defenders* worked to reinforce. And Moore did have many defenders. In fact, lost in the hooplah over the *Fahrenheit* "controversy" has been the fact that, by and large, the film garnered very positive reviews. However, as before, those positive reviews articulated the film in such a way that devalued its political import and mission. The problem was that, despite praising Moore's abilities and talents as a filmmaker, his supporters in the popular press did nothing to rebut the infotainment arguments made by his critics. These supporters seemed to admire Moore's considerable cinematic talents, but were much less willing to lend "journalistic" credibility to the political goals for which those talents were being employed. The result was that most of Moore's defenders engaged in a form of damning through faint praise.

One of the most frequent observations made in positive reviews of *Fahrenheit 9/11* was that Moore was a great entertainer, if not a serious journalist. This was a direct

invocation of the infotainment argument, with a positive spin. The headline for Claudia Puig's 3½ star review for *USA Today* summarized this interpretation: "Put Politics Aside: *Fahrenheit 9/11* Will Entertain" (1D). In this line of reasoning, critics lauded Moore for his skills as a filmmaker while simultaneously downplaying the political/journalistic angle of his film. Indeed, viewers were encouraged to "put politics aside" in order to get the most out of the *Fahrenheit 9/11* experience. With support like this, who needed bad reviews?

Following this line of reasoning, many critics engaged in a, "despite his faults, you gotta hand it to him," kind of logic. Thus, Puig argued that despite the film's manipulative and biased aspects, the one thing you could count on is that "no moviegoer will be bored" ("Put" 1D). *Fahrenheit 9/11* was "most of all, entertaining" and, therefore, "the year's must-see film." A host of critics agreed. As Steve Persall, of the *St. Petersburg Times* put it, "You don't have to believe it in order to admire it" ("Politics" W7). Richard Mink, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, agreed, calling the film, "Neither short-form news nor long-form documentary: it is an immensely entertaining nonfiction movie" ("Great" B7). As such, he argued, "*Fahrenheit 9/11* does what good films are supposed to do: It engages viewers' emotions ... But again, it's a movie ... and anyone who leaves the theater believing he has witnessed absolute revealed truth is simply a fool."

In fact, for many critics, what was most impressive about *Fahrenheit 9/11* was the fact that Moore had managed to make an entertaining and wildly popular documentary at all. "Moore's gift," explained David Elliott, writing for the *San Diego Tribune*, "is to make his 'documentaries' entertaining" ("Burning" 6). James Verniere, of the *Boston*

*Herald*, argued that, despite its “biased” bent, “you must ... congratulate the Academy Award-winner. Moore has figured out how to make the nonfiction film, once the bane of the box office, into the entertaining, hot-button, hot-topic movie of the day” (“Firestarter” 37). And as Eric Harrison acknowledged, Moore is an “indispensable treasure,” who, “[m]ore than anyone else, [has] broadened the art of documentary” (“*Fahrenheit*” 1).

But despite all the praise for Moore’s skill as an entertainer, supporters still held onto the traditional notion of what a “true” documentary should be. Thus, many of Moore’s supporters agreed that the best parts of the film were those moments when Moore, the entertainer, stepped back and “let it all unfold.” In an early review entitled, “Less is Moore in Subdued, Effective *9/11*,” Roger Ebert assured readers, with approval, that “the film doesn’t go for satirical humor the way Moore’s *Roger & Me* and *Bowling for Columbine* did. Moore’s narration is still often sarcastic, but frequently he lets his footage speak for itself” (“Less” 43). Joe Baltake, of the *Sacramento Bee*, agreed, claiming “*Fahrenheit 9/11* ... comes equipped with so much incendiary material that Moore must have instinctively known that he could relax a bit and even remove some of his voice from the film. He lets the disturbing images and even more disturbing statistics carry the film more than his own opinion” (“Boldly” TK19). Even some of Moore’s critics granted him this much, such as Staphanie Zacharek of *salon.com*, who argued that the film was “occasionally effective, particularly when Moore lets the gathered footage speak for itself.” Thus, even Moore’s supporters revealed themselves to be, in some ways, still beholden to the discourse of documentary.

### **The “Catharsis Defense”: Michael Moore as “Our Own Rush Limbaugh”**

Despite their commendations for Moore's mild attempts at "sobering" his over-the-top style, however, Moore's supporters ultimately agreed that it was his special skills as an *entertainer* that made Moore unique and worthy of adulation. As such, critics defending Moore were stuck in a somewhat paradoxical situation. Not willing to give up on traditional notions of "documentary standards," and rife with anxiety over a journalistic profession being "eroded" by crass infotainment, supporters could hardly legitimize Moore as a "straight" documentarian. But having already anointed Moore a bonafide, cinematic auteur, and gone on record extolling his abilities as a first-rate filmmaker, they couldn't simply denounce him outright, either. Thus, unable to square his "infotainment" antics with their conception of what real, serious documentary filmmaking was all about, Moore's supporters opted for a third interpretive strategy – what was, perhaps, the most delegitimizing interpretation of all: that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a form of "catharsis" for the Left. According to this logic, while Moore wasn't fulfilling the neutral, objective role of "journalist," or the highly appreciated role of cinematic "auteur," he was still fulfilling a valuable role – namely, providing embattled liberals with a kind of entertaining pep-talk after two years of non-stop, conservative dominance.

For instance, Ty Burr argued that "many people ... are deeply unhappy with the current administration and the war it has chosen to wage," and *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a welcome answer to "the wish for someone to come along and articulate that scorn" ("The Third" D1). And Robert Denerstein declared that "[t]hose who hate President Bush will find a long-awaited opportunity for catharsis" ("Moore's 8D). This view was perhaps best-stated by David Edelstein in *Slate*, under the headline: "Proper Propaganda," who gushed:

Back in the '80s – the era of Reagan and Bush 41, when milquetoasts Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis were the ineffectual Democratic candidates and ... when there was an explosion of ... trash-talking right-wingers, from Morton Downey Jr. to the fledgling Rush Limbaugh – I found myself wishing, wishing fervidly, for a blowhard whom the left could call its own. Someone who wouldn't shrink before the right's bellicosity. Someone who would bellow back, mock unashamedly, and maybe even recapture the prankster spirit of Abbie Hoffman. Yeah, I know: Be careful what you wish for.

According to this logic, Moore really *is* nothing more than an infotaining propagandist – but he's "*our*" propagandist. What this interpretation did was allow critics to have it both ways. Now they could safely celebrate Moore, as an artist *and* entertainer without having to worry about offending the sacred tenets of journalistic credibility. Furthermore, they could openly acknowledge his political leanings, without having to endorse them outright as legitimate points to be defended.

By employing this interpretive strategy, critics could safely sing Moore's praises – and even champion his causes – without ever having to acknowledge that his film should be taken *seriously* by the public at large. "Sure, I loved *Fahrenheit 9/11*," they seemed to say, "but only because Moore was speaking to *me*, and people like me. If you don't agree with him, no worries! It's not as though this is a real piece of journalism!" Thus, Bruce Kluger, of *USA Today*, argued that Moore was "as much a propagandist as the spinmeisters at the White House," but nonetheless, "[t]hose of us who continue to wring our hands over this administration's historic stumbles are grateful to Moore for assembling a visual component to our argument" ("Michael" 13A). And William Raspberry claimed that liberal audiences applauded the film "for much the same reason so many members of the black Christian middle-class applaud the harangues of Black

Muslim minister Louis Farrakhan. Some of his facts may be wrong and some of his connections strained, but his attitude is right” (“Fiery” A21).

This was, indeed, the worst kind of damning by faint praise. Here, *Fahrenheit 9/11* can be praised only once it has first been delegitimized. It can only be lauded as entertainment once it has first been disqualified as journalism. As Edelestein put it:

In 20 years of writing about film, no movie has ever tied me up in knots the way Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* has. It delighted me; it disgusted me. I celebrate it; I lament it. I’m sure of only one thing: that I don’t trust anyone – pro or con – who doesn’t feel a twinge of doubt about his or her responses. What follows might be broadly labeled as ‘waffling,’ but I hope, at least, that it is bold and decisive waffling.

It was “bold and decisive waffling,” indeed, and most of those in the popular press who defended Moore engaged in some form of it.

But most importantly, by interpreting *Fahrenheit* from within this “catharsis frame,” critics also constructed an imagined audience for it – and, in this case, the audience was unequivocally “select.” According to this interpretive frame, Moore was doing nothing more than “preaching to the choir” – or “shrieking” to the choir, as Nicholas Kristof would have it. Despite Moore’s claims to the contrary, they declared, this was no movie for the masses.

As such, critics resurrected the “bias caveat” they so often attached to reviews of *Roger & Me*. Now, however, this caveat was being applied not only to the filmmaker, but his *audience* as well. Indeed, allegations that Moore was addressing an audience of the already-converted seemed to adorn almost every *Fahrenheit* review, pro or con. The film, we are told, “Preach[es] to the converted” (McCarthy, “A Flinty” 33+) “play[s] to the



choir” (Verniere, “Firestarter” 37); and “may be scurrilous or perfectly logical, depending upon [the viewer’s] ideological bent” (Hornaday, “Presidential” C1). It is predicted that, “How you respond to *Fahrenheit 9/11* will, of course, have much to do with your political persuasion” (McDonald, “Fiery” H19); and “This distinction [between liberal and conservative] is important, because it should affect how you view [Moore’s] latest adventure” (Chinni, “*Fahrenheit*” 9). Thus, “you’ll laugh, you’ll shake your head, you’ll snicker, especially if you’re a liberal” (Sachs, “Having” 2); but “[t]he President’s admirers will be appalled” (Denerstein, “Moore’s” 8D). As Richard Roeper put it, summarizing the consensus view: “I haven’t seen any exit polls that tried to determine the political makeup of those who attended the film, but the assumption is that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was playing to choirs of Bush-bashers seeking to have their views reinforced” (“*Fahrenheit*” 11). Ultimately, supporters, detractors, and everyone in the great waffling in-between, seemed to come together in one, stable interpretation: that Michael Moore was the “Rush Limbaugh of the Left.”<sup>123</sup>

The result of all these interpretive frames – the discourse of infotainment, the damning by faint praise, and the “catharsis defense” – was that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was never properly *contextualized* as an instance of “radical journalism.” At least in the case of the Iraq war, the difference between Michael Moore and Rush Limbaugh is that Moore was voicing a perspective that had heretofore gone *underreported* and *under-discussed*. He was not simply voicing a “liberal” opinion, but an *alternative* one. This is a crucial point and one that needed to be made if Moore’s film was to be given a legitimate public

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<sup>123</sup> These references abound in popular press writing on *Fahrenheit* and are, indeed, too numerous to note here. And, to be sure, Limbaugh was not the only conservative icon Moore was compared to. He was also frequently paired up with Mel Gibson and his film, *The Passion of the Christ*, as well as Bill O’Reilly and the entire staff of Fox News.

hearing. However, critics refused to contextualize Moore's committed perspective in such a manner. For a culture so enthralled with the concept of political "balance," journalists proved themselves to be woefully unprepared to support a valiant attempt to redress that balance when to do so meant openly challenging the status quo.

### **Infotaining the Art-House Crowd**

Perhaps most damaging of all, however, was the way in which this interpretive context worked to reinforce some of the worst aspects of Moore's patronizing/classifying mode of address. Lingering understandings of Moore as an indie auteur combined with his newer image as cathartic jester for the Left to reinforce the idea that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was geared towards an imagined audience of "liberal elites," elated that someone had finally come along to confirm that they had in fact been *right* all along. By deploying the "catharsis defense," critics defined *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a "fantasy of advocacy" *par excellence* – an opportunity for disgruntled liberals to come together and celebrate their own, good political judgment.

Indeed, perhaps the most peculiar aspect of *Fahrenheit's* assessment within the popular press was that the film's critical reception was, in many ways, a referendum on the film's *audience*. Rather than simply assess the film, itself, journalists focused incessantly on the crowds that gathered to watch it. Under headlines such as, "Liberally Speaking, Moore's Tix Selling Well" (Rosinski 2), and "Democrats Find Relief Among Allies at *Fahrenheit 9/11*" (Weber 18), journalists gushed over the vast numbers of liberals buying up tickets to Moore's film. Articles across the country "surveyed" the throngs, reporting that; "It was hard to find Republicans in the crowds" (Stetz B1); and,

“If any pro-Bush Republicans lurked, they were more anonymous than ‘Deep Throat’” (Smith 1).

Thus, as with *Roger* and *Bowling* before it, *Fahrenheit* was understood to be geared only towards a “select” type of audience, this time with a specific political hue (deep blue). However, despite the political overtones, descriptions of the “Michael Moore crowd” looked remarkably similar to what might be descriptions of the usual art-house audience. More often than not, Moore’s indie cache and art-cinema pedigree made it possible for journalists to describe *Fahrenheit*’s “liberal” audience in a manner similar to that of the art-house crowd so often associated with his work: as a constituency made up largely of the educated, young, hip and urbane – in short, as an audience that was distinguished from “everyday, ordinary” filmgoers. As such, critics re-imagined the art-house audience in explicitly political terms.

An article by Margery Eagan of the *Boston Herald*, entitled, “Moore Sets Leftists Afire With *Fahrenheit*,” serves as a good example:

The Michael Moore crowd, at least in Brookline's Coolidge Corner, was everything the Mel Gibson *Passion* crowd was not. The smugger-than-thous vs. the holier-than-thous. The 100 percent linens vs. the no-iron buttoned-downs, short sleeves, T-shirts showing. Central Square and WBUR vs. Maverick Square and WEEI. You get the idea. At the sold-out 5 o'clock show Friday afternoon? An astonishing number of middle-aged, white haired men in ponytails (a signal that their antiestablishment heart still burns with rebellion, somewhere, even if they'd just rushed home from work to trade corporate briefcase for arthouse backpack).

Eagan 18

In this description of the “typical” *Fahrenheit 9/11* audience, Margery Eagan employs every art-house cliché, remarking on their intellectual bent (the “smugger-than-thous”),

younger sensibilities (in this case, older hippies pining for their younger days) and urban hipness (signified by her invocation of WBUR, an alternative music station associated with Brown University, and Central Square, a Boston locale known for its population of younger artists and musicians). All these claims are contextualized (and seemingly substantiated) by the fact that the screening is taking place at the Coolidge Corner Playhouse, one of Boston's premiere art-house cinemas.<sup>124</sup>

Beyond assessing the crowds, many articles reported that *Fahrenheit* screenings were being used by various liberal political groups to disseminate information and register voters. Often times, these articles also relied upon similar art-house clichés to set the scene. An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, describing a crowd that turned up to listen to Moore via an internet telecast at one of moveon.org's nationwide house parties, serves as a good example:

It was quite a juxtaposition: the clink of cool champagne glasses and an incendiary documentary. Perhaps 150 Michael Moore fans/George W. Bush non-fans jammed the cushy confines of the Bubble Lounge, on Montgomery near Columbus, to sip bubbly and participate in the nationally Webcast "Turn Up the Heat" town hall meeting Monday night. The young and the sleek in low-slung jeans and flip-flops, well-heeled Financial District Dems, fleece-clad Sierra Clubbers with graying hair ...  
Ganahl, "*Fahrenheit*" E1

Here, once again, the choir Moore is preaching to appears not only as "liberal," but young, hip and, in this instance, wealthy. Indeed, Ganahl's description of Moore's core audience could have come straight from a marketing report for the *Bravo* channel. Other news reports shared this tendency. For instance, the *New York Times* ran a story reporting

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<sup>124</sup> And here it seems important to point out, given my discussion of right-wing populist rhetoric in Chapter Six, that Egan is, on most issues, a reliably *liberal* columnist.

on the “thousands of parties” organized by moveon.org to screen the film and listen to Moore via internet, but the article only covered parties held in hip, urbane locales; a Brooklyn house party, the Bubble Lounge bar in TriBeCa, and at “the artist Damien Loeb's spacious loft in Manhattan,” where, we are told, indie luminaries such as Moby and Edie Falco hobnobbed and “notebooks were as common an accessory as plastic cups of wine” (Werde, “Friends” 1).

While the assumption that *Fahrenheit* was wildly popular with liberal audiences – and, indeed, the “art-house crowd” – was certainly true, this does not tell the entire story. The vast amount of tickets sold indicates that *Fahrenheit* was no simple art-house success story. But descriptions such as those detailed above worked in tandem with popular press descriptions of *Fahrenheit* as a cathartic ritual for disgruntled liberals. They encouraged the notion that *Fahrenheit 9/11* as an unfair, but well-deserved, piece of agit-entertainment for a particular class of people.

As I have argued in previous chapters, of course, Moore’s problematic mode of address encourages such an interpretation. Given Moore’s patronizing depiction of working-class Americans, it is difficult not to conclude that *Fahrenheit 9/11* often preaches to a choir of middle-upper-class liberals. However, as argued above, the film *also* worked as a form of radical journalism – promoting arguments not usually aired within the mainstream media – and also deserved to be interpreted as such. By describing Moore’s film *only* in terms of its aesthetic and emotional pleasures, while denying its journalistic integrity and political legitimacy, critics emphasized some of the more problematic aspects of Moore’s film, while ignoring its more positive contributions.

### **Conclusion**

The films of Michael Moore have always existed within the complicated nexus of documentary, independent film, and mainstream entertainment. What my analysis of their public reception shows is that radical, counter-hegemonic perspectives are not truly welcome in any of these realms. During the run of *Roger & Me*, Moore's detractors attacked his film via the "discourse of documentary," according to which any evidence of political bias was enough to delegitimize the integrity of his work. When Moore's supporters rose to his defense, however, they chose not to defend the film according to its journalistic *or* political merits. Instead, they interpreted Moore's film according to the "discourse of independent film," praising Moore for constructing a documentary that was aesthetically innovative, intellectually challenging and emotionally moving. In so doing, they, too, worked to downplay the political relevance of Moore's film, while at the same time rearticulating the image of Moore's core *audience*. More than anything else, the "art defense" reinforced the fact that *Roger & Me* was not a film speaking with and alongside the working class, but instead speaking to an audience of educated film-goers hungry for a cinematic experience that flattered their self-image as intelligent and serious-minded; an audience primed and ready for a "fantasy of advocacy."

Thus, while the discourse of independent film may have worked to defend Moore from those who would tarnish his integrity as a journalist, it only created more problems for his goal of "popularizing" committed documentary. Indeed, when Moore attempted to shake the label of "art-house auteur" and return to his populist roots with *The Big One*, he found himself under attack again, this time from the very people who defended him during the controversy surrounding *Roger & Me*. Critics invoked the "discourse of infotainment" to argue that Moore had sold out his artistic integrity by making a didactic

and simplistic mass entertainment. Once again, Moore's role as radical journalist was delegitimized, as critics now denounced him on two fronts: too mainstream to be considered "art," and not serious enough to be considered "journalism," Moore found himself totally isolated and utterly devalued within the public sphere.

Seeming to learn his lesson, Moore looked once more to the indie-film world when *Bowling for Columbine* was released. Riding the wave of critical praise stemming from his surprise award at Cannes, Moore and United Artists marketed the film as an intellectually challenging, politically-edgy piece of documentary-art, geared towards stirring up controversy and provoking political debate. Critics loved this new and improved image of Moore-as-Auteur and lavished the film with praise. However, this proved to be a strategy that came at a cost. Rather than grapple with Moore's arguments and political commitments, critics instead praised Moore for constructing what they saw as a film that asked serious questions, but provided no easy answers; a film that was less about pushing a point of view, than describing troubling realities about which viewers were meant to decide for themselves. In short, critics ignored Moore's political arguments and praised the film for its purported "lack" of commitment. Thus, when Moore ultimately refused to stay on the sidelines of political debate and used his Oscar-win as a platform to speak out against the Iraq war, he found himself under attack again, this time for betraying those in the film world who had stood up for him. By declaring solidarity with a political cause, and taking up an activist stance, Moore had proven himself unworthy of the support shown him by the critical community.

What this history of Michael Moore's public reception reveals is the way in which the mainstream media, as a whole, work to deny the legitimate airing of alternative

perspectives and radical, political views. Whether being attacked or defended, supported or denounced, the most radical aspects of Moore's work have always been held at bay. Indeed, the mainstream media only seem comfortable with radical arguments when they can be articulated within an art-house discourse that reinforces middle-class tropes of cultural authority. In this frame, Moore can be as "political" as he wants, as long as his films are understood to be thought-provoking, cinematic experiences geared towards an educated audience who will appreciate them as such. In the end, the public reception of Moore's films have served two functions, each with debilitating consequences for Moore's political goals and aspirations: they have either delegitimized the "credibility" of Moore's films and political arguments, or they have worked to reinforce the very worst aspects of his patronizing/classifying mode of address.

Meanwhile, no strategy employed by Moore to challenge this logic seems to have worked. Whether he has presented himself as a serious journalist, independent auteur, or populist entertainer, Moore has found himself delegitimized as a committed documentarian every time. This being the case, when Moore attempted to roll all these aspects of his persona into one with *Fahrenheit 9/11*, he found himself attacked and undermined from every angle. Detractors denounced the film as biased propaganda and lamented the film as the worst kind of "infotainment." Supporters praised his abilities as a filmmaker, but only while arguing that these talents "made up for" his *failings* as a journalist. Ultimately, journalists managed to come to a critical consensus on Michael Moore: they labeled him a filmmaker who made emotionally powerful and wildly entertaining movies for an audience of angry middle-class liberals eager to have their good political judgment, at long last, avenged.



Whether upholding journalistic standards of “objectivity and neutrality,” or artistic standards of “intellectualism and originality,” reviewers, journalists and editorialists of all kinds worked to delegitimize Moore’s films as useful and important political documents. In so doing, they undermined his role as radical journalist and, more often than not, reinforced some of the worst aspects of Moore’s patronizing mode of address.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE REEL DEAL: MICHAEL MOORE AND THE POLITICS OF CELEBRITY

*"Years ago I'd get upset. Then I realized there are two Michael Moores:  
the one invented by the media and the real me.  
The real me likes to read about the fictional Michael Moore."*<sup>125</sup>

– Michael Moore

#### Introduction

In the last chapter I described the manner in which the interpretation of Michael Moore's films by the popular press often served to blunt the "radical" potential of his political arguments and perspectives. Specifically, I argued that by interpreting Moore's films as either aesthetically brilliant or wildly entertaining art-house fare, journalists softened the radical edges of Moore's work while reinforcing the worst tendencies of his problematic mode of address. Far from challenging the status quo, the public reception of Moore's films reinforced the notion that these were films *about* the working class, but *for* a select audience of indie film-goers and educated, well-placed liberals. As such, the public reception of Moore's work served to reinforce the "fantasy of advocacy" constructed by his texts while, ultimately, undermining the political power of his radical messages.

One aspect of the Michael Moore phenomenon, however, would seem to work against this tendency to blunt Moore's radical power: his own, "bonafide" working-class background. Despite Moore's patronizing mode of address, and the tendency for supporters and detractors alike to articulate him as a cinematic auteur for middle-class

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<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Denerstein, "Moore Controversy" 1D.

audiences, Moore will always be the son of a GM autoworker with a family background tied to American labor history. This begs the question: if the mainstream media are committed to keeping Michael Moore's films within ideologically safe boundaries, how have they dealt with the radical potentiality of Moore's own, undeniably *working class* background?

The answer to this question lies within what I argue is a central contradiction in Moore's work – a contradiction that stems from his attempt to combine the progressive goals of political documentary with the pleasures of celebrity culture. Ultimately, Moore's ability to promote himself as a political star has been a double-edged sword. His status as political celebrity has not only been one of the major keys to his popularity (and result of it), but has also provided the popular press with a convenient trope within which to, once again, rearticulate the meaning and importance of Moore's political project. It is through his status as a political star that Moore's claims to speak with and alongside the working class have often been undermined.

To analyze Moore's star-image I will employ a specific understanding of "celebrity," as a discursive phenomenon. Framed within this discursive logic, the meaning and importance of Moore's working class background and political commitments are transformed in crucial ways. To develop this analysis I build on the work done on celebrity by cultural studies scholars. According to this perspective, "celebrity," itself, is not conceptualized as a fact or event, but as a process. As Graeme Turner argues: "celebrity is not a property of specific individuals. Rather it is constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented" (Turner 7). Thus, as Su Holmes puts it, celebrity should be "conceived in terms of the *system of representation* –

its conventions, structures and circulation – within which the celebrity self resonates within the public sphere” (10).<sup>126</sup>

In the following analysis, I describe the ways in which the discourse of celebrity has worked to temper Moore’s political arguments and undermine his image as working-class activist. Specifically, I describe a number of ways in which Moore’s role as celebrity-advocate has impacted his political efficacy: by reframing structural arguments in terms of individualist narratives; by distancing Moore from his working-class roots and recontextualizing him as a “political provocateur”; and by rearticulating his working-class background as a carefully constructed “pose” that is deemed inauthentic. Ultimately, I argue that these frames offer the mainstream media another convenient way in which to soften the radical edges of Moore’s work and undermine his credibility as a progressive voice.

### **Committed Documentary and the “Discourse of Celebrity”**

In order to combat what he sees as the political documentary’s fatal flaw – its reputation as a dry, dreary, and tedious form – Michael Moore has constructed a hybrid style of agit-prop that mixes satirical comedy and a strong narrative structure with political analysis and critique. Key to this strategy is Moore’s foregrounding of himself as the sardonic, rabble-rousing protagonist of all his films; a move that has allowed him to gain the attention of a popular audience. And hold that attention he has. Moore’s films have continued to outsell other documentaries at the box office, and he currently holds

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<sup>126</sup> This perspective is developed from Richard Dyer’s original work on “stars.” For, Dyer, the meaning of any star was not internal, but constructed across a variety of discursive ‘sites,’ including the promotional materials for a film; the “unintentional” publicity that a film, or star, might get; the films themselves; and the criticism or commentaries written about both the star and the film(s) he or she is in (*Stars* 60-63).

three of the top five spots for most successful documentary of all-time (including first for *Fahrenheit 9/11*).

Of course, Moore's construction of himself as narrative protagonist has *also* contributed to his status as a recognizable public figure outside the diegesis of his films. Indeed, Moore's popularity has as much to do with his off-screen image as on. Throughout the years he has been a guest on talk shows and news programs, a best-selling author, and the star of two television programs. And of course, in the Spring of 2003, he sky-rocketed to the status of household-name when he publicly decried the Bush administration's declaration of war on Iraq from the stage of the Academy Awards ceremony. It is no exaggeration to say that, over the course of his career, Moore has transformed the popular image of the documentarian from "fly-on-the-wall" observer to full-blown, political celebrity.

This strategy of personalization, however, has not come without a cost. For, in many ways, the very concept of "celebrity" works against the political goals of the committed documentary. Political documentary is inherently concerned with what Thomas Waugh has called a notion of commitment, distinguished not only by its political bent but its commitment to, and positioning within, particular communities and social movements. By contrast, Richard Dyer has argued that celebrity – as a cultural form – has always been concerned specifically with the promotion of the *individual* (*Heavenly* 7-9). Thus, even when celebrities become politicized: "They speak in the name of the individual and of the notion of success, not in the name of the individual as part of a collective organization" (7).

This “spectacle of individuality,” as P.D. Marshall calls it, serves an explicitly ideological function: namely “the articulation, in the modern age, of democracy and capitalism” (*Celebrity* 6). Or, as Dyer has famously put it: “the general image of stardom can be seen as a version of the American Dream” (*Stars* 35). Many celebrity-personae are based upon a “star-is-born narrative,” in which special individuals from modest backgrounds and means rise to fame and fortune. Such a narrative, of course, underwrites the notions of freedom and meritocracy which serve to legitimize the hegemonic notion of American culture as a “land of opportunity.” As Marshall puts it:

The spectacular quality of the code of individuality that is enacted by public personalities works ideologically to maintain the idea of continuity between wealth and the disenfranchised rest of society. Celebrities reinforce the conception that there are no barriers in contemporary culture that the individual cannot overcome.

*Celebrity* 246

This myth of individuality is not endemic to celebrity culture, alone, but has been an enduring American myth. And it has, more often than not, served a similar ideological function in whatever guise it might take. For instance, Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams argue that within the mainstream media, “politics,” and political issues in general, are almost *always* framed within what they call the trope of “nostalgic individualism” (“Fictional” 93). According to this logic, the solution to political problems “is never political organization aimed at institutional reform or change. Rather, individuals, acting on their own as individuals, are seen as the solution to the problem” (94). This is especially the case where potentially counter-hegemonic political meanings are in play. As Emily West has pointed out (building off of Delli Carpini and Williams)

political action is often individualized in this manner when depicted in mainstream, Hollywood cinema, as films such as *A Civil Action* (1998), *The Insider* (1999), or *Erin Brockovich* (2000) show (97). The myth of individualism, she argues, allows mainstream media texts to:

raise controversial sociopolitical issues while essentially preserving the status quo by suggesting, through their plot-lines, that governmental or other kinds of collective action are ineffective compared to the actions of the individual. Although admirably encouraging individuals to take responsibility for societal problems, these strategies arguably discourage collective political action and let governments, corporations, and other institutions off the hook.

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This tendency has certainly taken its toll on cinematic representations of class issues and class identity. As many scholars have noted, when working class issues and/or communities are represented on screen, they have usually been framed within individualized narratives of personal hardship and triumph, rather than stories of social oppression and collective action.<sup>127</sup> Enid Sefcovic calls this narrative framing the “constitutive narrative of America”:

The moral reasoning offered by the prepackaged formulae of Hollywood articulates individualist values, relying on a story that focuses on an appealing character who overcomes great odds to attain a goal that is presumed worthwhile within the structure of the film.

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While economic hardship and oppression might be the “great odds” over which the hero must triumph, the systemic realities of those odds, and the collective groups which they

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<sup>127</sup> For examples, see Anderson, “Diminishing”; Bodnar; DeMott; and Stead.

affect, are ignored within a story that fetishizes the notion that “anyone can make it” (334). Thus, even where class issues are the central topic of a given film, the myth of individualism tends to blunt the radical edges of such a depiction, channeling it into safer ideological boundaries.

From this perspective, then, we can see the way in which the traditional *celebrity* narrative performs similar ideological work, especially when stars attempt to challenge the status quo or speak in the name of marginalized communities. For instance, in his analysis of Marilyn Monroe and Paul Robeson, Dyer argues that both stars, in their own ways, engaged in political protests – Monroe, in terms of gender politics and Robeson in terms of racial identity and civil rights.<sup>128</sup> However, despite the importance of these protests, they were nonetheless, Dyer argues, “individual protests,” in the end:

[They] could be taken as protests emblematic of the situation of black people and women respectively, and have properly been used as such. But they remain individualized, partly because the star system is about the promotion of the individual ... they are protests against capitalism that do not recognize themselves as such, protests with deep resonances within the ideologies of entrepreneurial capitalism. They speak in the name of the individual and of the notion of success, not in the name of the individual as part of a collective organization of labour and production.

*Heavenly 7*

Thus, by couching his political arguments within a celebrity narrative, Moore invites a similar contradiction in his own working class image. Even though Moore’s own narratives of capitalist protest certainly recognize themselves *precisely* “as such,” his personal story of artistic triumph and social advocacy is, nonetheless, a story about – and,

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<sup>128</sup> Of course, as Dyer explains, both stars have a different relationship to “politics”: Robeson engaged in political causes openly and explicitly, while Monroe’s political status was more implicit, in the way that she became “an exemplary figure of the situation of women in patriarchal capitalism” (x).



indeed, a celebration of – *individual* success and daring. As such, he opens his own image to rearticulation along individualist lines – a rearticulation that threatens to soften his radically progressive vision.

This kind of dilemma is nothing new. It is a problem that has beset any number of media celebrities attempting to promote progressive causes; and it has been especially problematic for many Left movements in the U.S. throughout the twentieth century, as popular culture and populist politics often collided. In fact, Moore's image as "working-class star" lays claim to a familiar cultural trope with a long history; what Bryan Garman calls the "working class hero." In *A Race of Singers*, Garman traces the development of this trope in American cultural history from Walt Whitman through figures such as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. Specifically, Garman focuses on the contradictions that beset progressive goals and visions when working-class figures become the "heroes" of popular culture. Lifting a line directly from Whitman, he argues that the "desire to be working class heroes, to rise from the ranks of common men to become quite uncommon," has softened the radical edges of these figures, making their work "radical, but not too damned radical" (4).<sup>129</sup>

*A Race of Singers* focuses on the figure of Woody Guthrie, and Garman's analysis is instructive here because, in many ways, Moore's attempt to articulate class concerns and labor politics through the construction of himself as heroic, working-class rabble-rouser owes much to Guthrie's legend. According to Garman, Guthrie was unique not only for the way that he explicitly articulated a radical critique of the U.S. economic system, but for the fact that he was able to do so in such a way that commanded a popular

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<sup>129</sup> Garman borrows the phrase "radical, but not too damned radical" is from Whitman (3).

audience. However, Guthrie's fame, more often than not, served to temper the most radical aspects of his work:

Despite his commitment to union politics ... a significant gap often existed between Guthrie's collectivist theories and their practice. An irrepressible individualist, he was as interested in promoting his own legend as he was in representing the people .... This itinerant folksinger transformed the working class hero from a poet to a guitar-slinging traveler of the open road, but his redefinition failed to alleviate the contradictions that were deeply embedded in the concept of heroism.

11

As Garman describes them, these contradictions are strikingly similar to those that Dyer argues underwrite the concept of celebrity:

The construct of heroism encourages passivity by offering the remote prospect of upward mobility. ... the working-class hero is a construct that encourages acquiescence, not revolution. Rather than promoting social change, the hero is a symbol of success, another object to be consumed, an end rather than a means.

13

In the case of Woody Guthrie, this tension produced problems for the Folk Song Movement, of which he was a part.

The Folk Song Movement espoused a notion of political representation very similar to that of the committed documentary. According to Garman, "many members of the folk song movement discouraged the development of great individual artists who might undermine their egalitarian values" (127). Instead, songs were defined as "anonymous compositions produced ... by various members of the community who orally transmitted the songs and traditions embedded within them from one generation to

another” (126). Through such a conceptualization, the Folk Song Movement attempted to construct a continuity between its work and a broader, working class constituency. But as their most celebrated practitioner, “Guthrie’s irrepressible individuality worked against this possibility ... his heroic persona separated him from rather than united him with his constituency” (127). Thus, even as Guthrie sang about economic exploitation, his star-image increasingly relied upon his status as star-genius rather than as one of the folk: “Collectivity play[ed] an important part in Guthrie’s social vision, but he alone [took] credit for accomplishing some of history’s ‘biggest things’” (127).

In fact, Garman argues that Guthrie’s fame was based less upon his connection to the working-class people about whom he sang, and more upon the admiration his working-class heroism cultivated in middle-class fans, such as John Steinbeck and later Pete Seeger, who idealized Guthrie’s working-class mystique. Thus, while Guthrie certainly cultivated a migrant-following, especially early on in his career, his rise to fame transformed the nature of his image: “as he assembled a coterie of admirers comprised of intellectuals and began to live the life of an artist, his connections to working-class experience weakened” (130-1). In this way, Guthrie exemplified what Dyer argues is the central paradox of stardom: that stars are somehow, simultaneously, both ordinary *and* extraordinary (GET REF) “Woody was never ‘just plain Woody,’” Garman explains. “He may have been a hero to Steinbeck and to some extent a hero *for* the working class, but it is difficult to say whether he was .. a hero *of* it ...” (130).

This contradiction was exacerbated in the 1960s, when Guthrie’s heroic image was re-appropriated by Seeger (along with others associated with the counterculture), who hoped that “[Seeger’s] audience would absorb his and Guthrie’s radicalism through

a sort of cultural osmosis” (142). However, it was the image of an “heroic individual” that Seeger’s audience latched onto, not necessarily the political arguments or constituencies from which that image stemmed. As Guthrie’s star image became increasingly popular, his politics became less and less radical. “Journalists and scholars alike began to emphasize his optimism and individualism at the expense of his radicalism,” Garman argues (164). Ultimately, Guthrie’s image was transformed into “a symbol of personal rather than political rebellion” (165).

Of course, the similarities between Guthrie and Moore are not exact. While Guthrie’s image has been co-opted and re-articulated numerous times since his death, Moore is still in the midst of his own career and, as such, maintains more direct control over his own star-persona. Nonetheless, as Dyer, Marshall and others have argued, the meaning of a star’s image cannot be reduced to his words and actions alone. The celebrity, “Michael Moore,” is as much – or more – a product of the interpretations and evaluations made about him within the public realm as they are a product of Moore’s own shaping. And, more often than not, it is through the individualizing and depoliticizing lens of “celebrity discourse” that Moore’s image as a political star gets articulated. As such, Moore’s status as “working class hero” is fraught with the kinds of contradictions that have haunted Guthrie and others like him.

### **A Star is Born: A Working-Class Hero goes to Hollywood**

In the months surrounding *Roger & Me*’s initial release, Michael Moore was transformed in the popular press from relatively unknown journalist to national celebrity. As described in the last chapter, he initially caused a splash on the film festival circuit where *Roger* garnered rave reviews and standing ovations, a triumph that was magnified

when Moore secured a \$3 million distribution deal from Warner Brothers. Attention to the film exploded when it was revealed that Moore had taken creative license with the timeline of events documented by the film, provoking a spirited debate in the popular press over the merits of the film as a documentary. Finally, the *Roger* phenomenon peaked when the film failed to be nominated for an Oscar, despite being considered a “shoe-in” by many film reviewers and critics associations.

Amidst this swirl of publicity was the very public figure of Moore, who was both star of the film and its outspoken promoter in the press. Journalists found it impossible to discuss the merits of the film *apart* from its maker. To begin with, *Roger & Me* was often cast as a battle between good and evil, with Moore as a working-class David vs. Roger Smith as the corporate Goliath. Indeed, this characterization became a ubiquitous trope in their analyses of *Roger & Me*. Even Harlan Jacobson, who criticized Moore’s journalistic methods, could not resist this narrative frame, beginning his piece in *Film Comment*: “Moore has lived out some crazy dream of Frank Capra’s: *Mr. Moore Goes to Detroit* or maybe *State of the Unions*. He’s gone from some obscure little guy from nowhere ... to a modern David, flinging the Flint Stone at the Goliath of GM” (“Michael” 16). Richard Bernstein echoed this trope in the *New York Times*, describing the film as “a kind of David and Goliath revenge story, in which a modest, plain-speaking nobody triumphs morally over an evil corporate giant” (C20).

In this frame, Moore is defined as a working-class hero in the classically American sense. As defined by Garman, this trope is based upon a character who attempts “to rise from the ranks of common men to become quite uncommon” (4). However, in focusing on the ability to “rise,” as such, the trope undermines a mission of

social change, framing critiques in moral rather than structural terms, and “attribut[ing] injustice to the moral failings of individuals (or perhaps corporations), not to the state” (4). Replicating this tendency, many of the headlines for stories on the film invoked a mano-a-mano battle between Moore and Smith, or described Moore in an heroic mold: “New Filmmaker Michael Moore Takes on GM” (Leerhsen); “A Filmmaker Fights the Death of Detroit” (Carr); “GM is Cast as a Villain” (Moore); “Gutsy Independent Takes GM for a Ride” (Stanley); “Michael Moore, Filmmaker for the People” (Graham).

This frame, of course, was invited by Moore, himself, who turned the film’s theatrical run into a public shaming ritual, a strategy that journalists never failed to emphasize. Thus, many of the articles gleefully reference the stipulation, which Moore had worked into his distribution deal with Warners, that a seat be reserved at every screening for Smith, himself, with his name on it (Hartl; “Topics”; Carr; Moore). As the film quickly gained national attention, journalists focused on GM’s response strategy, stoking fascination in the spectacle of a giant corporation forced to fend off attacks from such an “insignificant” filmmaker (Sterritt; Pollack, “Michael” 3D). In such a frame, the radical bite is taken out of Moore’s critique by reframing the story as one of individualized corporate wrongdoing and improbable heroism.

The irony is that, in their stampede to anoint Moore a new kind of working-class hero, reviewers rearticulated the meaning of his working-class background in a specific way. As Moore’s star-status grew, the celebrity-frame took over, and his working-class background was transformed into a kind of amateur-authenticity. As Lee Marshall has argued, the notion that “stars come from a humble background ... and that, yes, even you could be discovered as a star, are key elements of the ideology of stardom” (*Bob Dylan*

80). As such, Moore's working class circumstances were referenced incessantly by the popular press; but rather than endow this background with any kind of political import, they simply utilized it to provide Moore's celebrity narrative with an upward-trajectory. In this frame, Moore's working class-background became the backdrop to a star-is-born narrative, whereby a down-on-his-luck, no-name journalist stormed the gates of Hollywood to gain fame and fortune.

An article in the *New York Times* describing Moore's reception at the Toronto Film Festival serves as a perfect example. "A Self-taught Filmmaker Creates a Comic Hit," declared the headline, while the article began with an image of Moore as a startled, first-time celebrity:

Judging from the frozen smile on his face, the standing, cheering ovation caught Michael Moore by surprise. The film maker, a solitary figure wearing a nylon-mesh baseball cap, stood awkwardly before an audience of 500 cheering filmgoers. They had just seen his first movie, *Roger and Me*, at the Toronto International Film Festival this month. "I wish that everyone back home could be here to enjoy this response," the 35-year-old director said into a microphone, his eyes tearing. But Mr. Moore, like his film, never lets a tear go unaccompanied by a laugh: "I never made a film before - I think I'm going to keep doing this."

C15

In this frame, Moore is described not as working-class activist, but as an amateur-filmmaker. The emphasis of the story is not so much his critique of GM, but his ability to make a splash at a world-renowned film festival. When Moore says that he wishes "everyone back home could be here," he invokes not a working-class constituency, but the mythical notion of the small town, pleased to see a local boy make good.

Thus, critics frequently employed a “fish-out-of-water” trope that emphasized how *out of place* Moore was as the focus of media profiles and interviews. In this frame, his working class background merely serves to emphasize the “improbability” of Moore’s tale of success. Thus, Richard Corliss began his piece on the filmmaker by stating, matter-of-factly:

Michael Moore doesn't look like a movie star. With his pinched face, his Pillsbury Doughboy silhouette and his air of befuddled skepticism, he looks as if he'd be lucky to land a night manager's job at a 7-Eleven. Moore might even pass for what he is: the novice director of a documentary film about blue-collar unemployment.

“Michael” 58

Joe Pollack, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* begins his interview with a similar description:

He wouldn't fit in at the Polo Lounge, or 21, or Elaine's, or any of the other glittery spots where the movie folk hang out. At the same time, he doesn't fit - or get - into the General Motors headquarters, or the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, or the Detroit Athletic Club, or the other places where the Detroit auto elite go to shmooze. Michael Moore, wearing a gimme cap and chewing a toothpick, looks and feels far more at home in O'Connell's Pub, and that's where he was waiting, occupying a corner booth and wearing a strained expression. "They recognized me," he said, and there was a mixture of disbelief, pride and confusion in his voice. "They recognized me."

“Michael” 3D

By employing such framings, journalists mapped Moore’s “humble beginnings” onto a specific version of the celebrity-success myth; namely, that of the indie-auteur.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Here I am referring not to auteurism as a theoretical construct, but as a marketing tool and publicity device. According to Tim Corrigan, auteurism took off as a commercial strategy during the 1970s, when studios began to realize that they could use the image of young, “independent artists” to appeal to the newly flourishing youth market, “which was correctly understood to be driving a national resurgence in film attendance” (34). By the end of the decade, he argues, auteurism had literally become a marketing tool: “...



Once again, we can return to Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and video tape*. Chuck Kleinhans argues that the surprise success of Soderbergh's film at Sundance in 1989 sparked a rabid interest in stories of amateur, first-time directors breaking through with small, low-budget films. Five years later, he argues, the success of *Pulp Fiction* solidified this phenomenon: "the entertainment press wrote another chapter of the American success myth with the story of how Quentin Tarantino went from video store clerk wannabe to big-time movie director, screenwriter, and celebrity" (308). In both of these cases, the specific film almost disappears from view, as the filmmaker becomes the star of a narrative about himself. This is precisely the way in which the story of *Roger & Me* was constructed by the press, a context in which Moore's working-class background lost its political potency. Rather than marking him as a representative of the working class, Flint became the backdrop for a mythical story of one man's rise from obscurity.

We can see this play out especially in the star-profiles of Moore, which were prevalent in the popular press during the Fall of 1989. As P. D. Marshall has argued, profiles are the preeminent way in which journalists cover famous people, and their focus is inevitably individualized; when journalists employ a celebrity-frame to profile famous politicians, the focus of the article shifts from analysis of their policies and perspectives to "finding out what the famous person is *really* like" ("Intimately" 316). There is a similar focus in the profiles of Moore. In these pieces, journalists never fail to mention Moore's working-class background or his political commitment to working-class causes. However, all of these facts simply serve as a testament to Moore's inner strength and personal ambition, transforming *Roger & Me* into a story of personal triumph. He *must* be

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the auteurs themselves were transformed from *cineastes* into high-rolling celebrity directors ..."

Filmmakers like Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese were recast as "branded merchandise to be consumed along with t-shirts, action figures, Happy Meals ..." (35).

special if he managed to overcome *this*, these profiles seemed to imply. Or, as the *New York Times* put it – breathlessly – in a profile that appeared after Moore’s successful screening in Toronto: “The sudden arrival of this unlikely film maker at the locus of a media and movie-distributor be-in is a story that’s ‘a bit hard to believe,’ as Mr. Moore puts it. ‘But I never doubted that the film would be successful,’ he adds” (Collins, “A Self-Taught” C15).

One of the most-repeated anecdotes in the popular press was the way in which Moore financed *Roger & Me*. Critics fawned over the fact that Moore “sold his house, held yard sales and set up hometown Bingo games to pay for the film,” which, the *Times* points out, “was completed so recently that it nearly missed the deadline for consideration” (Collins, “A Self-Taught” C15). In this frame, Moore’s status as working class resident of Flint becomes an obstacle to personal success, one that Moore manages to rise above in improbable fashion. In profiles such as these, Flint was not something to be celebrated, but *transcended*.

Here we can see the ways in which the discourse of celebrity worked to undermine the committed aspects of Moore’s work as political documentarian. Far from establishing himself with and alongside the working-class subjects of his films, Moore’s star image worked to distance him from those subjects. His attachment to Flint endowed Moore with a kind of working-class authenticity, but his construction as talented, tenacious, indie-filmmaker displaced the political implications of that background, constructing Moore not only as working class, but as “something *more*.” In this frame, Moore’s ability to get the film made, rise to national fame, and create havoc for a major corporation, is all read through the prism of Moore’s own, individual talents.

Ironically, the result of this star-is-born frame was that the Michael Moore narrative, as it was spun within the popular press, contradicted the one he tried to tell about America in the film, itself. This was a fact made clear during an appearance by Moore on *Late Night with David Letterman*. “You know,” said Letterman that night, “Your story is a version of the American Dream;” to which Moore quickly replied: “Yeah, except this one’s real. For most people, the American Dream is just a fantasy” (Pierson 136). Here, Moore tries to contradict the implications of his own star-image, but as the *Roger* phenomenon rolled on, it would become increasingly difficult. Moore’s story about working-class Flint had been usurped by the Michael Moore narrative.

### **The Big One, Indeed: Michael Moore and the “Spectacle of Audacity”**

Despite the tendency of the popular press to focus on the star-is-born aspects of Moore’s personal narrative, journalists could not completely ignore the political nature of *Roger & Me* altogether. The film was, after all, a critique of GM, and a very public attempt to shame the corporation and its chief executive. As such, Moore’s status as a political *activist* had to be accounted for, apart from his image as celebrity-auteur. Once again, however, the discourse of celebrity provided commentators with a useful way to channel that story of political protest into ideologically safe waters. Rather than focus on the broader implications – social, economic, or otherwise – of Moore’s critique, journalists instead read Moore’s spirited attack as evidence of special *personal* qualities which they attributed to the filmmaker. Moore’s campaign against GM was proof that the he was endowed with a unique mix of artistic courage, brilliance and temerity.

Thus, Roger Ebert argued that while he thought *Roger & Me* should be lauded for “say[ing] things that had not been said in the movies in a long time,” what he liked most about the movie was the chutzpah displayed by its director:

I liked it because it felt like Michael Moore was getting away with something. He was thumbing his nose at GM, he was taking cheap shots, he knew it, we knew it, and it was about time. ... *Roger & Me* is a brave, brash breath of fresh air in American moviemaking.

“Attacks”

Many depictions of Moore within the popular press followed suit, attempting to describe his particular brand of “rebelliousness,” rather than focus on what the filmmaker was rebelling about. For instance, Hal Hinson actually discounts Moore’s self-description as “just one of the masses,” finding something more heroically insurgent beneath his working-class garb:

Wearing baggy jeans, a windbreaker and a cap reading "I'm out for Trout," Moore styles himself as a kind of beer-bellied rube, but the Average Joe pose is merely an elaborate disguise for a highly sophisticated, cagey wit. Moore is a naysayer in the classic American tradition -- a working-class sorehead with attitude to burn.

D1

Here, Moore is once again distanced from the working-class itself and positioned within an heroic tradition of American iconoclasts; transformed into a kind of “every-rebel,” rather than everyman. A *Newsweek* profile at about the same time performs a similar task:

The 35-year-old Moore's first film, a huge hit recently in Toronto and New York, suggests a *60 Minutes* segment expanded to feature length – or more precisely what *60 Minutes* would have looked like if CBS had passed on Mike Wallace and hired the young Bob Dylan instead. For in telling the story of what happened to Flint after the automaker eliminated some 30,000 jobs, Moore – the son of a retired GM worker – conveys not just a sense of outrage but also his outrageous sense of humor. Forget fairness, libel lawyers and the PR agents who cast a shadow over journalism in the late '80s. Roger Smith – despite staying at least one expense account lunch ahead of the camera crew for most of the film – comes off exactly as Moore wants him to: equal parts pompous ass and flaming fool.

Leerhsen 113

Leerhsen's invocation of the figure of Bob Dylan is important for, in many ways, Dylan is one of Moore's progenitors – a working-class hero more revered for his personal genius than his connection to any segment of the oppressed about which he sang. Lee Marshall's analysis of Dylan's star image is instructive.

Echoing Garman's analysis of Woody Guthrie (himself an inspiration to Dylan), Marshall argues that the discourse of celebrity worked against Dylan's aspirations to be the "voice of the people." While Dylan tried to incorporate himself within the egalitarian ethos of the Folk Song Movement, his popularity was based upon the notion that he was also, somehow, above and beyond it. Dylan employed a "sleight-of-hand; presenting himself as a mundane, no high-flyer, regular kind of guy while at the same time offering a biography that clearly mark[ed] himself off as very different from other would-be folk singers" (80). Dylan's songs weren't about social change and collective solidarity so much as they were about *himself*, as rock-star poet and visionary genius. Interpreted from within the discourse of celebrity, even Dylan's most explicitly political songs were not *about* social injustice, per se, but about "how the individual encounters injustice" (Marshall 108-9).

Richard Dyer has made a very similar point, arguing that when stars become political they invite a specific framing of the movements/causes for which they stump. He offers the career of Jane Fonda as an illustrative example. In the course of her rise to stardom, Fonda became less famous for her role as actress and sex-symbol, and more for her association with various political causes such as feminism, Native American rights and, most of all, the anti-Vietnam war movement. However, when covering her political actions, the press tended to pay much more attention to Fonda, herself, than they did to the perspectives or constituencies she championed:

The significance of all of this – the events and the films – is always in terms of the fact that *it is Jane Fonda doing them*. ... What the star does can *only* be posed in terms of *the star doing it*, the extraordinariness or difficulty of her/his doing it, rather than in terms of the ostensible political issues involved.

*Stars* 78

What Dyer illustrates here is the way in which political celebrities emphasize the very act of “speaking out,” over the issues being spoken for. When celebrities become political advocates, it is the heroic act of advocacy itself that is highlighted. Political movements and social causes are transformed into narratives of individual *daring* (or, just as often, arrogance, depending upon which side of the issue in question one stands). As Dyer argues, Fonda did not dramatize any one political issue, per se, but “what it was like to be political” (80). This is, indeed, a distinction that has consequences.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> As Dyer points out, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin levied this very same critique of Fonda’s role in Vietnam: “They suggest that Fonda’s politics are imbued with reactionary American values, and hinge their case on a semiotic analysis of a newsphoto of her in Vietnam during the filming of *Vietnam Journey*. As they point out, it is striking that the photo shows her with the Vietnamese rather than the Vietnamese in their own right” (78). Importantly, however, Dyer tweaks Godard and Gorin’s analysis a bit. Whereas Godard and Gorin “blame Fonda for this,” Dyer argues, “one could argue that this is inherent in the star phenomenon” (78).

David S. Meyer and Joshua Gamson consider some of these consequences in their analysis of celebrities who act as spokespeople for social protest movements. The main advantage that celebrities provide social movements is, of course, their notoriety: “celebrities carry the spotlight with them” (185). The problem is that:

the spotlight a celebrity brings to a movement may focus only on her. ... The story of social protest then becomes a celebrity story, and not one that includes politics, policy, or space for grassroots action. Celebrity dissent can become strikingly similar to the ‘radical chic’ stereotype opponents employ to discredit movements.

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This transformation of a narrative of protest into a narrative of celebrity has a tendency to reframe broad, structural arguments into pleas for individual, ameliorative action. For instance: “AIDS activism can become an effort to provide for those suffering from the disease, not because of their rights, but because of society’s generosity” (188). Moreover, the celebrity frame often works to disempower members of the movement, itself, who disappear from view as active agents, while the celebrity-as-spokesperson takes center stage:

The very spotlight of notoriety that comes with celebrity participation may drown out some movement claims and constituents. ... When the stories covering a large march on Washington for reproductive rights all focus on the notable women who have led the parade, rather than the movement’s larger claims, we must wonder whom such attention serves. When space for coverage of challenging movements is limited, the proportion of it that goes to celebrity spokespeople means that there is likely less space available to participants and activists organic to the movement.

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While Meyer and Gamson are talking specifically about *organized* political movements, their warning is germane to committed documentary, in general, even when it is not representing such a movement.

As argued, one of the main goals of committed documentary is precisely to represent members of disempowered groups as *active* social agents and as a part of groups that are collectively/systemically oppressed. But all of this falls by the wayside when viewed from within the celebrity frame. A narrative of revolution-from-below becomes a narrative of advocacy-from-above. Rather than promote social change and celebrate collective action, the image of political star and celebrity spokesperson emphasizes the extraordinary over the “ordinary,” celebrating the ability of an heroic individual to speak out in the name of those less fortunate.

As discussed above, this was a framing strategy that was first invoked during *Roger & Me*, and it became the dominant frame for Moore’s star-image in the years to follow. While his work provided a much-needed dose of radical analysis for mainstream audiences, the emphasis remained on Moore, himself. The question posed by such narratives was not, “what should we do now,” but “what will *he* do *next*?” Moore was transforming himself into a virtual spectacle of audacity. This was certainly the case in 1997, when Moore’s second feature-length film, *The Big One*, hit the theaters.

Despite being his least-successful documentary, *The Big One* stands as an important moment in Moore’s career as it marks the first time he attempts to meld his star-image with his class politics. The film follows Moore across the Midwest on a publicity tour promoting his bestselling book, *Downsize This!* Ostensibly, the film acts as a political crusade, documenting Moore as he “stumbles” across various workers feeling



the effects of an unfair economic system. However, the film *also* becomes a document of Moore's new-found celebrity status, focusing less upon the economic issues and working people for whom Moore advocates, and more on the trials and tribulations of Moore as Celebrity-Advocate. The film is a virtual catalogue of audacious stunts and passionate advocacy. We watch as Moore barges into various corporate and state offices, pontificates as a guest on radio and television programs, performs his political-comedy routine on the public speaking circuit, and hangs out with fellow celebrities. To paraphrase Dyer, the significance attached to the events depicted in *The Big One* has less to do with the issues involved, and more to do with the spectacle of *Michael Moore doing them*.

We can see this celebrity-framing at work most clearly in the scene that ends the film, when Moore gets a sit-down interview with none other than Phil Knight, the head of the Nike corporation. What is most significant about this scene is that it is no patented Moore-ambush-sequence. As Moore makes clear, he was *invited* by Knight, himself. The scene begins with Moore doing a guest-spot for a radio program based in Portland, OR. Both Moore and the program host are surprised when one of Nike's corporate officials calls in and invites Moore to "meet Phil." Apparently, Knight's wife had learned about Moore when she read *Downsize This!* – in which her husband was excoriated as one of the country's worst "corporate crooks."<sup>132</sup> Thus, the narrative hook here is that, for once, Moore didn't have to storm into a corporate office to make himself heard. He had become so well-known that Knight felt pressured to head him off at the pass. As such, the focus of this scene is less about the issues Moore has with the Nike Corporation's practices of

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<sup>132</sup> At the time of Moore's film, Nike was manufacturing most of its products in Indonesia where it regularly used teenage labor, for which they paid less than forty cents an hour.

labor exploitation and outsourcing, and more about Moore's new-found ability to command the attention of corporate leaders.

Thus, the rest of the scene documents Moore and Knight sitting down and negotiating with each other like two powerful heads of state. To be sure, the scene deals with political realities not often discussed in the mainstream media, such as child labor exploitation and labor outsourcing. However, the interview devolves quickly into the kind of charitable discourse Meyer and Gamson argue is inherent in the practice of celebrity advocacy. When Knight claims that American workers "don't want to make shoes," Moore challenges Knight to open a factory in Flint if the filmmaker can produce enough people willing to work there. This leads to one of the most degrading sequences Moore has ever put on film: the filmmaker showing Knight a videotape of a group of forlorn, out-of-work Flintonians chanting "we need jobs!" This is precisely the type of plea for "ameliorative action" that Meyer and Gamson argue celebrity advocates often make – a move that serves to take the bite out of political critique by transforming social issues into problems for individuals to solve. Thus, when Knight continues to refuse, Moore asks him: "Would you do it as a personal favor to me?"

The way in which Moore incorporates his own celebrity-status into the narrative of *The Big One* is striking. When he rounds up workers in Flint, the sequence is not accompanied by Moore's characteristic voice-over. Instead, it is told through a montage of television news segments documenting the event. A series of newscasters tell us that "Filmmaker Michael Moore is urging the world's largest athletic shoe company to open ... a factory in Flint"; and, "Michael Moore chastised the chairman of Nike," while a third interviews Moore, who says, "Tomorrow morning, I want to prove him wrong!"

Clearly, the emphasis is on Moore's ability to command attention and create a fuss, not on the troubles affecting either the people of Flint or the workers Nike is exploiting. This is a "spectacle of audacity," pure and simple. By creating such a spectacle Moore essentially removes himself from the context of which he claims to be a part. Moore's working-class constituency literally fades into the background, becoming nothing more than victims to be bartered over or props in an elaborate media-stunt. This is no longer just Michael Moore, working-class hero, but Michael Moore, celebrity-advocate.

The mainstream media bought this image hook, line and sinker, as the press became enthralled, at least for one media cycle, with the spectacle of a celebrity-documentarian convincing one of the world's most powerful corporate leaders to embarrass himself on film. In fact, the Moore vs. Knight storyline drew attention even before *The Big One* premiered nationally and, as such, reviews and coverage of the film were dominated by this frame from the beginning. Essentially, the narrative focused on two issues: a fascination with Moore's power to intervene in the affairs of one of America's largest corporations, and shock at Knight's foolhardy decision to let Moore put him on camera. In fact, coverage of the Moore/Knight dust-up garnered more publicity than the film itself, and certainly more publicity than the issue of corporate malfeasance or the current state of affairs for the average American worker. As such, while Moore certainly proved himself able to "shine a spotlight" on whatever issue he chose, the media seemed more interested in covering the person holding the spotlight.

Todd Gitlin has described a similar process at work during the 1960s, in which the national media focused their attention on activists-turned-celebrities such as Tom Hayden and Jerry Rubin, at the expense of the movements and constituencies for which

and for whom these figures spoke. Like Moore, these “champion radicals,” as Gitlin calls them, were geared more towards the production of flamboyant stunts and “extravagant, ‘incidental,’ expressive actions” – actions that were “colorful and symbolic,” and made “good copy” in the press – but were not necessarily connected to the goals or interests of any specific movement or constituency. The media, of course, reveled in the aura cast by these radical celebrities, since, as Gitlin argues, news is generally concerned with “the *event*, not the underlying condition; the *person*, not the group ... the fact that *advances the story*, not the one that explains it” (28). As such: “The drama most easily packaged for everyday consumption seems to be the drama of *recognizable* individuals: that is to say, of regulars, of celebrities, of stars who embody that mysterious quality we call glamour” (147). Thus, as activists like Rubin rose out of the rank and file and into the media spotlight, they became detached from their own movements and constituencies: “They floated in a kind of artificial space, surrounded by haloes of processed personality; the media became their constituency” (155). The same could be said for Moore.

Thus, a *York Times Daily News* piece that was printed weeks before *The Big One* opened painted the film as an audacious political stunt geared towards forcing Knight’s hand: “Filmmaker Michael Moore says he’ll change the ending of his new movie,” the article opens, “if Nike chief Phil Knight will do the right thing” (Rush 14). Moore, we are told, has pledged to “give the movie a happy ending” if Knight will “put on his shining armor and agree to build a factory or warehouse in the beleaguered city [of Flint].” Other news outlets quickly jumped on the story. The same day a *Newsweek* article introduced the film by posing the question: “How anxious is Nike about the immanent release of *The*

*Big One?*” The article goes on to relate an anecdote that would soon become ubiquitous in the film’s coverage:

Shortly before the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival last January, Moore relates, he received a call from Nike’s head of public relations, Lee Weinstein, asking for a meeting in Manhattan. Nike had just obtained a bootleg copy of Moore’s documentary, in which CEO Phil Knight explains on camera that he uses cheap labor because “Americans don’t want to make shoes.” “Weinstein said to me, ‘What would it take to have a couple of scenes removed from the movie?’” Moore claims. Weinstein begged him, Moore says, to delete one scene in which Knight admits to employing 14-year-olds at his Indonesian factories. “He told me, ‘Phil didn’t mean to say that,’” Moore says laughing. A Nike spokesman admits Moore was asked to remove the scene, but denies offering him any quid pro quo. Replies Moore, who never asked exactly what Nike was proposing: “Where was Linda Tripp when I needed her?”

Hammer 40

Nike’s lame attempt at spin control was played up over and over again in the press. The *Daily News* even described it as a shadowy, illicit affair:

The mysterious phone call came five months ago, when Michael Moore, guerilla moviemaker, had just finished another mean, nasty, funny documentary .... On the line was the head public relations man for the Nike sneaker company. ... The Nike man didn’t take long to make his point: “We have the tape.”

Dwyer 8

Here, coverage of *The Big One* turns into a kind of celebrity gossip-column, in which Moore, Knight and his employees battle it out in the pages of the national news media, as well as on the internet.

For the popular press, *The Big One* was not an invocation to reconsider labor issues such as corporate downsizing and outsourcing, but an invitation to fawn over the

audacity of a courageous “filmmaker, rabble-rouser, and professional thorn in the side of corporate America” (Graham N11). In this frame, Moore’s structural critique of the economic system was transformed into an individualized story of heroic charity. He was now a “working-class hero” (Roeper, “Moore” 2); “the self-appointed scourge of corporate America” (Hemmer 13); “a professional gadfly on behalf of the economically disenfranchised and downsized” (1); and “a spokesman for the American worker” (Parks 1). Indeed, a profile in the *Boston Globe* focused on the fact that Moore “maintains he is not a political activist,” but rather just someone who “doesn't mind being the voice for the forgotten” (Graham N11).

In the end, however, what the media liked most about Moore was not so much his political arguments, but the media spectacle they engendered. As Gitlin puts it, the media, itself, became Moore’s “constituency.” The real story here was “[c]onsumer maverick Michael Moore [who] has another CEO on the run” (Persall, “Lakewood” 8). In the eyes of the press, the most compelling part of Moore’s film was not its searing indictment of an economic system, but the public commotion this newly anointed celebrity was able to create.

### **A Rebel for Any Cause: “Decontextualizing” Michael Moore**

As Moore’s celebrity grew, and as his star-image became more and more dependent upon the spectacle of audacity, his connection to Flint specifically, and the working class in general, began to wane; Moore’s persona “decontextualized.” While the ball cap, blue jeans, and “joe-six-pack” look remained, Moore’s status as voice-of-the-working-man did not. His construction in the popular press shifted from working-class advocate to a much more generalized “spokesman for the Left.” By the time *Fahrenheit*

9/11 opened in 2004, Moore had made the long journey from working-class filmmaker to celebrity-pundit.

We can see this shift take place in the way that journalists described Moore's background for interview pieces and personality profiles. During the release of *Roger & Me*, Moore was constantly described in relation to his working-class roots. For instance, rarely did an interview or profile of Moore begin without describing his blue collar dress. Journalists continuously described him as "scruffy" (Thompson 3B), "rumpled" (Hartl, "Michael" G1), and "unkempt" (Stanley 19). They continuously invoked various blue collar clichés and referenced his tight financial situation. For instance, Jay Carr began his profile of Moore for the *Boston Globe* by claiming that, "Michael Moore is a Coke-and-pizza kind of guy" (69), while Charles Leerhsen began his profile in *Newsweek* by explaining that: "One of the hottest filmmakers in the country can't afford to buy a car right now" (113). And when journalists described Moore's background, they usually focused on his familial status as the "son of an autoworker" (Pollack, "The American" 3F; Collins, "A Self-Taught" C15; Leerhsen 113; Carr 69; James 1F) – rather than his professional career as a journalist and political activist. As previously discussed, all this emphasis on Moore's working-class background merely served to set the scene for a triumphant story of individual success. But however de-politicized, at first Moore's star image was explicitly attached to a working-class milieu.

As Moore's career advanced throughout the 1990s, however, the tendency to explicitly reference his working-class roots began to wane. Now, rather than recount Moore's working-class childhood, critics were more likely to emphasize his *political* background, tracing the roots of his political activism. Profiles focused on Moore's initial

desire to become a Catholic priest, his career as the crusading editor of an alternative newspaper, and the fact that he was the youngest person, at age 18, to be elected to a Michigan school board. As Moore's spectacle of audacity garnered more and more attention, his image shifted from working-class hero to that of a much more generalized "liberal political provocateur." A comparison of two different television news segments at different stages of Moore's career exemplifies this transformation.

In the early stages of his career, Moore was often used by the mainstream media as a kind of "working-class expert," called upon to offer a worker's perspective when issues such as mass lay-offs or labor strikes made the national news. When workers struck GM in 1998, Moore appeared as a guest commentator on several national news programs. In an NBC segment, Moore is shown walking around Flint in a baseball jacket and blue jeans, while the reporter's voice says: "Flint's most famous resident, filmmaker Michael Moore, who made a cynical movie about GM plant closings, says the workers are afraid" (REF). In segments like this, Moore is contextualized first and foremost as *Flint's* most famous resident – a guy who comes from, and speaks for, the working class and, specifically, Michigan autoworkers. In news segments such as this, news reporters defer to Moore's "working-class perspective," asking him what he thinks about the economic situation and the effectiveness of the strike.

Moore's appearance on CNN's nightly newscast with Aaron Brown in 2002 stands in stark contrast. Here, Moore appears under the title card: "The Moore the Merrier," a sarcastic reference to his image as an angry, political provocateur. Moore was on to promote his book, *Stupid White Men*. However, despite that book's explicit focus on the plight of working Americans, "class," as an issue, is quickly shunted aside, while



Moore's status as outspoken, liberal pundit is highlighted. We can see this shift in emphasis take place at the outset of the interview. Brown begins by referencing Moore's Flint-roots and his perspective on class issues:

Michael Moore is probably best known for his documentary, *Roger & Me*, a guy from Flint, MI unhappy with the decline of his hometown. ... Moore's gone on to become a scathing critic of corporate America, how money corrupts politics, and genuinely how the little guy always seems to get – what the little guy always seems to get.

Here, we get an introduction that is fairly typical of the way in which Moore had been defined throughout the early part of his career, and one can almost imagine that Brown's next question will be about downsizing, the state of the economy, or any number of the class-based issues Moore deals with in *Stupid White Men*. Instead, Brown shifts gears completely, turning to Moore and asking: "What ever happened to liberals?"

Here, Brown shifts the interview away from Moore's connection to working-class issues, and instead focuses on Moore as outspoken liberal pundit. Brown's questions are geared more towards soliciting "outrageous" commentary and "biased" rants than committed, political analysis. The bulk of the interview is dedicated to what Brown calls "a little word association," in which he throws out hot-button topics such as "Enron" and "The President." Clearly, Moore is expected to play along by performing the persona of liberal provocateur and unapologetic Bush-critic, in short, to provide a little political red-meat to an otherwise staid television newscast. Finally, with only a minute left to go in the interview, Brown asks Moore to tell him about the book. "Well, it's about more than Bush," Moore says. Clearly trying to shift the conversation back to his bread-and-butter issues, Moore tells an anecdote about a pilot who only makes \$15 an hour. Brown,

however, pulls back, following up Moore's story with another opinion-provoking question: "15 seconds: do you feel good or bad about your country these days?"

Thus, we can see the process that Gitlin describes in his analysis of the New Left celebrity-radicals in the 1960s. As Moore's celebrity-status grew, his relationship to the *media* began to take precedent over his relationship to the working-class community of which he claimed to be a part. The issues Moore championed, and the social experience from which his politics stem, were becoming less important than the way in which he articulated those opinions and experiences. Indeed, the image we were left with was not of a man "speaking from experience," but that of a celebrity "speaking for himself." The spectacle of audacity had taken over.

This shift towards the discourse of celebrity was certainly on display during the coverage surrounding *Bowling For Columbine*'s release in 2002. Importantly, this film did not climb its way into the festival circuit as had *Roger & Me*, but arrived with a splash at the Cannes Film Festival. Moore was no longer an amateur filmmaker trying to make it big, but a celebrity auteur garnering rave reviews and standing ovations at Europe's premier film event. Television coverage of *Bowling* focused less on the film, and more on Moore, himself. Thus, a CNN spot dealing with the festival centered most of its attention on Moore's press conference, where the filmmaker gave an impassioned speech about the Bush administration's attempt to exploit the fear aroused by the 9/11 attacks to bolster public support for going to war.

Ironically enough, CNN's Cannes correspondent that night was none other than Moore's old interlocutor, Harlan Jacobson. Anchor Candy Crowley gave this introduction:

... today where the industry buzz was overshadowed by *political* buzz, from one of the most political filmmakers in attendance, Michael Moore. He launched an attack on the War on Terror. Before we talk to Harlan, let's take a listen.

Here, Moore's celebrity persona not only overshadowed the "industry buzz," but even his own film, as newscasts focused on Moore's post-screening, anti-war speech. Of course, no mention was made, by either Crowley or Jacobson, of the fact that Moore's critique of the Bush administration's effort to exploit public fear is *one of the central themes* of *Bowling for Columbine*. Instead, in this segment and others like it, Moore was portrayed as somebody "going off topic"; a political provocateur who was turning his film's award into a bully-pulpit to "sound off" on whatever topic he felt like. Thus Crowley asks Jacobson, feigning shock: "Well, gosh, Harlan. All along I thought you were out there to cover movies and films. Well, what was THAT all about?"

"Oh," answers Jacobson, in a clearly dismissive tone,

It's about *Michael*, Candy. ... I don't think that the American press corps particularly thinks that his film, or rather his press conference, is anything more than Michael turning the Cannes film festival into something about himself.

This accusation of self-aggrandizing seemed to be the consensus view among the mainstream media in the U.S., where the story of the day was how Moore won a standing ovation from a clearly anti-Bush crowd and "managed to sound even more radical than usual" (Brunette D9).

Here it is important to point out that while Moore's transformation from working-class hero to liberal provocateur was cultivated within the mainstream media, it was also an image invited by Moore, himself. This transformation is indicative of the ways in which most film personalities become "stars"; a phenomenon that Joshua Gamson calls "decontextualized fame" ("The Assembly" 13). In his historical analysis of celebrity discourse, Gamson argues that as the power of the Hollywood studio system waned, individual stars became "proprietors of their own image" (12). As such, their ability to sell themselves became dependent upon their ability to "show a distance from their own image" (12). By constructing an image of themselves that was separate from whatever characters they played, or films they were in, stars transformed themselves into highly-marketable commodities: "As sales aids, celebrities are most useful if they can draw attention regardless of the particular context in which they appear. Name recognition in itself is critical for commerce. In fact, the less attached a name is to a context, the more easily it transfers to new markets" (13).

Indeed, the importance of "decontextualized fame" is something of which Moore and those around him seem to have been keenly aware. "Michael Moore, working class hero from Flint," is a star-image that is only news-worthy so long as it is contextually relevant – as it was in 1998 when the UAW was striking GM. However, by emphasizing the spectacle of audacity and constructing himself as a liberal lion, rather than simply a voice from the working class, Moore turned himself into a brand-name political pundit, who could bring his political courage and convictions to bear on any issue, no matter what the context might be. Kathleen Glynn, Moore's wife and producer, acknowledged as much in a 2001 interview in which she discussed the creation of Moore's website,

michaelmoore.com. “We called the site dogeatdogfilms.com,” she told *Variety*. “That’s the name of our production company and it seemed logical to have everything that we did come under that brand name. Soon we realized that Michael Moore is the real brand and we started michaelmoore.com” (Silberg S23).

Indeed, Moore’s site is geared precisely towards strengthening his brand. Both Moore and Glynn have argued that the site was initially conceived as a kind of grassroots organizing tool. However, despite these claims, in the end, *Michaelmoore.com* only *feels* like a grassroots, political website. It has virtually no interactive features whatsoever – nothing even so basic as a chat-room or comments section. Politically speaking, it doesn’t do much more than act as a kind of bulletin board for left-leaning news and causes. Mainly, it acts as a promotional site for Moore’s celebrity image.<sup>133</sup>

In the years between the site’s inception and *Fahrenheit*’s release, the “front page” of the *Michaelmoore.com* regularly showcased links to news articles denouncing the Bush administration, etc. But more prominent were positive reviews of Moore’s films, celebrity “endorsers” who had made positive mentions of Moore’s work, and links to resource pages that support the “factual basis” of Moore’s arguments and claims (not to mention, of course, links to Michael Moore merchandise). The most prominent feature of the site was “Mike’s Letter.” This section was the place where Moore continued the extra-textual narrative about “Michael Moore: political advocate and provocateur.” Typical features here were “open letters” to various politicians and other powerful people in which Moore showcased his trademark bravado, updates about how his media products were doing, and information about his public appearances. In the end, this was a branding

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<sup>133</sup> There have since been some important changes to Moore’s website that came with the release of his fifth feature-length documentary, *Sicko*, in 2007. These changes will be discussed briefly in the Conclusion.

site, pure and simple – a marketing device geared towards keeping Moore’s spectacle of audacity up and running (even while his films were not in theaters nor his books on the current best-seller list). Its most glaring omission was any real connection to Moore’s working-class roots.<sup>134</sup>

A telling example of the way in which More branded himself in such a fashion during this time appears in the “extra material” section of the *Bowling for Columbine* DVD. These bonus features transform the meaning of the film by turning it into a celebrity narrative about Michael Moore, political provocateur. For instance, the DVD might have included information on political groups involved with gun control, the war effort, and various economic issues. It might have included information about, or interviews with, some of the subjects we meet in the film, such as Tom Mauser and Tamarla Evans. Instead, the bonus features begin with an “interview” of Moore, himself, in which he addresses the camera directly and explains what happened during his infamous night at the Oscars. Tellingly, the interview is described as taking place “somewhere in Michigan,” an ambiguous description befitting the lack of connection Moore shows to the community of which he once was a part. At this point, Flint itself has ceased to be anything other than a non-specific marker of Moore’s celebrity persona.

Moore goes on to describe the Oscar episode in detail, from the day he got word of the nomination, to walking into the Kodak Theater for the first time, to the excitement of hearing his name called out. Rather than going into detail about his remarks and how they connected to the themes of the film, Moore frames his speech firmly within his won celebrity-narrative. He first describes the speech as an heroic act by a principled activist:

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<sup>134</sup> At times, the site also featured links to various political groups and protest actions, such as [moveon.org](http://moveon.org), but this was not a place for activists to come together and “convene” on-line, post information on specific actions, etc.

“It was not only something that I said, it was something that I had to say because that’s how I live my life.” He then describes the speech as an act of social-advocacy in which Moore stood up for those who could not:

And, I gotta tell ya, in the last three weeks since I got this, walking around through airports, city streets, whatever, the remarks from people have been incredible. People have been so appreciative of me saying what I said, and being a voice for the people that don’t have a voice out there.

Finally, he frames the speech as an act of unapologetic hubris by an audacious political star:

So, somebody said that this will go on that Oscar highlights reel. You know, I don’t know – it wasn’t my intention. ... You know you live in the moment that you’re in, and I try to live my life in an authentic way, in an honest and sincere way. And, you know, at the end of the day ... I’m Michael Moore. What else was I gonna do?

This feature is followed by several segments that continue the “Michael Moore narrative:” a featurette depicting Moore speaking to students at the University of Denver and then signing autographs, and a “film festival scrapbook” that includes footage of Moore walking down the red carpet, accepting his award at Cannes, and giving celebrity-interviews (complete with Moore wearing an obligatory pair of ray-bans). Together, these bonus features work to create the story of one, heroic man, further distancing Moore’s image from his working-class roots and bread and butter issues. Moore’s image is no longer entirely “wrapped up” in Flint and the working class. Moore was now starring in a story primarily about himself.

Indeed, this is precisely how the popular press constructed Moore's image, as well. By the time Moore hit the news cycle again in 2004 – this time for *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s win at the Cannes Film Festival – he had become the star of his own narrative. More often than not, *Fahrenheit* was framed not only as an indictment of the Bush administration, but specifically as another chapter in the "Michael Moore saga." A profile of Moore by the *San Francisco Chronicle* stands as a good example:

At 9 p.m. on a Friday, Michael Moore is at Todd-AO studios in Hollywood testing the sound quality of his documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* before it is shipped to 700 theaters. He's hoarse from sitting all day in an air-conditioned room, continually consulting with technicians.

"I'm thinking, 'Why am I in a lab at this hour?' I just won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. I should be somewhere far away celebrating," he says with a raspy voice.

It's odd to hear Moore sounding weak, because the 49-year-old filmmaker is famous -- detractors would say infamous -- for projecting loud and clear. He's become the populist voice of America, whether blaming the chairman of General Motors for the devastating impact of factory closures in *Roger & Me* or confronting Charlton Heston about making National Rifle Association stump speeches in towns rocked by crazed gunmen in *Bowling for Columbine*.

Accepting a Academy Award for *Columbine* in 2003, Moore spoke against the war raging in Iraq, shouting boos from the audience. When Quentin Tarantino presented Moore with the Palme d'Or last month, Tarantino called *Fahrenheit 9/11* "the first movie ever made to justify an Oscar speech already given."

Stein 24

In this framing, *Fahrenheit* becomes important not so much for the arguments that it makes, but for the place it plays in the ongoing Michael Moore saga. The film is read not only as an indictment of the President, but as an answer to all those people who dismissed Moore as a knee-jerk, anti-war loony.



In fact, the Tarantino comment was repeated over and over during coverage of *Fahrenheit*'s Cannes victory and crystallizes the ways in which Moore's star-image was now understood. Just as Moore's films contextualize his political arguments within an individual narrative, pitting a heroic documentarian against any number of social villains, now Moore's films were being read as part of a broader, extra-textual narrative revolving around Moore, himself. From here on, Moore would only be understood in terms of his own celebrity spectacle.

### **The Perils of Authenticity**

Moore's celebrity-status brought with it advantages and disadvantages. Its positive aspects were clear to see; with the possible exception of *The Big One*, Moore's feature documentaries were rousing box-office successes, each one out-selling the last. If, as he claimed, Moore's goal was to pull documentary into the mainstream, he had done that and more. And there can be no doubt that his ability to create himself as a brand-name star had much to do with this success. Indeed, when Moore briefly considered removing himself entirely from *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Harvey Weinstein counseled against this, arguing "You're the star they're coming to see" (Toplin 40).

However, the fact that Moore was now a celebrity not only meant that he could draw large audiences; it meant that he began to be treated *like* a celebrity. Specifically, the increased attention to Moore's popular success brought with it a new cynical attitude towards his political commitments. While Moore's *films* had previously been derided as playing fast and loose with the facts, it was the credibility gap that journalists began to see in Moore's *persona* that now became the center of focus. Joshua Gamson's historical

analysis of the celebrity phenomenon helps to illustrate the way in which this cynical attitude towards celebrity works.

According to Gamson, there are essentially two basic “stories” that explain fame and celebrity in contemporary culture. The first is the narrative usually peddled by Hollywood: the star-is-born narrative that characterized Moore’s star-image during the release of *Roger & Me*. According to this explanation, celebrity is the result of an inherent greatness: “the great and talented and virtuous and best-at rise to the top of the attended-to ...” (1). In this frame, stars are, more or less, what they appear to be. Thus, in the early part of the twentieth century, studios worked hard to assure that there was a symbiotic relationship between star-personas and their “real life” counterparts (6). According to this narrative, “Greatness is built in; it is *who you are*.” (9).

However, Gamson argues that a second story has always co-existed with the first. In this story, “the publicity apparatus itself becomes a central plot element, even a central character” in the celebrity narrative (2). According to this frame, celebrity is “represented not only as *useful to* selling and business, but as a business itself, *created by* selling” (14). Stars are described as: “‘merchandise,’ ‘inventory,’ ‘property,’ a ‘product,’ a ‘commodity,’ and the fans ‘markets’” (14). While these two stories have always coexisted, Gamson argues that over the course of the twentieth century, the balance between them shifted dramatically towards the second:

Although the narratives about and explanations of fame developed in the earlier part of the century have remained commonplace, the challenge from the manufacture-of-fame narrative has been greatly amplified. No longer under institutional guard, it has become a very serious contender in explaining celebrity.

The result of all this is the production of an “increasing self-consciousness and irony about celebrity” that encourages a relationship between audience and celebrity that is cynical to the core (14). As Gamson puts it: “In the later twentieth century texts everyone is a potential trickster, and image-makers and hypesters are everywhere. ... Who is real? Who really has ‘star quality’ or ‘talent’ or ‘greatness’? Who actually deserves attention?” (18)

Of course, the fact that celebrity discourse has given up on the authenticity of celebrity personas does not mean it has relinquished the concept of “authenticity,” itself. Far from it. As Su Holmes points out: “while contemporary celebrity magazines ... revel in an irreverent and often ironic attitude toward celebrity culture ... the continued negotiation of authenticity still sits at the very core of their framework” (16). Holmes argues that the emphasis on candid photography and stolen images of celebrities going about their daily lives reveals a powerful commitment to the idea that there is an authentic, “true” self beneath the artificial image (16).<sup>135</sup> As such, celebrity profiles have increasingly begun to cultivate a “behind-the-scenes, inside-dope style [of writing], instructing the reader further in reading performances, finding the ‘real’ behind the ‘image’” (Gamson 16).

P.D. Marshall argues that such a focus can actually work to a star’s benefit – providing them the kind of “decontextualization” that “is very important for establishing the power of the film star as a distinct cultural commodity that is transferable to other domains, other cultural projects, and can be separated from his past films” (*Celebrity*

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<sup>135</sup> As Holmes puts it: “The[se] magazine[s] certainly acknowledg[e] the performative nature of the celebrity self – criticizing celebrities who seem to be ‘posing’ for candid shots, for example .... But this is only to keep the ‘authenticity’ of the ‘real’ candid image intact” (16).

110). However, while this authenticity-gap is often a boon to the stars of the entertainment world, it can be lethal in regards to other kinds of celebrities. For instance, Marshall argues that it is particularly dicey ground for contemporary politicians to tread. According to Marshall, today's political candidates are often subjected to a form of public scrutiny that attempts to match the "real" activities of an individual candidate with the star-image of that candidate constructed through political advertisements, public appearances, and other media events (230). The problem is that the authenticity of a politician's image is crucial to his/her success within the political realm:

The principle difference between the film celebrity and this transgression into the personal and the politician and his or her revelations of the private sphere is that the politician must maintain the conception of a continuity between the public presentation of self and images of the private self.

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As such, the discourse of celebrity often works to undermine the political process by encouraging the audience to adopt a cynical posture in which *no* politician can be taken seriously, *no* image deemed "true." Joshua Gamson describes the problem succinctly:

As politics adopts celebrity-industry practices, it also adopts its seams and its familiar cues. ... The audience for politics is converted into an audience for celebrity. ... Political figures simply join others to be deconstructed. This is perhaps the most insidious of positions for democracy: it negates the possibility for authenticity and thus maintains the status quo ... All is performed. Political participation and the search for authentic voices are seen as ludicrous endeavors.

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When politics gets filtered through the celebrity frame, the relationship between audience and politician is undermined by a debilitating cynicism that

delegitimizes any politician, no matter what his/her political goals and commitments might be.

A similar problem besets political documentarians like Michael Moore. For, as Dirk Eitzen argues, documentary is not a particular type of text, *per se*, but a specific type of *relationship* that is constructed between audience and text. And this is a relationship understood to be based upon an inherent “honesty:”

... there is no such thing as a text that is intrinsically and necessarily a documentary. It is a particular kind of reading frame that makes a text a documentary. In other words, a documentary is what people are accustomed to make of it, no more no less. What they are accustomed to make of it ... is a film or video that they *presume* to make truth claims.

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Specifically, Eitzen argues that documentaries are texts about which audiences are accustomed to asking; “Might it be lying?” But in Moore’s case, when viewed through the celebrity frame, this question shifts from “Might it be lying” to “Might *he* be lying?” And this is a question that the discourse of celebrity not only poses, but simultaneously answers. By inserting himself into the world of contemporary celebrity, Moore enters a realm in which the question, “Might he be lying,” is always, already answered in the affirmative. As such, the “authenticity” of Moore’s working-class image became the central focus of debates, with critics constantly emphasizing the “artificial” aspects of that image.

A public struggle over Moore’s political authenticity began in earnest as early as the late 1990s, as Moore’s success as a movie star, TV personality and bestselling author began to overwhelm his working-class persona. As Moore’s fame grew, journalists began

to look into his personal life, inevitably focusing on the purported contradictions between his working-class image and “real-life” existence. The filmmaker’s integrity became the issue.

Importantly, this process began to take shape around the time of *The Big One*’s release. As argued in the previous chapter, despite its problematic mode of address, *The Big One* (along with *TV Nation* and – I would add here – his foray into popular nonfiction) represents an attempt by Moore to recapture the working class audience that was all but ignored during *Roger*’s triumphant run as an indie/art film. And perhaps more importantly, this point in Moore’s career saw the filmmaker displaying his political radicalism in a rather brazen fashion, as he continued to criticize the ethos of corporate capitalism even during the “go-go” economic optimism of the early Clinton years. As such, the cynical contours of contemporary celebrity discourse offered many in the popular press another convenient way to soften the radical edges of Moore’s work, this time by undermining his political “authenticity.” When Michael Moore threatened to move from being entertainingly radical to “too damned radical,” the mainstream media turned Moore’s celebrity status against him. A 1997 profile in *Salon* serves as a perfect example.

In this article, David Radosh makes the case that Michael Moore is a detriment to his own political causes, and his reasons boil down to one, basic accusation: Moore isn’t the man he appears to be. The very first lines of the piece exemplify Radosh’s problem with Moore:

What does Michael Moore have in common with Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern? The answer – I mean the *other* answer, the one that doesn’t

include the words blubber or bigmouth – is Judith Regan. The feisty celebrator's HarperCollins imprint, Regan Books, recently announced a six-figure deal with Moore for a January 1998 follow-up to the director-cum-author's bestselling *Downsize This!*

Here, Moore's celebrity-success works to undermine his political authenticity. By pointing out that Moore and Rush Limbaugh, who do not share the same politics, *do* share the same publisher, Radosh implies that the politics for which Moore advocates don't matter nearly so much as the money he makes from such advocacy. In essence, he argues that Moore's success makes him a phony. Thus, the entire article reads like a politically-inflected celebrity exposé, in which Radosh provides us with a glimpse of the "real" Moore behind the populist mask.

We first learn that Moore is a consummate self-promoter. Under the sarcastic heading, "Roger and Me, Me, Me, Me, Me!," Radosh reveals that Moore promoted his own films and books within a series of columns he wrote for *The Nation*. "Late last year, Moore wrote four 'Media Matters' columns for *The Nation* in which he showed clearly what media matter to him," Radosh writes with clear disdain. "The first installment mentioned *Downsize This!* in the opening paragraph, then discussed both *Roger & Me* and *Canadian Bacon*. The second installment was all about *TV Nation*. The third mentioned *Downsize This* ...." Here, any act of self-promotion whatsoever is interpreted as evidence that Moore's true "commitments" aren't as altruistic as he would have us believe.

Next, Radosh turns to Moore's professional life, where it is revealed that "Moore's office is not, as he insists in his book, a 'nonstop rock-'n'-roll party for the proletariat.'" Here, Radosh repeats information gleaned from articles in *New York*

*Magazine* and the *New York Observer* that paint Moore as an anti-union boss who, according to unnamed former staffers, tried to dissuade his writers from joining the Writer's Guild. This fact alone serves to further undermine every argument Moore has ever made in favor of unionization and against corporate malfeasance.

Finally, Radosh digs into Moore's personal life, pointing out that he lives in a "\$1.27 million apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan" and "sends his daughter to private school." According to Radosh, these facts may serve as the most searing indictment of all, because Moore is constantly telling journalists that he is still the "same person" he was before making *Roger & Me*. "It is vital to Moore's sense of self (not to mention his career) that he remain a Guy from Flint. He hasn't been that guy for quite some time."

In this way we can see how Moore's successful attempt to popularize political documentary through mainstream media strategies, such as the promotion of his own celebrity image, *also* provides journalists with ammunition to turn against him. Here, Moore's entire political project is completely tarnished by the simple fact that Moore no longer lives in Flint, paycheck to paycheck. And any evidence that he actually makes money "peddling" such an image is seen as an unforgiveable contradiction.<sup>136</sup> From this highly cynical perspective, financial success can only imply one thing: personal ambition.

In many ways, the *Salon* piece exemplified early on the ways in which Moore's star-image would be interpreted by the popular press for years to come. Indeed, his

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<sup>136</sup> Of course, this kind of analysis puts Moore – and, in many ways, the entire tradition of committed documentary – in the worst kind of catch-22, whereby the only way to stay "true" to one's political commitments is to forsake proven distribution and marketing strategies and practically assure that hardly anyone at all will see your film. Anderson and Benson found a similar "double-bind logic" often deployed by critics of Frederick Wiseman, whereby his films were considered "flops" if they failed to make money, but denounced as exploitations made for personal gain if they achieved any kind of financial success (*Documentary* 77).



million-dollar, Manhattan apartment and his daughter's private school became oft-repeated anecdotes, situated side-by-side with obligatory mentions of the *Roger* scandal – all in an effort to prove that journalists were savvy enough to “see through” the image Moore projected. Similarly, descriptions of Moore's appearance changed drastically. What was once understood to be an authentic sign of Moore's working-class background – and a pointed show of disrespect to the powers that be – was now described as an “outfit”, a “costume,” the “gimmee ball cap” and the “obligatory jeans.”

Nowhere was this trope of (in)authenticity more apparent than during the hooplah surrounding Moore's Oscar speech in 2003, the moment when Moore became a full-blown national celebrity. As previously discussed, the speech was supported by some, but denounced by most. However, there was one thing most journalists agreed upon: that the speech was no surprise. Whatever one thought about the *content* of the speech, and/or Moore's right to make it, what remained indisputable was that this was just another instance of Michael Moore doing “what Michael Moore does;” one more instance of a savvy self-promoter solidifying his image as political provocateur, and likely guaranteeing another few weeks in the theaters for his incendiary documentary. In short, wherever one came down on the content of Moore's speech, common sense held that it was utterly, and unquestionably, *inauthentic*.

*New York Times* critic A. O. Scott summed up the majority opinion: “Those winners who felt compelled to make statements about the war for the most part did so with modesty and tact. The exception, predictably, was documentary maker Michael Moore” (“Open” E1). Most journalists piled on. Under headlines such as, “Michael Moore Lives Up To His Name” (D1), and, “Moore Drew Boos From Predictable Line,”

critics and supporters alike delegitimized the potency of Moore's words by focusing on the performative aspect of his speech. Over and over, Moore is described as "predictable";<sup>137</sup> a "self-promoter" (Shales C1; Sachs, "Freedom" 2; Mathews, "An Evening" 42; ); as priming his own ego and pushing his own agenda (Denerstein, "Moore Drew" 41A; Waxman C1; Vancheri B1; "Michael Moore's Moment" 27; Lyons A11; Persall, "Fool" 1D; Lovell E8). And that "agenda" had less to do with a legitimate political argument, and more to do with the continued maintenance of his own star-persona. As Lloyd Sachs put it, writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

It's unlikely that Moore, who drew an unruly mix of boos and cheers, will pay any great price for his one-man uprising. On the contrary, the greatest self-promoting muckraker of our time may well profit from the prime time exposure. His Oscar-winning documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, which is still in theaters in some cities, is sure to gain screens. And his, um, acceptance speech, which many people viewed as Michael just being Michael, also drummed up support for the forthcoming DVD.

"Freedom" 2

The cynicism inherent to celebrity discourse was working in overdrive. The very fact that Moore's speech was a calculated performance, right in line with his bread-and-butter persona, is enough to delegitimize it outright.<sup>138</sup>

A similar cynicism pervaded the early coverage of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. At first, critics described the film in terms of Moore's "spectacle of audacity," marveling over Moore's ability to cause such a commotion. The film burst onto the scene at Cannes in

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<sup>137</sup> References are too numerous to mention.

<sup>138</sup> Here it seems important to emphasize the deep level of cynicism inherent to such an interpretation of Moore's Oscar speech. For, the very fact that it was "predictable" actually belies a certain level of *consistency* and, yes, *commitment* on Moore's part. Indeed, *so* committed was Moore to his political goals that he risked not only public embarrassment, but industry-acceptance (i.e. *his very ability to "make money"*) by shunting aside the opportunity to bask in his own success and, instead, stating his fervent opposition to the war.

2004, where journalists spent more time covering its rapturous reception than they did analyzing the film's argument. Article after article described, in detail, the mobbed screenings and wild response. Thus, Roger Ebert began his first of many reviews with this characteristic description of the film's screening at Cannes:

The film premiered Monday at the Cannes Film Festival to a series of near-riot scenes, as overbooked screenings were besieged by mobs trying to push their way in. The response at the early morning screening I attended was loudly enthusiastic. And at the official black-tie screening, it was greeted by a standing ovation.

“Less” 43

Indeed, most journalists covering the festival fixated on the standing ovation Moore received, reporting Cannes artistic director Thierry Fremaux's comment that it was the longest he'd ever seen by a festival audience (Bernard, “Standing” 3; Scott, “History” E3; *Daily News* 3). So fixated were journalists by the audience response that Roger Ebert actually dedicated half an article to figuring out just how long, in fact, the ovation for the film was (“Ovation” 70).

In this way, journalists initially focused less on the film and more on the spectacle surrounding it. The real story here was not Michael Moore's arguments, but his ability to cause a public stir. *Fahrenheit 9/11* wasn't just a documentary, it was a political stunt on the grandest of scales. Thus, the most oft-quoted line in report after report was Moore's response to Tarantino upon being presented with the award: "What have you done? The last time I was on an awards stage in Hollywood, all hell broke loose" (“Moore's Milestone” A24). For most journalists, *Fahrenheit 9/11* was first and foremost an attention-getting exercise by a political celebrity with a knack for getting noticed; a

“movie Molotov Cocktail,” as Richard Corliss put it, that “whipped Cannes into an inferno” (“The Art”).

Thus, following the familiar pattern of celebrity discourse, the initial focus on Moore’s rapturous reception quickly devolved into cynical assessments of the filmmaker’s talents as a publicist. For many critics, the enthusiastic response to *Fahrenheit 9/11* was not read as an invitation to consider just why so many people might be excited about applauding an anti-war film, but was instead read as evidence that Moore was a terrific salesman. Moore’s much-publicized spat with Michael Eisner over the U.S. distribution of the film is a case in point. The mainstream media turned the feud into a story about Moore’s ability to create a media event out of whole cloth.

The controversy began when the *New York Times* reported that Disney was blocking its Miramax division from distributing the film. According to Disney, the film was likely to alienate too many viewers for a company that “caters to families of all political stripes” (Rutenberg A1). Moore struck back immediately, saying: “Should this be happening in a free and open society where the monied interests essentially call the shots regarding the information the public is allowed to see?” (REF). Meanwhile, Moore’s agent, Ari Emanuel, claimed that Disney CEO Michael Eisner had asked him to pull out of the Miramax deal the previous spring, expressing concern that the film could anger Florida Governor Jeb Bush (Rutenberg A1). Disney denied this claim, and argued that Moore was trying to turn the whole affair into a publicity stunt. Disney didn’t need much help making that accusation stick. By and large, the popular press read Moore’s comments the same way.

For many journalists, the Disney flap represented a golden opportunity seized upon by Moore and his handlers. As A.O. Scott put it; “Was the timing – and subsequent controversy – primarily a result of Mr. Moore’s appetite for publicity or the timidity of Disney management? Both answers are entirely plausible, and one hardly rules out the other” (“Now” 16). *Entertainment Weekly* had a similar take, arguing: “The timing was perfect: Gleefully stoked by Weinstein and Moore, the brouhaha exploded in Cannes, leaving the Croisette divided between Moore’s supporters and detractors, between those crying it was conspiracy or claiming it was all business” (15). Others weren’t so even handed in their analysis of the event. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* declared Moore’s outrage over Disney’s decision “phony,” arguing in an editorial: “Moore appears to have timed his announcement to stir up publicity for his movie's upcoming screening at the Cannes Film Festival though he has known for a year that Disney Chief Executive Michael Eisner was refusing to distribute *Fahrenheit 9/11*” (B7). Jack Mathews, writing in the *New York Daily News*, was even more strident:

Proving he still knows how to manipulate the media, he hoodwinked even the *New York Times* editorial page into accusing the Walt Disney Co. of censorship, after Michael Eisner refused to allow his Miramax division to release *Fahrenheit 9/11* – something Moore knew he was going to do a year earlier!

“Moore” 38

And Robert Denerstein, of the *Rocky Mountain News*, called the flap a publicity stunt – a description, he added, that “seems a bit redundant. Moore is a publicity stunt; everything he does or says tends to attract attention” (“Moore Winning” 12D).

Thus, once again, the discourse of celebrity ruled the day, as journalists interpreted the Disney controversy as just one more fascinating example of Moore's ability to promote his own image through whatever means necessary, a frame that completely ignored the controversy's inherent political implications. While journalists certainly were not wrong in their assessment that "controversy sells," the focus on Moore's ability to whip up a publicity storm masked the crucial fact that a major corporation *was* actively suppressing a film *precisely because* of its political content. The fact that Moore may have taken advantage of Disney's political temerity hardly undermines this fact.<sup>139</sup> But political implications were not really the business of the day, as journalists declared the Disney controversy a "victory" for both Moore and Miramax.<sup>140</sup> "Mr. Moore isn't shedding too many tears over Disney's rebuff," the *Pittsburg Post-Gazette* argued in an editorial. "The inflation of his image as a 'courageous' documentarian guarantees that *Fahrenheit 9/11* will have a new distributor within weeks. ... In America, sometimes controversy is just another way to make a buck" (A14). Meanwhile, *Newsweek* declared:

The truth is, there are no losers here. Miramax now has to sell the \$6 million film, and the controversy is likely to jack up the price, so the studio (and parent Disney) will make money. Eisner gets to look tough. Miramax's Harvey Weinstein looks like a rebel. Moore gets tons of free publicity, and the buyer ... could make a fortune.

"The 411" 69

Thus, viewed through the cynical lens of the celebrity frame, Moore's political

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<sup>139</sup> As Moore pointed out, Disney owns media outlets that support outspoken political conservatives, such as Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson, but has never evinced a similar reluctance to distribute their politically-inflected material (Thompson C1).

<sup>140</sup> Miramax was able to sell the distribution rights to Lions Gate and IFC Films (Snyder, "Moore Doc" 9+).

authenticity was null and void. He could now only be seen as a media spin-meister and public relations guru, a spectacle in and of himself. By the time *Fahrenheit 9/11* opened in the States, Moore had gone from working-class hero to “master propagandist and incorrigible entertainer” (Corliss “The Art”), for whom Cannes was nothing more than “a Barnum-esque launch pad” (Guarino 3). Thus, wherever any particular journalist came down on *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the film, and Moore himself, were always viewed through a deep layer of skepticism. At the end of the day, the common sense view was that, whatever your political leanings might be; “You always have to take Moore with a big grain of salt” (O’Connor 31).

### **Celebrity Infotainer**

Thus it was that during the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11* the discourse of celebrity began to dovetail with the discourse of infotainment, discussed in the previous chapter. As argued, the fact that Moore was blatantly combining strident political arguments within an unapologetically entertaining format prompted journalists to read *Fahrenheit 9/11* as nothing more than a cathartic, amusing spectacle for liberal audiences. The discourse of celebrity only reinforced this logic. Whereas Moore has always defined himself as a working-class guy bringing an alternative perspective to average Americans, the press saw it differently. From within the celebrity frame, Moore became less a filmmaker with something to say, and more a political entertainer with something to *sell*.

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of this celebrity discourse was the way in which it transformed not only the meaning of Moore’s star-image, but that of his *audience*. If Moore was understood to be a master-entertainer and marketing guru, then his audience must be folks willing to purchase what he’s selling; in short, they can only

be characterized as “fans.” Once again, this is typical of contemporary celebrity discourse which, as Gamson argues, has developed an increasingly self-conscious attention to the celebrity’s construction as a *consumer product*:

In the earlier days, an agent was typically shown discovering star quality that simply demanded to be brought to the public, and the subsequent adoration was proof of the quality. Now, a shrewd agent was shown discovering a market and manufacturing a celebrity-product around it.

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According to this logic, Moore wasn’t engaged in the art of persuasion so much as the business of delivering goods to a specific market. In this way, the discourse of celebrity worked in concert with the discourse of infotainment to reinforce the perception that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was merely preaching to the choir.

As argued in the last chapter, coverage of *Fahrenheit 9/11* was unique in the way that it focused on Moore’s reception in the public sphere. And more often than not, the focus of this attention was the delineation of a specific “market,” to which *Fahrenheit* was purportedly appealing. It was now obligatory that coverage of Michael Moore include reportage on his “fans.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in the coverage of Moore’s *political* actions and appearances. Even when Moore lent his celebrity towards explicitly political causes, journalists continued to view him primarily as a celebrity-phenomenon. For instance, when moveon.org utilized *Fahrenheit*’s opening weekend as an organizing tool, the mainstream media took note. To moveon.org, *Fahrenheit* offered a convenient way to connect with large groups of potential voters and disseminate political information. They circulated pledge forms in which signers promised to see the film on opening night and organized house parties the Monday after *Fahrenheit*’s



opening weekend to discuss the film and participate in a nationally-broadcast conference call with Moore. These screenings and house parties were then used as part of a broader voter-registration movement (Werde 1; Johnson 5F).

Thus, for the first time in Moore's career, he saw one of his films actually serving a direct political purpose, however small. If anything counteracted the argument that *Fahrenheit* was "mere entertainment," this kind of grassroots organizing around the film was it. However, the mainstream media obscured this aspect of *Fahrenheit*'s success beneath the glare of Moore's own celebrity image. *Fahrenheit*'s use by moveon.org became just one more bit of evidence that Moore's celebrity-stock had risen to astronomical heights. Articles describing the house parties tended to portray them as rock concerts for the Left, with Moore playing a role usually assigned to the likes of Bruce Springsteen or Bono. "Filmmaker Michael Moore is so popular," declared the *Oregonian*, "even his disembodied voice draws thousands" (Esteve B05). The article went on to report, with wonder, that "more than 800 packed a ballroom at Portland State University to hear Moore's scratchy voice come through an amplified telephone line." In typical fashion, the headline referred to the attendees as the "faithful." A similar article covering a local house party in the *St. Petersburg Times* explained: "They had been part of the crowd that crammed theaters over the weekend, making a surprise hit of the Bush-bashing political documentary film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Now they gathered to hear its creator" (1B). And as an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* described a California gathering:

On the heels of the phenomenal opening of Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and with just a few days of publicity and planning, Moveon had managed to

mobilize its members to organize house – or bar or bookstore – parties for the purpose of hearing Moore speak and answer questions in real time. It worked out in spades. Monday night, an estimated 55,000 people at 4,600 gatherings from Alaska to Maine came together to toast the film's success and have at least a brush of contact (albeit with just his voice and a computer screen) with Moore, a heretofore unlikely idol.

E1

Here, Moore is described explicitly in terms similar to that of a pop-star, as the article reports, breathlessly, that during Moore's conference call, "You could hear a pin drop in the room." According to descriptions like this, the film itself becomes an after-thought, as do the political strategies being mobilized around it. Michael Moore, himself, is the story.

A similar discourse pervaded the coverage of Moore's appearance at the Democratic National Convention in July of 2004. Importantly, Moore was there as the guest of the Congressional Black Caucus. This was an invitation that bore clear political implications. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore details the way in which African American members of Congress were ignored when they stood in opposition to the 2000 election decision. As such, their invitation to Moore shined a very public spotlight on the question of how much power was actually enjoyed by the African American community within the Democratic party. Thus, as with moveon, *Fahrenheit 9/11* became a potent political tool to be utilized by political groups and organizations. Furthermore, the very presence of Moore at the DNC had the potential to shine a spotlight on a Democratic leadership that was, at that point in time, equivocating on its opposition to the war.

Once again, however, the political aspects of Moore's appearance were buried beneath a hail of celebrity discourse, as journalists treated Moore's appearance as they would the arrival of a major star at a Hollywood movie premiere. The image the mainstream media constructed of Moore at the DNC was one of a celebrity navigating his

way through throngs of adoring fans while lapping up the media attention. An article in the *Boston Globe* serves as a good example. Under the headline, “*Fahrenheit 9/11* Fans Welcome Hero to Hotbed,” the article constructs a narrative that could have described the public appearance on any well-known celebrity. “The man of the hour was more than an hour late,” begins the piece, describing a group of veterans’ and soldiers’ families who are awaiting the arrival of Moore. The problem, the article explains, is the paparazzi: “But as activists sat on benches, Moore, in town for the Democratic National Convention, was stuck at the Fleet Center, held up by a crush of reporters, and well-wishers who shouted, ‘Michael!’ and ‘Great stuff, Mike, great stuff!’” (Abraham A1).

The article attempts to play up the contradiction between Moore’s celebrity status and his ability to connect with “regular people.” “He’s not the star! It’s these people,” the article quotes one veteran as saying. “But minutes later,” the article continues, “Moore arrived, and it was immediately clear that he was, indeed, the star. The cameras closed in. So did the activists. Everybody braced for Moore’s next provocation” (Abraham A1). According to this interpretation, Moore’s own star image has gone beyond even *his* control. “Michael Moore,” the brand name, has taken on a life of its own, and all anyone can do – including the mainstream media – is sit back and watch in wonder:

Low-key doesn't happen for Moore since his film was released a month ago. When he and his wife pulled into a restaurant parking lot in a small town in northern Michigan last week to switch drivers, they were waylaid by patrons, Moore said. The changeover took ten minutes. The pesky nobody of *Roger & Me*, Moore's debut film, which chronicled his attempts to confront General Motors boss Roger Smith about the closing of a factory in the filmmaker's town of Flint, Mich. is gone. These days, he travels with a posse that includes several edgy security guards who talk into their sleeves.

A1

Ultimately, it was Moore's overwhelming popularity that drew the media's attention, not his political arguments or connections to political groups such as moveon.org and the Congressional Black Caucus. Thus, for instance, NBC's coverage of Moore's appearance had a similar feel to that of the Globe's. "No matter where you go around this convention here in Boston," explained Katie Couric on the *Today Show*, "you're likely to bump into *Fahrenheit 9/11* director Michael Moore. He is apparently a big hit here with the Democrats" (NBC News transcripts). True to form, the rest of the piece, reported by correspondent Carl Quintanilla, is geared precisely towards demonstrating what a "big hit" Moore has become. "Michael Moore is not a delegate here in Boston," explains Quintanilla. "He's not a speaker. He's a guest of the Congressional Black Caucus, and Democrats can't seem to get enough of him. Forget the flags, forget the balloons, the one thing you can't avoid at this convention sits under a green Michigan State baseball cap."

In this description, Moore may have trumped the "flags and balloons," but he is also implicitly *equated* with them. Moore is just one more prop in a grand political spectacle geared towards providing emotional catharsis for an audience of rabid fans. Thus, when Quintanilla reports on Moore's critique of the media and the Democratic leaders who stood by while the president went to war, this critique is de-fanged by describing it as all part of Moore's celebrity act and consumerist appeals. Thus, he "analyzes" a clip of Moore shouting to a crowd, "We need you to ask the questions!" by merely stating, "Democrats seem to crave his fiery style." The rest of the piece covers a "packed screening" of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore's appearance on a special edition of the

*O'Reilly Factor*, and Moore's plans to show *Fahrenheit* on the side of a barn in Crawford, TX. As such, Moore's appearance at the DNC becomes nothing *but* appearance, while the story of *Fahrenheit 9/11* becomes just one more chapter in the grand Michael Moore narrative.

### **Conclusion**

Moore's ability to turn himself into a celebrity with real marketing potential has been a true double-edged sword. He has, as Meyer and Gamson put it, managed to shine a bright spotlight upon a variety of progressive issues and causes, but in so doing, the "spotlight" itself became the focal point of public attention. Ultimately, Moore's reflexive narrative strategies, along with his willingness to carry them into the public realm, opened himself up to the "discourse of celebrity" – a discursive logic that dulled the radical edges of his working-class commitments and, ultimately, undermined his credibility as both working-class activist *and* "trustworthy" documentarian. As such, Moore's "spectacle of audacity" upstaged and overwhelmed the political arguments of his films. Framed within such celebrity discourse, Moore became nothing more than another celebrity-huckster, striking a pose to please a market.

As such, the celebrity discourse surrounding Moore worked to solidify the critical consensus that *Fahrenheit* was nothing more than a bit of wildly entertaining "catharsis for the left." As with the critical reception of his films, the public reception of Moore's celebrity persona worked to reinforce the notion that Michael Moore was selling fantasies of advocacy to an audience of liberal fans, hungry for their own "blowhard" to compete with the Hannitys and Limbaughs of the Right. This was, of course, an articulation that the Right, itself, could not ignore. As I will argue in the next chapter, from such a

position it was not a far leap to re-imagine Michael Moore as the living, breathing symbol of the arrogant, self-serving, “liberal elite.”

**CHAPTER 6**  
**THE PARADOXICAL POPULIST:**  
**MICHAEL MOORE ON THE CULTURAL BATTLEFIELD**

*“I guess what he thinks is that he’s on some kind of crusade to speak up for us,  
you know, veterans or soldiers out there doin’ our jobs, and ah,  
I don’t need him to speak up for me. I have my own voice.  
Leave me out of it is all I want, you know?”<sup>141</sup>*

– Peter Damon

**Introduction: A Rhetorical Question**

On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004, Barbara Ehrenreich, acting as a guest columnist for the *New York Times*, devoted an entire editorial to defending Michael Moore against conservative attacks made on *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Her defense, however, was peculiar in that she didn’t mention the film by name. Nor did she make the case for the specifics of Moore’s argument, or even his general point of view. In fact, she didn’t mention the war in Iraq or George W. Bush at all. And she ignored entirely the question of what is and is not a “true documentary,” or the role that objectivity should play in political discourse; questions that had dominated so many discussions of Moore’s work in the past. Instead, Ehrenreich focused entirely on Michael Moore, himself, and his image as a political figure. Entitled, “Dude, Where’s That Elite,” Ehrenreich’s editorial sought to defend Moore against the charge of “liberal elitism.”

“You can call Michael Moore all kinds of things,” began the column:

... loudmouthed, obnoxious and self-promoting, for example. The  
anorexic Ralph Nader, in what must be an all-time low for left-wing  
invective, has even called him fat. The one thing you cannot call him,

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<sup>141</sup> Quoted from *Michael Moore Hates America* (2004).

though, is a member of the “liberal elite.” Sure, he’s made a ton of money from best sellers and award-winning documentaries. But no one can miss the fact the he’s a genuine son of the U.S. working class – a Flint autoworker, in fact ...

“Dude”

The fact that Ehrenreich felt compelled to defend Moore in such a manner speaks to the dramatic way in which Moore’s image had shifted in the decade and a half since *Roger & Me* debuted. His working-class “bonafides” were no longer a given, and his image was no longer *necessarily* tied up with his Flint, MI biography. Moore was now understood to be a wealthy film-auteur and internationally renowned celebrity, his persona connotatively linked to images of red carpets and awards ceremonies rather than closed-down factories and union strikes. And as the Ehrenreich piece indicates, it was an image from which the Right was able to make much political hay.

During the summer of 2004 Moore’s political opponents continuously characterized the filmmaker as a “limousine liberal” (Goldstein 7) and a member of the “entertainment elite” (Medved, “A Town” 15A) – a figure detached from the wants, needs, and values of “average Americans.” Indeed, so powerful was this critique that the Right seemed, for the most part, content to forgo any real engagement with Moore’s film and the powerful arguments it put forth. While there were some conservative critics who engaged directly with Moore’s arguments, for the most part they focused their invective against Moore’s character. *Fahrenheit 9/11* couldn’t be trusted, they argued, because Michael Moore couldn’t be trusted. He was a wealthy elitist in working-class guise, talking down to average Americans, while making a mint by playing to a steady fan-base of liberals who gleefully lapped up the spectacle.



From one perspective, this interpretive strategy stands as a paradox. For, while the Right has attacked Moore as an elitist, Moore has usually described himself as a *populist*. The trademark baseball cap, the irreverent scruffy beard, the exaggerated girth he never tries to hide and the working class background he never fails to emphasize; all speak to Moore's attempt to construct himself as a "man of the people," an "average Joe" speaking truth to power. How is it, then that the Right had become so successful in painting this autoworker's son as the symbol of a shadowy, liberal elite that Barbara Ehrenreich felt compelled to devote an entire column to deflecting the charge?

In order to understand this paradox, we must first understand the way in which "populism," as a political strategy, works. I begin with Ernesto Laclau's insight that populism is not a type of politics, *per se*, but a political "logic" that works rhetorically to construct a version of popular identity with which it invites historical subjects to identify: "A movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual *contents* identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents – whatever those contents are" (33). One of the most crucial mistakes made by Moore is his understanding of populism as being inherently "of" the people, when, in fact, populism refers to the *process* by which any notion of "the people" is constructed. As Francisco Panizza argues: "populism refers to modes of identification rather than to individuals or parties" (8). Thus, simply aligning oneself with the working class, with average Americans, or with "the people" broadly defined, is not enough. For, in reality, these entities do not exist, *a priori*. As Laclau argues, "the people" are nothing more than a heterogeneous and disparate amalgam of competing interests, needs, and desires.

Populist appeals, then, are attempts to constitute a “*unity*” from this heterogeneity (*On Populist* 73).

This is an idea that rhetorical scholars have long understood.<sup>142</sup> For instance, Maurice Charland develops the concept of what he calls “constitutive rhetoric” to argue that successful rhetorical strategies work not through acts of “persuasion,” in the traditional sense, but through acts of *identification* in which political actors construct the very identities to which their persuasive tactics purport to “appeal.” Thus, it is the contest over “the people” themselves – who they are, and how they will be defined – that becomes the strategic center of any political struggle (“Constitutive” 136). For Laclau, populism represents just this kind of constitutive rhetoric. Seen from this perspective, the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11* in 2004 constituted an act of “failed populism;” an effort that paradoxically provided Moore’s political opponents with a convenient symbol against which to construct *their own* populist appeals.

Using *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a case-study, this chapter considers the political consequences of Moore’s particular version of committed documentary. In the previous four chapters I performed a discursive analysis of the “Michael Moore phenomenon.” I analyzed the ideological consequences of Moore’s mode of address, his patronizing depiction of class identity, his public reception as an indie-auteur, and his status as a political celebrity. In this last chapter I would like to consider the *strategic* consequences these discursive acts have wrought. Placing Moore’s work within the historical context of what Chip Berlet calls “Right-wing populism,” I analyze the ways in which Moore’s political opponents framed the filmmaker as a poster-child for the “liberal elite,” thus

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<sup>142</sup> Indeed, the way in which various political rhetorics attempt to *construct* (rather than appeal to) “the people” has been a particular interest for contemporary rhetorical scholars. See McGee; Lucaites.

transforming *Fahrenheit 9/11* from a brilliant critique of the Bush administration into a convenient symbol with which to denounce the entire Democratic Party. And specifically, I describe the ways in which Moore's own rhetorical strategies and articulation within the public sphere *invited* such an interpretation. As such, while I do not engage with the language of rhetorical criticism specifically, this chapter looks at the Michael Moore phenomenon from a broadly rhetorical perspective.

Here it seems important to point out that I consider a rhetorical perspective to be entirely complimentary to the (cultural studies-based) methods of discourse analysis and ideological critique that I have been employing throughout. I follow the work of critical rhetoricians such as Charland and Raymie McKerrow, whose work has brought together the insights of cultural studies and rhetorical analysis. In his seminal essay, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," McKerrow argues that critical rhetoric is primarily a form of ideological critique in which ideologies are "perceived as rhetorical creations" (92). He utilizes the critique of power put forth by Michel Foucault, who argues that power exists within any discursive formation that makes normative claims and sets limits on what is allowable. Thus, like cultural studies, critical rhetoric "serves a demystifying function by demonstrating the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through relationships with power/knowledge" (91). But, as McKerrow is quick to point out, critical rhetoric does not see itself *only* as a mode of critique. It also sees itself as a practical means for creating political strategies. Critical rhetoric not only seeks to "unmask or demystify the discourse of power," it also attempts to discern "what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change" (91).

Charland has made a similar argument. In his essay, “Rehabilitating Rhetoric: Confronting Blindspots in Discourse and Social Theory,” Charland defines rhetoric not just as something structured by and within discourse (although it is that), but also as something which can *act upon* discursive structures. Accordingly, rhetorical analysis begins with an insistence that human beings act in and upon the world (structured, as it is). Critical rhetoric focuses its attention on the fact that, “and this is key, *the artful deployment of language*, through topics, arguments, tropes, figures, has real effects upon language itself, upon meaning, upon what humans do” (“Rehabilitating” 465, my emphasis). Thus, while cultural studies provides rhetorical theory with “an adequate theorization of the place of discourse, the forces that put it in place, the ideological and affective grounds from which it proceeds, and the silences that are imposed,” rhetorical theory can “remind [cultural studies] that practical politics requires ideological work in the form of arguments and narratives that create good and compelling reasons or motives to act” (472).

Seen in this light, specific questions about Moore’s work emerge. As a filmmaker who is fighting for progressive causes and goals, does Moore “create good and compelling reasons” for viewers to agree with his arguments? Does he provide motivations that will work in the current political context? And does he invite identifications to which his purported viewership can relate? These are questions that a rhetorical perspective helps to foreground. And they are also questions that I have tried to answer, in one way or another, throughout my analysis.

As I have shown, the problem with Moore’s films is that they utilize a mode of address that is associated *not* with populist political strategies, but with a specific

tradition of documentary film; a tradition that invites its audience to see themselves as heroic advocates and its subjects as pitiable (even laughable) victims; a tradition that *objectifies* its subjects for an elite audience of knowledgeable viewers who are invited to gaze upon, understand, and thus, symbolically control the people seen on screen.

Furthermore, as I have shown, these problems have been exacerbated by Moore's articulation within the public sphere – as an “indie-auteur” making socially conscious films for educated cineastes; as a political “info-tainter” selling political catharsis to hungry liberals; and as a savvy, Hollywood celebrity riding a faux image of himself as working-class hero all the way to the bank. In this chapter I will argue that these discursive events combined in the summer of 2004 to undermine Moore's political project. In fact, as I will argue, they actively worked to cede populist ground to conservatives, who pounced upon *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a convenient symbol with which to promote their own version of “Right-wing populism.” In order to make this argument, however, it is useful to first define exactly what I mean by “Right-wing populism,” and to describe the way in which this rhetorical strategy has shaped the political context in the U.S. since, at least, the Nixon era.

### **A Not-So-Ancient Antagonism: Theorizing and Historicizing Populism**

In Chapter Four, I argued that Moore's problematic mode of address, combined with a patronizing depiction of class identity, reinforced an “ancient antagonism” pitting educated liberals against an ignorant working class. This division is important, for it is around the concept of “antagonism,” itself, that populism, as a rhetorical strategy, is based. According to Ernesto Laclau, populist discourses split the social frontier into two competing camps – the people and its other, an oppressive “power elite.” The key to

successful populist discourses is the way in which they constitute a unified, popular identity from this central antagonism. In order to explain how this process works, Laclau offers three guiding concepts: discourse, empty signifiers, and rhetoric (*On Populist* 68).

As discussed previously, discourse is the central category of Laclau's theoretical work ("Post-Marxism" 100), and by this he means "any complex of [social] elements in which *relations* play the central role" (*On Populist* 68). For Laclau, any notion of "the people" does not pre-exist the discourses which appeal to it, but is in fact *constituted* by those discursive operations. Populist discourses symbolically divide the social field into two antagonistic camps: one representing "the people," and the other representing some form of power elite. In this formulation, each camp is defined relationally via its opposition to the other. In other words, each camp is defined only by the relationship of antagonism itself.

To explain how this discursive construction works, Laclau imagines any social space as being made up of a variety of political "demands." In a given community, there may be groups demanding better schools, access to housing, lower taxes, etc. Initially, these separate demands will be defined *differentially* against one another. Suppose, however, that a number of these demands are rejected by those in power; in such a case "the demands [will] share a *negative* dimension beyond their positive differential nature" (37). As a result, groups whose demands have gone unsatisfied may begin to re-aggregate themselves based upon this shared experience of rejection. This then, Laclau argues, constitutes an "inverse situation, in which a variety of demands become linked together through a *logic of equivalence*" (37). The equivalential chain formed in such a process becomes the basis for a populist notion of "the people." Thus, in populist discourses, the

very notion of a unified popular identity *depends* upon this antagonistic division of society along the lines of an us vs. them dichotomy.<sup>143</sup>

Of course, since the “equivalential chain” constructed in such a case is held together only by its shared opposition to power, it has no real *positive* content of its own. So how can such a chain be represented? It is here that Laclau introduces the concept of the empty signifier. For Laclau, empty signifiers refer to “those images, words, and so on” through which the unity of an equivalential chain is expressed (*On Populist* 76). More often than not, an empty signifier is produced when a particular demand starts to function as a signifier representing the chain as a whole. But in order to do so, this particular demand must, literally, “empty” itself of its own, individual meaning: “as their function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content” (40).<sup>144</sup> In contemporary Right-wing populism, both “middle America” and the “liberal elite” (as well as their short-hand monikers, “red state” and “blue state”) constitute just this type of empty signifier.

But the point to remember is that the production of empty signifiers is primarily a *discursive* process. For, what does an empty signifier actually represent, if it is “emptied” of its particular contents? Nothing more than its *position within an antagonistic scheme*. This is what Laclau means when he refers to: “any complex of [social] elements in which *relations* play the central role.” When conservatives invoke the empty signifier, “liberal

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<sup>143</sup> Laclau argues that there is a central “tension” at the heart of populist discourses, between an “equivalential logic,” which unites social elements together, and a “differential logic,” which distinguishes between those same social elements. In populist movements, the equivalential moment is “privileged,” but only on the basis of a constitutive difference, in the form of the dividing antagonism (*On Populist* 80).

<sup>144</sup> Laclau argues that the role of “empty signifiers” helps to explain what many theorists have dismissed as the “poverty” of populist symbols. The empty signifier’s inability to express a specific, intentional meaning, is also the key to its ability to represent the “unity” of a wide variety of meanings (“Populism” 40).

elite,” they do not derive the meaning of that term from any *specific* entity (there is no *real* liberal elite), but from a specific antagonistic relationship which pits a variety of “average Americans” against such an entity. Thus, it is *the construction of the social frontier itself*, based upon this antagonistic relationship (specifically defined), that constitutes the meaning of a term such as the “liberal elite.” And, as such, “we should expect that *antagonistic political strategies would be based on different ways of creating political frontiers*” (original emphasis 41).

The importance of constructing social frontiers brings to the fore Laclau’s third concept in understanding populism: the role of rhetoric. For, what the previous discussion implies is that the construction of populist symbols is not ontological, but “performative” in nature. As Laclau puts it, “we are not dealing with a conceptual operation of *finding* an abstract common feature underlying all social grievances, but with a performative operation constituting the chain as such” (original emphasis, *On Populist* 97).

That populism is primarily performative in nature is essentially what historian Michael Kazin argues when he defines populism as “a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric” (5). Although his study of American populist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not employ Laclau’s theoretical rigor, his description of the ways in which populist movements have constructed popular identities stands as a pertinent illustration of Laclau’s abstract theory. Indeed, Laclau singles out Kazin’s work, specifically referencing Kazin’s detailed description of the shift in American politics from a progressive Populism, symbolized by unionism and the New Deal, to a Right-wing populism, given birth during the anti-Communism of the 1950s and coming into full-bloom with Reagan’s popularity in the 1980s. What both Laclau and Kazin are at pains to



make clear is that, while the “content” of these two versions of populism shifted, the *form* remained the same: each populist movement sought to define American society in terms of a central antagonism pitting a power elite against “average Americans.” The key to the shift lay in how that antagonism was articulated.

As Kazin points out, there was a close resemblance between the rhetoric of progressive populists and their Right-wing successors, in that, “both appealed to the will and interests of a self-reliant, productive majority whose spiritual beliefs, patriotic ideals, and communities were judged to be under attack at the hand of a modernizing elite” (quoted in Laclau, *Populist Reason* 134). While progressives sought to describe this antagonism on economic grounds, symbolized by “producers” (working Americans) on the one hand and “parasites” (business owners, speculators, banking interests, etc.) on the other, Right-wing populists sought to re-articulate this antagonism on *cultural* grounds. For instance, the anti-Communist movement of the 1950s re-defined the battle as one between elite communist-sympathizers and average hard-working Americans. Cultural warriors like George Wallace performed a similar feat in the following decades, employing the rhetoric of the “aroused community” to delegitimize the power of the liberal Welfare state. This strategy was perfected in the 1980s by the Reagan Administration, who invoked a political battle between average Americans and the “special interests,” implicitly understood to be “a group of liberal insiders who wielded their great power to thwart public will” (262). In each case, the communities these populists spoke for, “were filled with pious, self-reliant individuals who gathered to safeguard ‘traditional values’ ... [from] the state – its courts, its schools, its bureaucrats, and its untrustworthy politicians – [which were] trying to dictate how ‘the ordinary man’

taught his children and conducted his business” (257). Thus, in Right-Wing populism, both the “aroused community” and the “liberal elite” stand as empty signifiers par excellence: defined not by their “contents,” per se, but by their position within a particular antagonistic relationship pitting average Americans against an elite faction of “special interests” who felt they “knew better” and, hence, sought to tell the rest of society how to live .<sup>145</sup>

In contemporary times, Right-wing populism has continued to thrive. Led by the Christian Coalition, Right-wing populism enjoyed renewed success during the 1990s thanks to one of the most powerful rhetorical strategies developed in contemporary times: what is popularly referred to as the “culture war(s).” As Chip Berlet and Mathew N. Lyons argue:

The Culture War is a rubric, or umbrella, under which several sectors of the U.S. political Right could criticize modern liberalism. While primarily a rhetorical invention of the Christian Right, the Culture War resonated across multiple boundaries, picking up support from secular conservatives, neoconservatives, and libertarians.

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The “culture war” strategy was born within the context of the end of the Cold War, a historical moment which saw the Right lose its great bogeyman of the past forty years, the great “Red Menace.” By shifting from a focus on anti-communism to a focus on “traditional values,” the Right replaced communism with another vague-but-all-encompassing threat: what Berlet and Lyons call “secular humanism” (228).

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<sup>145</sup> Indeed, as Kazin points out, while it was clear who Reagan’s special interests were (some amalgam of “privileged” minorities such as feminists, homosexuals, advocates of affirmative action, and unionized labor) Reagan “seldom attacked any of the groups by name. Imprecision was vital to describing the putative elite ...” (262).

The rubric, “traditional values,” was a purposefully broad category, encompassing any number of core conservative principals, such as western European culture, private property, minimum regulation of business, and “beliefs in individualism, hard work, self-sufficiency, and social mobility” (230-1). More often than not, however, the culture wars were played out publicly in the arena of identity politics, as issues of abortion, gay rights and affirmative action became the hot-button issues of the day. Despite this shift towards such “cultural” matters, the narrative was entirely familiar: “The Christian Right presented its so-called pro-family crusade ... as a defense against liberal and morally corrupt elites out of touch with mainstream America” (Berlet and Lyons 231). Whether vilifying feminists, renouncing gay lifestyles, or decrying the excesses of the Welfare State, conservatives of all stripes deployed a “populist narrative of average people against cosmopolitan elites” (231).

For instance, while conservatives often framed the abortion debate in terms of the “rights of the unborn,” they frequently inculcated a popular belief that feminism was elitist: “In this view the source of women’s oppression is not men, but other women, specifically other women who are inferior morally, but who have influence and power to impose their own twisted, secular priorities” (Berlet and Lyons 232). Similarly, while gay lifestyles were often delegitimized by describing them as sinful and unnatural, the Right “often portrayed gay men, like feminists, as a wealthy, privileged elite misusing their power to impose their immoral agenda on society” (236). And despite the Right’s purportedly “pro-family agenda,” their commitment to working families dissipated where racial boundaries were concerned. They transformed government assistance programs for poor people – especially minority women and children – into a “plot” by the secular,

liberal elite to “encourage women, especially teenage women, to have children out of wedlock and raise families on their own” (238). In this frame, programs like Welfare became a concerted attempt by these elites to redirect the hard-earned tax dollars of average Americans towards “lazy, sinful parasites ... pictured by many as people of color” (239). Thus, even in the wake of the Cold War’s collapse, the Right was able to keep a broad coalition of social groups together by rhetorically constructing a social frontier based upon a central antagonism pitting a liberal elite against “traditional,” hard-working, self-sufficient Americans.

At this juncture, however, it is crucial to acknowledge the fact that – deceptive as it was – this Right-wing populist strategy was not made entirely out of whole-cloth. While it did, of course, redirect attention away from many of the real, structural problems facing Americans from all walks of life by scapegoating various groups (often times those most oppressed by these structural constraints), this populist strategy *did* take advantage of what were – and still are in many cases – very *real* attitudes of resentment and bitterness, especially within the white working and lower-middle classes. As many scholars have pointed out, these attitudes were often invoked as a reaction to social policies enacted by the Left. Democratic legislation such as school busing and special deferments from Vietnam for college students created a situation in which supporting liberal causes such as civil rights and the anti-war movement was understood to be a “privilege” enjoyed by white, middle-upper class, educated liberals, while the working classes were forced to take the brunt of these social initiatives in the form of neighborhood unrest and mandatory military service via the draft (Cowie; Mills). Thus, as Nicolaus Mills argues: “it would be a mistake to think that the elitism charge has stuck

simply because the Democrats have been victimized by their conservative opponents and a changing society” (42). “Since the 1960s,” he argues:

Democratic liberals have also put themselves in a position to be seen as elitists. On the great wedge issues of the last 40 years -- Vietnam, school busing, law and order -- Democratic liberals, acting on the basis of deeply held convictions, have backed policies for which the highest costs have not been born by an educated middle class living in suburbs and safe city neighborhoods but by poor and working-class families, who have had to take whatever came their way.

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As Mills argues, however, it is not *only* in the arena of political legislation that the Left has set itself up for attack. More often than not, it has been their own rhetorical strategies that have invited Right-wing populist attacks. Mills notes a passage from the memoirs of the late progressive Senator Paul Wellstone, in which he laments his decision to hold a press conference on his opposition to the Gulf War at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC because it “deeply hurt many Veterans” (42). As Mills argues, Wellstone’s self-criticism is important because it implies an understanding of the ways in which patronizing forms of political representation can undermine the political commitments of the Left:

Wellstone understood that for Democratic liberals like himself to act in a way that showed indifference to others (in this case, an indifference that allowed him to use a war memorial as a media prop and ignore the sacrifice it symbolized) was serious. It left them vulnerable to the accusation that they were elitists who stood for an ideologically driven politics in which the feelings and values of ordinary people were unimportant.

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This point is made by Laurie Ouellette in her analysis of the discourse of Public Television during the 1960s and 70s. During that time, she argues, the Nixon Administration utilized an “authoritarian-populist discourse”<sup>146</sup> to align middle and working-class Americans with conservative “reformers” against what they defined as an arrogant power bloc of Eastern, liberal elites running Public Television (177).<sup>147</sup> According to Ouellette, not only was PBS inept at quelling such a rhetorical strategy, but its producers and managers *invited* such an attack by deploying in its programs – and in their public discourse describing and defending the network – “a stereotypical image of conservative Middle America [that reiterated] the very same ‘us vs. them’ opposition circulated by conservatives” (199). As discussed in Chapter One, Ouellette argues that PBS utilized an “educational mode of address” to describe itself and its mission, a mode of address symbolized most potently by its description of popular television as a “vast wasteland” bent on selling crass, commercialist fare to an audience content to wallow in cultural mediocrity. Such a strategy had the effect of “group[ing] conservative businessmen, suburbanites, and blue collars under the same disparaged sign of Middle America,” while implying a middle-upper class, liberal audience who knew better, and expected more (symbolized by the network’s famous tagline: “Viewers Like You”). As such, PBS’s own self-description reinforced the cultural divide that Nixon’s critique relied upon.

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<sup>146</sup> Ouellette borrows this concept from Stuart Hall’s work on “Thatcherism” in 1980s Britain, but her description of Nixon’s strategy is entirely consistent with my description of Right-wing populism here. Indeed, Ouellette also cites Kazin’s work in her analysis (177). For more on authoritarian-populism, see Hall, Stuart. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London: Verso, 1988. pp. 138-146.

<sup>147</sup> This was the discourse of Nixon’s “silent majority,” but it is a strategy that should sound familiar. It is similar to the populist rhetoric Newt Gingrich deployed when selling the Contract for America in the mid 90s, and it is similar to the culture wars discourse invoked during the 2004 election that sought to divide the nation into states of Red and Blue.

Ouellette's analysis here is illustrative when viewed through the lens of Laclau's theoretical formulation. If the Nixon administration had succeeded in constructing a social frontier based upon an antagonism pitting a liberal elite against "Middle America," then the construction of a successful counter-discourse would need to rearticulate that frontier by changing the nature of this antagonism. In such a formulation, "liberals" would be aligned *with* "Middle America" (defined in much broader terms than working-class and white) through a common opposition to a different kind of elite.<sup>148</sup> The problem with PBS is that their educational mode of address had the opposite effect, defining Middle America, not as *allies*, but as "the problem," a problem that only an imagined audience of concerned, educated liberals could solve. Thus, far from rearticulating a new social frontier that formed an equivalential chain *between* liberals and "the people," PBS succeeded in reinforcing the existing frontier, constructed by Right-wing populists and based upon a constitutive distinction between liberals and the "rest of us."

In the summer of 2004, Michael Moore ran into a similar problem. Even after the Christian Coalition's power began to wane in the wake of the Clinton Administration, Right-wing populism continued to pay dividends into the new century, and arose with a vengeance in the post-9/11 world. As Jefferson Cowie argues, in contemporary times Right-wing populism has become so entrenched in American public life that the term "liberal" has been rendered politically unviable due to its implicit connotation with elitism:

In today's media, you would be hard-pressed to find a "working-class liberal." Invoking the word "liberal" is more likely to fill the political

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<sup>148</sup> Such as when New Dealers united urban unionists, rural farmers, ethnic immigrants, and African Americans through a common opposition to a "parasitic" business class in the 1930s (Kazin 135-163).

imagination with Swedish cars, unpronounceable coffee drinks, and fine wine ... the term liberal in contemporary political discourse is currently reserved for everything the working class is not.

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Cowie's pronouncement here is especially pertinent to Moore, who has long been one of America's most visible "working class liberals." The context within which Moore was forced to operate made it easy for the Right to reject his working-class attributes and paint him, instead, as a member of the liberal elite. Indeed, it was this same cultural context that allowed the Republican Party to transform George W. Bush, a member of one of the country's most patrician (and powerful) families, into a humble "man of the people."

However, as with the example of PBS, Moore's articulation as an elitist was not entirely foisted upon him. It was an articulation for which he, himself, laid the groundwork, and that was solidified in the public discussions that surrounded him. As I have argued in this dissertation, Moore's authoritative mode of address and patronizing depiction of working class subjects have often constructed a divide – rather than a connection – between the working class and his audience. And his image as an indie-auteur, liberal info-tainer and wealthy celebrity with a penchant for savvy media manipulation only strengthened that separation. It was this very divide that Moore's conservative opponents seized upon in 2004 to delegitimize *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s political arguments, and to vilify Moore. Through a close analysis of conservative publications, internet websites, counter-documentaries and web-blogs produced during and shortly after *Fahrenheit*'s theatrical run, I will describe the way in which the Right transformed this divide into the central antagonism of Right-wing populist discourse. As such, I offer



*Fahrenheit 9/11* as a case-study in the problems the tradition of committed documentary – at least, in its progressive form – still has to face in its attempt to be a positive force for social change.

**“Michael Moore Hates America:” (Re)-Articulating a Working-Class Hero**

It is no secret that in the summer of 2004, *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Michael Moore were hot topics of public discussion. But what is often left out of this story is the fact that Moore was of keen – indeed, overwhelming – interest to commentators specifically aligned with the political *Right*. While liberal commentators, activists, and blue state residents may have flocked in large numbers to *see* Moore’s political documentary, it was in the pages of conservative periodicals, on screen in conservative documentaries, and on websites and political blogs that Moore became the center of political discussion. The summer of 2004 saw the creation of a virtual cottage-industry geared towards debunking and debasing Michael Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Anti-Moore books such as *Michael Moore Is a Big Fat Stupid White Man*, films such as *Michael Moore Hates America* and *Fahrenhype 9/11*, and websites such as *Moorewatch.com* and *Moorelies.com* surfaced to denigrate the filmmaker.

What is perhaps *most* interesting about this anti-Moore invective was its virtual ubiquity throughout the 2004 presidential campaign. Rather than critique Moore’s film quickly and move on, dismiss it out-of-hand, or ignore it entirely (as GM tried to do in 1989 with *Roger & Me*), the conservative press – and especially the conservative blogosphere – seemed not only content but *excited* to pile on relentlessly. Moore was not a liberal enemy to be feared, but a symbol around which the Right could rally. His image

was invoked in political speeches bent on energizing the conservative base<sup>149</sup> and attached to malicious attacks on the Democrats.<sup>150</sup> In fact, in their study of the political blogosphere during the 2004 election, Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance found that (excluding Bush and Kerry) Michael Moore was the fifth most-cited political figure on the 40 most popular political weblogs, behind only Dick Cheney, Dan Rather, John Edwards and Bill Clinton (12-13). Most importantly, Adamic and Glance found that those blogs mentioning Moore by name were overwhelmingly conservative (roughly less than one fifth of all Moore-mentions were from liberal bloggers).<sup>151</sup> Thus, it is no exaggeration to say the Moore became an important, if not central, facet in the Right's rhetorical strategy during the 2004 election.

The specific role Moore played in the Right's rhetorical strategy becomes clear when looking at what the Right had to say about Moore during this time span. To be sure, conservatives were not remiss in exploiting the concerns, usually emanating from the popular press, about Moore's lack of adherence to journalistic standards of documentary practice. As Robert Brent Toplin has described in his analysis of *Fahrenheit's* public reception, the Right was quite adept at deploying a "nit-picking" strategy against Moore, mentioning every factual inconsistency or instance of duplicitous "manipulation" they could find to paint Moore as a deceitful propagandist. Thus, the claims of misrepresentation voiced by representative Mark Foley, for instance (already discussed), were oft-cited in conservative hit-pieces. By this time in his career, however, Moore was

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<sup>149</sup> John McCain's speech at the RNC, for example.

<sup>150</sup> Perhaps most infamously, Moore's face adorned a billboard in LA "thanking" prominent Hollywood Democrats for Kerry's defeat in 2004 ("Oscar" 90).

<sup>151</sup> Only Dan Rather, ensconced in the midst of the Bush/National Guard story scandal, received a greater proportion of conservative invective during this time period (Adamic and Glance 13).

ready for such attacks, heading many of them off at the pass through his self-described “war-room” of lawyers who had fact-checked every statement made in the film.

What is more important than this nitpicking strategy is the way in which such arguments were framed: namely, within a larger critique that focused on Moore’s *character*. In the hands of conservative journalists, bloggers, filmmakers and activists, Moore became a convenient symbol of the “Liberal Elite.” In the following section, I will describe the manner in which the Right performed this feat by exploiting many of the problematic aspects of Moore’s rhetorical strategies and reception within the popular press, as they have been described throughout this dissertation. Specifically, I will focus on three main rhetorical strategies employed by the Right to undermine Moore’s working-class image: 1) anti-elitism (in which Moore is described as patronizing towards, and callously dismissive of, “average Americans”); 2) conspiricism (in which Moore is attached to a broader elite-conspiracy perpetrated by what is popularly referred to as the “Liberal Media” or the “Hollywood Liberal Elite” ); and, 3) demonization (in which critiques of Moore’s arguments become conflated with disparaging assessments of his personality and motivations).<sup>152</sup>

### **Stupid White Men: Anti-Elitism and Michael Moore**

In many ways, the blue print for the conservative re-framing of Moore was set by conservative writers and activists, David T. Hardy and Jason Clarke, in their book, *Michael Moore Is a Big Fat Stupid White Man*, which made the *New York Times* bestseller list for several weeks in August of 2004.<sup>153</sup> Not only did the book make the

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<sup>152</sup> I draw my definition and understanding of these three Right-Wing populist strategies from Berlet and Lyons (2000).

<sup>153</sup> Hardy is a former U.S. attorney who made his name with a 2001 book examining what he argues was the U.S. Government’s mishandling of the of the 1993 Waco raid. Clarke is the founder of Moorelies.com,

bestseller list, but it was continuously referenced and quoted throughout the summer on most conservative weblogs. In essence, *Stupid White Man* is nothing more than a catalogue of all the arguments leveled at Moore by various critics over the years. In chapters meant to define Moore's films as manipulative propaganda, Hardy and Clarke detail the criticisms leveled at *Roger & Me*, offer their similarly "scathing" analysis of *Bowling for Columbine*,<sup>154</sup> and reproduce a number of popular press articles that have criticized Moore. All of this recycled material, however, serves as the excuse for a much broader – and nastier – assault on Moore's personality and character.

The first chapter of Hardy and Clark's book, entitled "An Open Letter to Michael Moore," sets the tone for all that follows, framing their circumstantial criticisms within a larger depiction of Moore as an arrogant, self-aggrandizing elitist. Their opening lines exemplify this strategy:

Dear Mike: here we are again, a year or so later. What, you don't remember us? We understand how we might have slipped your mind – what with your hectic schedule composing wildly arrogant letters to presidents and other people who actually do things for a living. Or touring Europe to preach resentment of the United States (before jetting back to enjoy the good life here). And, of course, there's the significant time you must spend laughing all the way to the bank. But we're your "wacko attackos," as you've so affectionately dubbed us. We're among the many who've been keeping an eye on you – and piping up – over the years.

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Here, Hardy and Clarke deploy what Berlet and Lyons call the rhetoric of "producerism" to paint Moore as an elitist. According to Berlet and Lyons, producerism constructs a

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one of the first major anti-Moore weblogs which he started in 2003, in direct response to Moore's Oscar speech.

<sup>154</sup> Exposing such revelations as the fact that Moore "edited" Charlton Heston's speech at the NRA convention in Littleton, CO, and that he partially staged the last scene in the film in which he leaves a picture of the slain Flint girl at Heston's house (78-80).

populist notion of “the people” by placing them in opposition to a wealthy and “unproductive” elite. Producerism, Berlet argues, has been “the most common populist narrative on the Right” since, at least, the time of Andrew Jackson. Here it is deployed against Moore, as Hardy and Clarke describe the act of political critique as a privilege for the elite classes – something a wealthy filmmaker can do while the rest of us must “do things for a living.” This narrative is bolstered by the way in which the authors define *themselves*: not as Moore’s lone adversaries, but instead as “among the many.” As Hardy and Clarke explain later in the chapter, Moore’s “wacko attackos” represent none other than the “regular folks who were sick and tired of standing by while your legend grew unchecked” (7). Indeed, they describe their book and respective websites as an attempt to give voice to what they describe as a populist uprising against Moore, sparked by his anti-war Oscar speech: “Outside the Kodak Theater, across the rest of the country, the thundering dismissal of your screed was amplified many times over in offices, at family dinner tables, and around bars” (6-7).

Importantly, what undergirds this producerist narrative is the very manner in which Moore espouses a sense of dismissiveness towards his critics:

You weren’t about to take a hint. Instead, your reaction was to dismiss us all – and with malice. You labeled an entire movement looking critically at your work as “wacko attackos,” and rather than address our charges, you dismissed us out of hand as “henchmen” of the president or tools of the right wing.

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Here, Hardy and Clark substantiate their producerist narrative by emphasizing Moore’s tendency to belittle his accusers as brainwashed tools of the right. It’s Moore’s attitude

that galls them the most – an attitude which implies that any view of the world, apart from Moore’s and those who agree with him – can only be hopelessly naive. The worst part about Michael Moore’s films, they argue, is not just that they are “wrong,” but that Moore thinks he’s so *right*.

This strategy, set forth in many ways by Hardy and Clarke, was reproduced endlessly – and often times quite deftly – by and within the conservative blogosphere throughout *Fahrenheit*’s theatrical run. Perhaps no website was more adept at depicting Moore as a patronizing elitist than moorewatch.com. The site, run by Jim Keneflick,<sup>155</sup> is – in its own words – dedicated to “watching Michael Moore’s every move.” Specifically, this means making vicious, personal attacks on Moore’s character and motivations, usually in a frame that invokes the familiar strategies of Right-wing populism. In the pages of moorewatch.com, Moore is portrayed as just another “well-heeled western liberal” (Lee “Dude”) who “pretends, with his beat-up cap and shabby clothes, that he can identify with you and me” (JimK “A Point”). Importantly, this interpretation is predicated upon the idea that Moore espouses a blatantly patronizing attitude, one in which Moore demeans the very intelligence of the people he claims to represent.

Take, for instance, the flyer, developed by moorewatch.com’s production team for readers to print out and distribute at screenings of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. “Does Michael Moore Think You’re Stupid?” the flyer asks in large, bold lettering (“Michael Moore Is”)? The answer, of course, is yes. The flyer reprints statements, taken out of context, from various interviews Moore has given overseas, statements such as: “Should such an ignorant

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<sup>155</sup> Readers may note that Keneflick is, in fact, the man to whom Moore’ donated \$12,000 to pay for his wife’s medical bills (she was uninsured at the time) – only to reveal this fact in his film, *Sicko* (2007). Despite publicly thanking Moore for his generosity, Keneflick continues to operate moorewatch.com to this day.

people [Americans] lead the world?” and “They are possibly the dumbest people on the planet.” The list ends with this summation: “Are these the opinions of a man who respects you enough to tell you the unvarnished truth?” Here, we see the manner in which Moore’s conservative attackers latch onto the shaming discourse Moore often employs in his depiction of working class people. While on the surface this flyer seems to be an indictment of Moore’s film, it actually turns out to be an indictment of his character, revealing Moore’s condescending attitude towards “regular folk.” As the flyer, itself, explains: “If you are interested in learning more about the man behind the message, his deceptive tactics, *and what he really thinks about Americans like you*, read on” (my emphasis).

*Moorewatch.com* is filled with such rhetoric. For instance, the site frequently links to reviewers and commentators from the popular press who take a similar tack when critiquing Moore; commentators such as Mark Steyn of *The Telegraph*, who claimed that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a film made for “the sophisticated, cynical intellectual class,” primarily geared towards making them feel “snobbishly superior” (“The Importance”); and Jon Haber, who likened *Fahrenheit 9/11* to racy “exploitation flicks” made for “New York sophisticates.” In this way, *moorewatch.com* adopts a patently populist strategy that goes beyond merely debunking Moore as a shifty propagandist. Instead, it focuses on revealing him to be an elitist snob who makes movies ridiculing the “common folk” for an audience of “upper-class hippie millionaires” (JimK “Steal”).

At the same time, while highlighting the elitist aspects of Moore’s image, *Moorewatch.com* portrays *itself* as the voice of average, working Americans. “Moore doesn’t know shit about my life!” declares Keneflick in one representative diatribe.

He can't. He's never been close to where I've been. His parents might have a clue about where I am *now*, but Mike doesn't. ... His "man of the people, I'm fighting for you" schtick is as transparent as glass to anyone who has lived the everyman life.

JimK "A Point"

By describing himself as an "everyman," Keneflick turns Moore's patronizing attitude against him, arguing that *Moore* is the one who "doesn't get it." His "man of the people, I'm fighting for you schtick" is, in Keneflick's words, "hollow and false, and us everymen know it." Thus, by constructing this narrative of elitism and oppression, websites like *Moorewatch.com*, and books such as *Stupid White Man*, call forth the social frontier of Right-wing populism, a world based upon a central antagonism pitting liberal elitists against "the people" themselves, who aren't given much say in the matter.

What makes this argument so powerful, however, is that it is, on a certain level, *true*. What these Right-wing populists were doing in 2004 was cannily exploiting the very class antagonisms so often reinforced by Moore's own films. Take, for instance, the way in which *Moorewatch.com* attacks *Fahrenheit*'s depiction of U.S. soldiers. In August of 2004, Keneflick began using the site to solicit letters from U.S. troops, which he intended to compile into a book. The letters, he claimed, would be: "Unedited, untouched accept for the assemblage, a book of letters from soldiers that support the President and do not trust Mr. Moore."<sup>156</sup> The specific aim of the project was to contest what Keneflick describes as an insulting act of hubris on Moore's part: namely, Moore's *presumption* that he can speak on behalf of the U.S. Military. As he puts it: "Michael Moore, who in my personal opinion borders on traitorous with some of the things he has said about the

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<sup>156</sup> The book never came to fruition, but Keneflick's descriptions of the project serve as a perfect example of the website's populist strategy.



military in the past, has no right to be the voice of the US. Military, nor their representative to the rest of America.” Hence, the title of the book: “They Can Speak For Themselves.” As Kenflick describes it:

This site, and the book, is called "They Can Speak For Themselves." No one who wears the uniform needs me to speak for them. I will offer letters without editing for length or content. I will not change a single word. Depending on how it is published I may not even spell-check them or fix typos.

In many ways, the title of Keneflick’s book proposal could serve as the rallying-cry for all those who sought to discredit Moore and his film. More often than not, Right-wing populists described Moore as someone who not only talks *down*, but *over and around* the “average Americans” he claims to represent. He’s not only patronizing you, they claimed, but he’s putting words in your mouth and speaking in your stead. In this frame, *Fahrenheit 9/11* becomes a snide conversation among liberal elites that has been going on behind the backs of “average Americans.”

This is a powerful argument for it exploits the very weaknesses of Moore’s own rhetorical strategies. As I have argued, the traditional documentary is based upon a relationship of authority in which the documentarian is vested with the ability and inclination to tell “us” about “them.” As such, both documentarian *and* audience are connected by an expository/observational mode of address that places us above and outside the subjects we see on screen, positioning the audience in a way that invites us to observe, judge, and, in many cases, to *classify*. Thus, when deployed by filmmakers on the Left to analyze issues such as class relations, this mode of address becomes mapped

onto broader discourses of class in such a way as to reinforce the very antagonism that has differentiated the working class from the professional middle class for decades.

What I have called Moore's "fantasy of advocacy" is nothing more than a mediated version of this "classifying" discourse. By defining the working class as a social "problem" in need of fixing, Moore's documentaries become one more version of the "helping professions" described by Barbara Ehrenreich: claiming to speak on behalf of the working class, while simultaneously working to shore up the cultural authority of an audience that is invited to judge, sympathize, and classify the behavior of those they see on screen.

This mode of classifying discourse clearly becomes a concern where populist rhetoric is concerned. As Laclau has argued, the key to populist movements is the construction of a chain of equivalence that succeeds in uniting diverse political subjects together under the banner of some popular identity. In contrast, Moore's classed mode of address performs a function that is *precisely the opposite*. The social frontier called into being by Moore's fantasy of advocacy is one that symbolically *separates* "the people" from the political advocates it is trying to address. In this way, Moore creates not his own version of populist discourse, but a *mirror image* of that produced by Right-wing populists. By constructing an audience of privileged viewers, of whose help "the people" are in need, Moore's films actually work to reinforce the very concept of a patronizing, liberal elite upon which Right-wing populism is based. Thus, his films run risk of inviting their own critique upon this very basis.

To demonstrate that, in the summer of 2004, *Fahrenheit 9/11* continued this patronizing tendency, it makes sense to briefly revisit the film.

### **Fahrenheit 9/11 as a Fantasy of Advocacy**

While the first half of *Fahrenheit 9/11* offers a stringent critique of the Bush Administration's case for war, the powerful second half of the film marks an important shift in the film's focus. Having made the argument that the Bush administration's war-rationale was nothing more than an elaborate smokescreen meant to fool the American public, the second half of Moore's film seeks to explain how his administration accomplished this feat. It does so by turning an "observational gaze" upon the very people who unwittingly aided the Bush administration's cause: the people who voted for him, the soldiers that went off to fight his war, and the working-class segments of the population which make up much of the U.S. army. Importantly, Moore portrays these subjects in the same way that he has represented all working-class subjects throughout his career: as hapless victims of their own false consciousness. The subjects we meet in the second half of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, from the townsfolk of Tappahannock County, VA, to military-mom Lila Lipscomb, are represented as gullible dupes victimized by their own naïveté. In so doing, *Fahrenheit 9/11* shifts gears, from a piece of investigative journalism focusing on policy decisions and deceptions, to a traditional social-victim exposé.

Moore begins the second half of the film with a humorous visit to Tappahannock, VA, where we are told that Homeland Security Officials earmarked the town as a possible terrorist target, mixing it up with nearby Rappahannock County. The scene features a series of typical Moore-style interview-montages, in which the statements of various towns people are edited together in thematic fashion: residents repeat the words "Tappahannock" and "Rappahannock" ad nauseum; they single out Wal-Mart and the

local spaghetti dinner as possible terrorist targets; and they espouse feelings of distrust towards “outsiders.” Moore edits these statements together, in rapid-fire succession, clearly playing them for laughs at the residents’ expense.

The goal here is not to deride government officials for making a silly mistake, but to invite us to marvel at the fact that many of the townspeople were dumb enough to believe that Tappahannock could really be a terrorist target. But there is a serious message behind the humor. Moore frames the entire sequence with the testimony of an “expert witness,” Rep. Jim McDermott, who says: “You can make people do anything if they’re afraid,” and explains how the administration played the American people “like an organ.” Thus, more than simply having fun at the expense of “regular people,” Moore uses this sequence to set up a broader theme of naiveté, which he then develops throughout the rest of the film.

Importantly, “the people” McDermott references above include not only those frightened into submission by the Bush Administration, but those sent off to fight his war. In the next sequence, Moore shifts from the home front to the front lines. While the tone becomes more serious, the argument remains the same. In the opening sequence, soldiers explain how they get themselves motivated for battle. One man describes war as “the ultimate rush,” while another explains how they play rock music inside the tanks to set the mood for battle. The soldier then recites the lyrics to one of these songs: “The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire! We don’t need no water let the mother fucker burn!” To drive the point home, the referenced comes up onto the soundtrack, laid over the soldier’s voice, while Moore cuts to a montage of brutal war imagery. The effect is a chilling kind

of irony in which a testosterone-driven “party” song is juxtaposed with images of American soldiers killing Iraqis.

From this sequence, Moore segues into a second montage of interviewed soldiers (accompanied by images of dead bodies and gruesome injuries) explaining how the war turned out to be more “real” than they’d ever expected. One soldier explains: “This is a lot more real and true than a video game. A lot of people thought it was gonna be, ‘Oh yeah – look through the sight and shoot.’ No. A lot of this is face-to-face,” while another laments:

We called in with some artillery and some napalm and things like that. Some innocent women and children got hit. We met them on the road and they had little girls with noses blown off. And like husbands carrying their dead wives and things like that. That was extremely difficult to deal with. Because you’re like, you know, ‘Shoot. What the hell do we do now?’

By juxtaposing these two montages in linear fashion – one in which soldiers describe a battle “rush,” and the next detailing their dismay at the carnage it has caused, Moore emphasizes the theme of naïveté.

This theme is driven home by a direct cut from the image of an Iraqi woman decrying American military destruction, to TV footage of Britney Spears telling a reporter: “I think we should just trust our president in every decision that he makes, and that we should just support that.” Moore’s use of Spears – whose image is generally understood to connote a kind of cultural callowness – ties this sequence about the troops directly to the earlier sequence depicting the befuddled residents of Tappahannock, VA. Britney’s obvious signification as “dumb blonde” combines with her emphatic plea for blind trust in a president that Moore has already discredited to remind the viewer, in

mocking fashion, of the dupes who thought bin Laden might bomb the Tappahannock Spaghetti Dinner. In this way, Moore equates the American soldiers in this sequence with the “average Americans” we met in the last; they are all gullible victims of a powerful, manipulative force.

Just as important as the way in which Moore portrays his subjects as dupes is the way in which his mode of address constructs a *distance* between the subjects we see on screen and the audience to which Moore’s film is addressed. As I have argued in previous chapters, by turning his subjects into objectified dupes who are quite unable to interpret their own situations for themselves, Moore creates a “fishbowl effect” in which his audience is invited to look down upon and judge the behavior of those we see on screen. This effect becomes strikingly apparent during what might be considered the film’s most sensational scene, in which Moore couples found footage of a group of American soldiers mocking and torturing Iraqi captives with a patronizing voice-over: “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.” Here, Moore’s use of found footage creates an observational gaze, inviting his audience to look down upon a group of subjects without their knowledge – while his expositional voice-over single-handedly defines this footage, endowing it with a specific interpretation.

Thus, in the very act of *explaining* the behavior of “average Americans,” such as the people of Tappahannock or the soldiers in Iraq, Moore’s film implies an audience who exists *outside* this domain. Nowhere is this distancing-strategy more apparent than during the final moments of the film, in which Moore provides us with a summation of *Fahrenheit*’s “lesson.” Here, he addresses the viewer directly: “Of course, not a single

member of Congress wanted to sacrifice their child for the war in Iraq. And who could blame them? Who would want to give up their child? Would you?” Moore’s emphatic “would you” is clearly addressed to someone who *wouldn’t* – or, in other words, who doesn’t need to. He continues:

I’ve always been amazed that the very people forced to live in the worst parts of town, go to the worst schools, and who have it the hardest, are always the first to step up to defend that very system. They serve so that we don’t have to. They offer to give up their lives so that we can be free. It is remarkable, their gift to us. ...

Here, Moore’s mode of address becomes explicit. The soldiers, the poor, everyday Americans – these are not “one of us,” and nor is Moore “one of them.” They are those who serve so that *we* don’t have to; those who provide *us* with a precious gift. In this way, Moore’s mode of address works, unwittingly, to re-inscribe the equivalential chain constructed by Right-wing, populist discourse. The working-class folks and military families that we meet in the second half of the film are equated according to their shared status as victimized dupes, a status that Moore and his audience clearly do not share.

From here, Moore flatters the cultural authority of his audience by constructing a narrative of “enlightened activism.” As discussed in Chapter Four, Moore portrays Lila Lipscomb’s transformation from self-described “conservative Democrat” to war-protestor as a process of enlightenment. The climax of Lipscomb’s emotional journey – and the last time we see her on-screen – is when she exclaims, standing in front of the White House: “People think they know, but you don’t know. I thought I knew, but I didn’t know!” The statement puts an emotional exclamation point on the entire argument of Moore’s film. Lipscomb once was blind, he seems to be saying, but now she sees, thanks

to his (and by proxy, “our,”) intervention. The implication here is the same one that has undergirded Moore’s work since *Roger & Me*: that the working class is not only oppressed, but they seem to be pathologically incapable of recognizing this fact on their own. In this way, *Fahrenheit 9/11* constructs itself along the same axis of cultural knowledge and authority that I have argued documentary, as a form, and Left class discourse, as a rhetorical strategy, have long employed: there are those who “get it,” and those who don’t. In this formulation, it becomes the mission of liberals, like Moore and his audience, to lift the scales of ignorance from the eyes of those below them.

It is here that we can begin to see the way in which Laclau’s theoretical formulation helps to describe Moore’s rhetorical failings. Just as populist discourse divides society into two separate camps, Moore’s rhetorical strategies create a similar divide. In *Fahrenheit 9/11* Moore does not stand in and amongst “the people” – he stands above, and outside, speaking for and about. And he not only speaks for and about one segment of the population, but *to* a very different one, an audience that is defined by what it is not – poor, rural, working-class, and military. Furthermore, not only does he *differentiate* his imagined audience from the subjects we see on screen, but he also invites this audience to assume a position of power *over* those subjects. By defining the working class as duped victims in desperate need of enlightenment, Moore invites his audience to look down upon, judge and classify his subjects, rather than identify with them. At its best, Moore’s depiction of the working class in *Fahrenheit 9/11* invites feelings of sympathy, not empathy. In this way, *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s fantasy of advocacy envisions a social frontier that is not all that different from that envisioned by Right-wing populists: a



world split between an educated elite who “think they know,” and a mass beneath them who don’t.

It is this very distinction that conservative pundits, activists and bloggers seized upon during the summer of 2004, transforming it into the central antagonism from which Right-wing populism draws its rhetorical strength. Their claims that Michael Moore “thinks you’re stupid” made sense because, in a way, that is precisely the attitude that *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and all of Moore’s films, espouse. Thus, conservatives spent much of their energy exploiting the resentment that can, and often has, accompanied depictions of the working class as powerless, ignorant dupes. This strategy is, perhaps, most pronounced in the anti-Moore films that arose in the wake of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. These “counter-docs” were meant to fight Moore on his own turf, so to speak, using the big screen to rebut *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

### **They Can Speak For Themselves: *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the Politics of Resentment**

Take, for instance, two of the most prominent anti-Moore documentaries, Michael Wilson’s *Michael Moore Hates America* (which garnered positive reviews from such top-line film critics as Roger Ebert and Richard Roeper), and Alan Peterson’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*.<sup>157</sup> As Robert Brent Toplin points out in his detailed analysis, both films employ the “nit-picking” strategy mentioned above. However, as with the websites and books discussed earlier, both films package such critiques within a broader narrative of populist empowerment, in which many of Moore’s own subjects are invited to “talk back” to the filmmaker or, in the words of moorewatch, to “speak for themselves.” As such, they work specifically to exploit the patronizing manner in which *Fahrenheit 9/11* represents its subjects.

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<sup>157</sup> Both films were released in the Fall of 2004.

For instance, Michael Wilson defines his film specifically as a mission of empowerment. “Michael Moore had pissed me off,” he explains in the film’s opening monologue:

It wasn’t his infamous Academy Awards speech. I mean, everyone has the liberty to bitch about politics. It’s our right as Americans, and dissent is what makes us great as a nation. But this guy had painted a picture of my country as a place where no one can succeed. Where some dark, shadowy figure was deep below ground running his multinational corporation, keeping you from living your American dream. And he told people around the world that we were stupid!

This monologue comes during an opening sequence meant to ironically mirror the beginning of *Roger & Me*. Like Moore, Wilson displays self-deprecating pictures of himself as a baby and teenager with long hair while he details the “hard times” his family went through when his Dad was laid-off. However, unlike that opening segment in *Roger*, Wilson actually gives air-time to his dad, who is allowed to describe the economic difficulties he experienced in his own words.

This move on Wilson’s part is important. On one level, *Michael Moore Hates America* is an attempt to buttress the boot-straps theory of American equality, but on another level it is really a film about *voice*. Who gets to interpret the lives of average Americans? the film seems to ask – Michael Moore, or people like *you*? Clearly, Wilson sides with the latter. Thus, he concludes his opening monologue by describing the manner in which Moore strives to keep average Americans from speaking for themselves: “Because my father had passed his faith in America onto me, I knew [my daughter] could live any life she could dream. But Michael Moore, through his films and books, had told her she couldn’t.”

The rest of the film is structured around the narrative concept of average Americans “speaking back.” Thus, we meet all sorts of subjects who contradict Moore’s depictions of “average Americans” and working-class life in general. Importantly, some of these subjects are people who actually appeared in Moore’s films. For instance, the clerks who work at the bank depicted in *Bowling For Columbine* express outrage at the manner in which they were treated by Moore. At first, the segment appears to be yet another instance of “revelation,” in which it is shown that Moore actually staged the entire bank sequence. However, as the scene goes on, the focus shifts away from Moore’s “manipulative” tendencies, to the resentment the employees feel at having been denied the opportunity to fully participate in their own representation. What they really resent, they argue, is not Moore’s argument, but the fact that they weren’t allowed to make their own.

For instance, the bank manager, who is shown in the film walking Moore through an incredibly lax background check, argues that during filming she often tried to deflect some of Moore’s negative insinuations about the bank’s policy. “There were a couple of times that I actually zinged *him*,” she explains, “and he said, ‘Hey, I’m the funny one here, not you!’” A second clerk, who is shown in the film handing Moore the gun, quickly concurs: “I remember that! He did say, ‘This is my movie and, I’ll be the one making the jokes.’ That’s a direct quote.” This employee goes on to draw connections between the manner in which they were treated by Moore and his depiction of “average Americans,” in general: “Personally, [Moore] seems to portray Americans as – at least the ones in his movies – as uneducated – definitely uneducated, umm – ill-prepared for what’s going on in the world.” Conversely, he credits Wilson for giving him a chance to

represent himself in his own words: “I’m glad that you guys came here and gave me the opportunity to kind of tell you how, really, things occurred.”

Of course, not *all* of Moore’s subjects have resented the way in which they were treated by Moore during the filming, or depicted on screen in the final cut.<sup>158</sup> And this is not an attempt to argue that Wilson has represented the “true” thoughts and opinions of these subjects. But it is to argue that, by depicting subjects in the way that he does, Moore makes himself vulnerable to these kinds of counter-attacks. As I have argued, the cinematic pleasures offered up by Moore’s “fantasy of advocacy” are dependent upon a world divided between those who know and those who don’t. As such, Moore has provided his critics with a golden opportunity to paint him as a patronizing bully. When these critics can find *actual subjects* from Moore’s films who claim feelings of anger and resentment towards Moore and his treatment of them, the effect is made all the more powerful.

Indeed, Wilson was not the only filmmaker to employ such a strategy. In *Fahrenheit 9/11* we are introduced to a whole litany of subjects who are outraged at the manner in which Moore has treated them, including the school teacher in whose classroom Bush infamously learned about the attacks of 9/11 and the Oregon State Trooper who shows Moore how lax the Bush Administration had been in securing the borders. But this trope of outraged subjects speaking back finds its most powerful enunciation towards the end of the film. In one of *Fahrenheit*’s final scenes we hear from the aunt of a soldier whose funeral was depicted in *Fahrenheit 9/11*:

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<sup>158</sup> Lila Lipscomb, for one, was quite positive about her experiences and even participated in efforts to publicize the film (Adair “A Mom” 1A).

The military men and women that have lost their lives – been disabled – need more respect than to be put into a film like Michael Moore [sic] where they're just being, um, so degraded. ... One person's opinion or agenda does not make the truth. Just because they're famous, have a lot of money, we have to believe them? ... For Michael Moore to degrade them and to make them look so foolish and basically low-intelligence and bloodthirsty murderers, that's not the type of military we have. ... I want Americans to know that James believed that the cause was just. That he was an educated, brilliant man that could have done anything, but he wanted to defend you and I and all Americans, and we are eternally indebted to the service that he has given to this country.

Here, once again, the focus is not really on Moore's critique of the war, but on his tendency to silence or ignore the opinions of the very people he claims to represent. Furthermore, the woman's choice of words in this scene reveals the way in which Right-wing populists were often able to frame the anger of these subjects explicitly in the language of class resentment. Like the bank clerk in *Michael Moore Hates America*, this woman sees Moore's treatment of her nephew as evidence of a particular *attitude* towards the people Moore represents. Thus, she feels it necessary to emphasize that he was "educated," "brilliant," and "could have done anything he wanted." What appears to anger this woman so much is not only that Moore has exploited her nephew's death, but that he has insulted his intelligence, as well. At base, this is an argument for *respect*.

This scene is important, for Moore's depiction of the US military was seized upon by both *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Michael Moore Hates America* as a weak spot in Moore's rhetorical strategy. By directing her anger at Moore's depiction of soldiers as "foolish and basically low-intelligence and bloodthirsty murderers," this woman operationalizes a form of class-based resentment that has long marked the military's relationship to the political Left. As historian Christian Appy argues, military anger towards the Left in general, and anti-war protestors specifically, has always been a class-tinged resentment.

He describes this resentment in his book on Vietnam veterans, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*:

During the war, the mass media gave little serious attention to the relationship of the working class to Vietnam. Instead, the subject was presented in an indirect and distorted way that reduced to a grossly misleading stereotype. Rather than documenting the class inequalities of military service and the complex feelings soldiers and their families had about their society and the war in Vietnam, the media more commonly contributed to the construction of an image of workers as the war's strongest supporters, as superpatriotic hawks whose political views could be understood simply by reading the bumper stickers on some of their cars or pick-ups: 'America: Love it or Leave it.' These "hard-hats" or "rednecks" were frequently portrayed as "Joe six-pack," a flag-waving, blue-collar, anti-intellectual who, on top of everything else, was assumed to be a bigot.

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It is not difficult to see the resonance of this stereotype in Moore's own depiction of soldiers on the Iraqi battlefield; as un-caring, testosterone-driven aggressors who like to listen to "The Roof Is On Fire" while "mowing-down" Iraqi targets; who laugh with glee while kicking and ridiculing an Iraqi prisoner; and who nonchalantly carry out violent raids on the homes of Iraqi citizens on Christmas Eve.

As discussed, however, Moore balances these representations by showing other soldiers who express surprise, and sometimes regret, about the reality of war's horrors. And, ultimately, he draws a more sympathetic portrait of US soldiers when he makes the claim that they are all, in a way, victims of a rigged economic system that has left them no choice but to sign up for a commitment that will inevitably rob them of their innocence. However, once again, as Appy argues, this tale of working-class naiveté and victimhood as it entails the US Military is another tried-and-true stereotype – what he

calls “the paradigm of innocence savaged” (81). This trope, he argues, is a narrative that has long been used to describe the behavior of US soldiers during wartime, but one that is ultimately “more persuasive as a literary convention than as a historical explanation” (81). In fact, he notes, it is a narrative most often found in novels and films made by middle- or upper-class artists, rather than in anything written or produced by military men and women, themselves.

What Appy finds most problematic about the “paradigm of innocence savaged,” as well as the less sympathetic redneck-patriot stereotype, is that they subvert and deny the much more complex understandings that actual military men and women have always harbored about their own service and, indeed, their own identities as soldiers. Instead, what we get in both narratives is the assumption that, for a variety of reasons – most beyond their control – soldiers are simply unable to think about, much less recognize, their own oppression.

As such, these stereotypical depictions of soldiers have much in common with the Left’s pathological description of working-class life (discussed in Chapter 4). In fact, Appy draws a direct correlation between the manner in which soldiers are often depicted by middle-upper class observers, and the manner in which working-class people, in general, have often been depicted by those “sympathetic” to their plight:

Much the same has been said about civilians in peacetime, perhaps especially about working people who spend long hours doing particularly dangerous and exhausting labor. Work so depletes their energies that they have little will or capacity for entertaining serious thoughts about the meaning or purpose of their lives. ... So goes the conventional wisdom. But those, like Studs Terkel, who have really listened to working people have found an extraordinary range and depth of feelings and attitudes about work and life.

It is just this kind of “range and depth” that, Appy argues, has often gone missing from liberal accounts of US soldiers, a depth that might be recovered if soldiers, themselves, were given a voice in their own representation.<sup>159</sup>

In fact, Appy argues, it is this question of *voice* that has been the central concern for the many veterans that *have* actually made the move to an antiwar perspective after serving. In the early 1970s, for instance, Vietnam Veterans Against the War began organizing “rap groups” in which veterans were invited to work through their understandings and feeling about their experience collectively. While psychiatrists were at times invited to attend such meetings, for the most part the VVAW “insisted on retaining primary control over the structure of the meetings and the issues addressed, a radical departure from conventional models of group therapy” (309). Referencing the work of James Lifton, Appy argues that it was through the process of developing their *own* critique of the war that these veterans were able to come to a place in which they felt comfortable protesting the mission of which they had been a part: “For antiwar veterans a crucial element of their political development was their speaking about their own experience of the war’s immorality” (310).

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<sup>159</sup> Appy offers Hal Ashby’s now-classic film, *Coming Home*, as an example. “Despite some fine moments,” Appy argues, “the film finally reduced the complexity of veteran’s experiences to a sanctimonious political parable” – especially “the reasons why most veterans did not come to share the unconflicted antiwar convictions of the film’s hero” (310). Specifically, the film boils things down to an overly simplistic choice between two characters: Luke, an enlightened vet who has seen through the “lies,” and Robert, a soldier so brainwashed by military ideology that he commits suicide rather than face up to the realities of the Vietnam fiasco. As Appy puts it, these are “pious antiwar politics” that relieve the audience of the need to consider the difficulty of Robert’s dilemma. Ultimately, what Appy finds so problematic about *Coming Home*, and most narratives representing the plight of US soldiers, is the lack of attention they give to the complex and varied understandings of actual military men and women: “*Coming Home* makes an attractive hero of a wounded veteran who witnessed against the war, but it gives little voice to the majority of veterans who remained ambivalent about or supportive of the war” (314).



However, as argued, this element was entirely missing from mainstream media representations of US vets:

... throughout the 1960s and much of the 1970s, Vietnam veterans rarely received respectful attention in mainstream culture. On the rare occasions when Vietnam vets were portrayed in film and television, they were typically represented as psychological misfits. ... there was little ... cultural effort to investigate the experiences of Vietnam veterans.

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Such a climate, Appy argues, bred not only a mutual misunderstanding between vets and broader society, but resentment as well.

As with the grieving aunt depicted in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for most veterans it was not only a matter of understanding, but *respect* (316). Specifically, Appy argues, veterans resented the insinuation that they had no control over their lives in general and, specifically, over their decision to join the military. In fact the manner in which Appy describes this emotion resonates with the way in which the woman from *Fahrenheit* defends her nephew as somebody who *chose* military service of his own accord:

However circumscribed their choices, [soldiers] want to feel they are exercising some control over their lives. After all, to attribute one's course in life to external forces is an admission of powerlessness, a painful acknowledgement that one's humanity has been severely restricted. Instead, people often describe as matters of choice the actions they also perceive as unavoidable. As Richard Sennett and Jonathon Cobb found in their study of working-class consciousness, "They were resolved to shape actions open to them so that, in their own minds, they felt as though they acted from choice rather than necessity." By claiming responsibility for their lives, they were claiming a sense of dignity and self-worth.

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It is this sense of dignity and self-worth – agency and empowerment – that is radically absent from most mainstream depictions of US soldiers, especially those that espouse a particular type of liberal sympathy. And indeed, they are also absent from Moore’s depiction of US soldiers in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a fact that clearly rankles some military men and women.<sup>160</sup> Apart from Lila Lipscomb and Sergeant Abdul Henderson, who attain agency only via their interactions with Moore, the US soldiers in *Fahrenheit 9/11* are portrayed in much the same fashion as are all of Moore’s working-class characters: passive – and sometimes pathological – victims in need of enlightenment. As such, this is a rhetorical strategy that literally *invites* Moore’s opponents to step in and provide a platform for “agency” where it is so sorely needed.

Enter Peter Damon.

Damon is an Iraq War veteran, depicted for a brief moment in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, who lost both his arms when the tire of a Black Hawk helicopter he was repairing exploded. He is shown in the film explaining the phenomenon of “phantom limb pain” to a reporter. This brief clip is used by Moore during the section of the film in which he argues that the Bush Administration has “left veterans behind.” In 2006, a full two years after the film debuted, Damon sued Moore for portraying him in false light, arguing that the film made him appear to support Moore’s conclusion that the Bush Administration

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<sup>160</sup> For instance, Iraq-veteran Paul Rieckhoff, who became one of the war’s most vocal opponents after serving in combat (Rieckhoff started the website “Operation Truth” an anti-war site, and has become a well-known guest on the political talk-show circuit), supported *Fahrenheit 9/11* and its stance against the war, but took umbrage with Moore’s portrayal of US soldiers. As he told the *Washington Post*: “I’m ticked off at the way he portrays soldiers. It really makes them look stupid, like these testosterone-enraged mindless killers, like a bunch of barbarians. I’m going to tell him that” (Rosin and Allen A1).

was not taking proper care of wounded veterans.<sup>161</sup> Moore's opponents used Damon's story to their advantage.

Damon appears as the 'star witness,' so to speak, in both *Michael Moore Hates America* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. As a US soldier incensed at the way in which he has been treated by Moore, Damon serves as the perfect symbolic antidote to Lila Lipscomb and Abdul Henderson. Most important for the populist strategies of these filmmakers is the manner in which Damon articulates this anger. As with the woman from *Fahrenheit*, Damon reserves most of his anger for Moore's patronizing attitude and the manner in which he represents soldiers as victimized dupes. "The whole movie makes soldiers look like a bunch of idiots" he told the *New York Daily News* in an August, 2004 story. "I'm not a child. We sent ourselves over there as volunteers for a cause. It was all our own doing. I don't appreciate him calling us children" (Sisk 8).

Here, Damon voices exactly the kind of class-tinged resentment that, Appy argues, many Vietnam veterans espoused when confronted with antiwar activists who portrayed their service as a "plight" beyond their capacity to understand or ability to control. In *Michael Moore Hates America*, Wilson skillfully harnesses that sense of resentment, tying it to his overall depiction of Moore as a liberal bully who thinks he can tell average Americans what and how they should think. "I guess what he thinks is that he's on some kind of crusade to speak up for us, you know, veterans or soldiers out there doin' our jobs, and ah, I don't need him to speak up for me" Damon tells Wilson,

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<sup>161</sup> The footage of Damon was not actually taken by Moore's camera crew. It was part of a segment on NBC's *Nightly News*, and was obtained legally by Moore for use in his film. As such, the case was dismissed ("Judge"). Damon's stance on the issue of veteran-care seems conflicted. Before he sued Moore, Damon appeared with Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy at a press conference in which the Senator denounced a Republican-supported bankruptcy bill that would impose financial difficulty on many vets transitioning back to private life and demanded that Congress increase disability pay for soldiers (Neuwahl B4).

effectively voicing the central “thesis” of Right-wing populism. “I have my own voice. Leave me out of it is all I want, you know?”

In *Michael Moore Hates America*, Damon proves himself to be as eloquent and emotionally compelling a character for Wilson as Lila Lipscomb was for Moore. Sitting in his kitchen, wearing a Boston Red Sox jersey, making his argument against Moore while helping his children with a puzzle, Damon makes for a powerful symbol of the everyday dignity, respect, and agency that is often missing from sympathetic portraits of soldiers and their “plight.” More than anything else, Damon voices resentment and outrage at the idea that someone like Moore would deign it necessary to speak on his behalf. In so doing, he helps reinforce the antagonistic relationship between soldiers (and their families) and “liberal elitists” that Right-wing populism has so often relied upon:

Why do you think that it’s your responsibility to, like, speak up for us military men and women? We have a voice of our own. We don’t need you to speak for us. And why did you portray us that way in *Fahrenheit 9/11*? You know that there’s more to the military than that. If you’ve ever talked to anybody in the military you would know that. So, I would like an apology from Michael Moore to the American military for the way that he portrayed us in this film.

Alan Petersen makes similar use of Damon in *Fahrenhype 9/11*. In that film, Damon appears along with the angry military aunt as well as a number of military recruiters, all of whom decry the manner in which Moore appears to speak on behalf of military men and women without their permission. Thus, by piecing together such a group of angry subjects, “speaking back” to Moore, these conservative filmmakers create the impression of a populist uprising by average Americans sick and tired of being silenced by liberal elitists like Michael Moore who claim to know how they feel. As

Damon puts it: “I don’t know what he’s talking about, being left behind – I don’t feel that way.”

This populist stance was replicated by just about every conservative journalist, blogger, pundit or activist that made his or her case against Moore in 2004. Moore, we were told, is an “arrogant” filmmaker who “denigrates [our] intelligence” (songstress 7, Wizbangblog); who tried to “discredit red-state voters as a bunch of ignorant hicks” (Captain Ed, captainsquartersblog); who thinks we’re a “nation of idiots” (Hardy and Clarke 10); that “we’re all uneducated” (Matt “Michael” Blogsforbush.com); that “Americans are inherently stupid” (Bill Indcjournal.com); and that we’re “the stupidest, most naive people on the face of the earth” (Coulter, “Saddam” 672). So deep was Moore’s contempt for the intelligence of average people that Tammy Bruce of frontpagemag.com described Moore’s effort to overturn *Fahrenheit*’s R-rating as an elitist-plot to undermine their authority as parents:

Not only do these people [Moore and his producers] believe they have sole possession of the truth, they are also convinced they know what’s best for *your* children. Your concerns, your values and your rejection of the propaganda of that film’s maliciousness and hate are of no concern to them. They know what’s best and they are determined to access your children one way or the other.

Bruce

The depiction of Moore as a smug elitist became a ubiquitous trope on Right-wing blogs and in conservative publications during the 2004 election. As one reader of wizbangblog put it in the comments section of a post-election post assessing the “effect” of *Fahrenheit* 9/11:

Only a liberal could be so arrogant as to believe that EVERY person who voted differently from them lacked information, and will vote their way if provided with education and enlightenment ... the fact that some people didn't vote for Kerry because they hate out-of-touch elitists like Moore himself, who are seen as representative of the Democratic Party's cluelessness and condescension, never occurs to them.

Omni

### **The “Liberal Media” Conspiracy**

Merely depicting Moore as an elitist was only the first step in the Right's populist strategy. These ubiquitous accusations of smug elitism on Moore's part were seamlessly transformed into a much more sinister accusation of conspiracism, whereby Moore became simply the most visible example of a not-so-secret cabal that has been controlling the country for decades: what the Right so often refers to as the “liberal media elite.” As Berlet and Lyons point out, conspiracism has long been a central tenet of Right-wing populist strategies. In general, they define conspiracism as a rhetorical strategy that “assigns tiny cabals of evildoers a superhuman power to control events” (10). This move is essentially a bait-and-switch in the way that it shifts the focus away from the structural/systemic issues that the Left often champions (10). As such, it has been a useful ploy for Right-wing populists interested in counteracting the systemic/structural arguments of liberals like Michael Moore. From Nixon's “East Coast Elites” to the “Special Interests” that Ronald Reagan railed against, the Right has consistently deployed some version of a Left-wing, elitist cabal as the centerpiece of its populist strategies.

The attack on Michael Moore was no different. In the summer of 2004 the Right constructed Moore as the poster-child for a Left-wing conspiracy housed within the mass media, itself. This “liberal media elite” included most of mainstream journalism and Hollywood. By deploying such a narrative, Right-wing populists were able to take

advantage of Moore's success within the film industry, turning *Fahrenheit*'s string of awards and accolades into "evidence" that Moore had left his working-class roots behind to enjoy the embrace of "elite" society.

Once again, comments posted on *Moorewatch.com* serve as a perfect example. In an early June post, Lee of *Moorewatch.com* reported, with unabashed glee, that the Flint Film Festival was opening that week, and *Fahrenheit 9/11* would not be a part of its program.<sup>162</sup> Lee quotes festival director Greg Fiedler as explaining, "[We] wanted this to be about local filmmakers and not about one famous one who has a way of bringing all the attention on himself" ("Not Going Home"). Lee goes on to sneer:

What? Home-town yokels that spawned working-class Moore don't want him destroying their festival by using it as a forum for promoting *F911*? Shocking. *Moore could have offered to submit something, but he didn't, [Fiedler] added.* Of course he wouldn't. He's the toast of the world's leftist elites in Hollywood, Manhattan, and Cannes. Why the hell would he want to sully himself by associating with those toothless redneck working-class auto-worker types?

Here, Lee once again invokes an antagonistic divide between Moore and the "rest of us," only now he includes "Hollywood, Manhattan and Cannes" into the mix. His focus on the Flint Film Festival is crucial. By contrasting this grassroots film festival to the main centers of "media power" – Hollywood, New York and Europe – Lee creates the image of a Left-wing media that isn't really interested in producing or disseminating media products geared towards the working man – "those toothless redneck working-class types" – at all. According to this logic, Moore has been accepted into an insular world of Left-wing elitists only interested in talking to themselves. As he put it in a later post:

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<sup>162</sup> "Lee" is the second main contributor on *moorewatch.com*, along with Keneflick, and only goes by his first name.

“[Moore’s] the darling of Hollywood and Cannes and the international Left-wing elite, and that defines how he sees the world” (“Observing Mikey”).

This rhetorical strategy sets up a rather brilliant catch-22 in which any success Moore might have on the national – or world – stage is automatically read as evidence that he has turned his back on the working class in order to join the elite ranks of haute liberal culture. Thus, for instance, many of Moore’s critics focused incessantly on the various gala premieres of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, emphasizing the rapturous receptions he was receiving from a glamorous and wealthy elite comprised of industry professionals and the critical establishment. On the internet, the conservative wizbangblog scoffed at the “Hollywood elite who turned out for the [*Fahrenheit*] premiere” (Aylward, “Michael”), arguing, “the only people that believe Michael Moore also believe Gore won Florida and that you can tax people into prosperity” (Aylward “Bin Laden”). Conservative weblog captainsquartersblog concurred. When Linda Rondstat was infamously ejected from the Aladdin Casino in Vegas for praising *Fahrenheit 9/11* during her live act, the blog labeled it as “Today’s Hollywood Consistency Moment,” lambasting her for “tak[ing] people’s money and lectur[ing] them on how to think” (Captain Ed).

This trope was also pronounced in conservative print publications. Take, for instance, the manner in which the conservative *Washington Times* portrayed *Fahrenheit*’s various premiers. In Udner the headline, “De-Lovely, Delightful, D-Elitist,” Stephan Sullivan contextualized Moore’s Cannes victory by describing the Cannes Film Festival as an exclusive, elite conclave:

Last Saturday, on the closing night of this year’s festival, on a beach next to the Palais de Festival, a few hundred well-dressed chosen ones



gathered, at MGM's expense, to watch fireworks and hear a parade of stars – Ashley Judd, Kevin Kline, Alanis Morissette and Sheryl Crow – belt out Cole Porter tunes. ... the bash featured a grand pavilion a hundred yards offshore, a full orchestra, multiple screens and all the champagne, lobster and jellified pate any human can endure. With yachts glistening in the harbor and scores of searchlights scraping the sky – and the much-sought-after entry bracelet securely on your wrist – it was relatively easy to forget all the 'common' people who stood on the Croisette [boardwalk] above like gawking pigeons.

B05

Here, Sullivan is at pains to invoke the populist image of a world characterized by a vast separation between a powerful elite and the "common people." The dominant theme of his article is that of separation and exclusivity. "[E]ven with the smattering of anti-Iraq declarations," he comments, "the troubles of the world seemed far way." The film industry itself is described in aristocratic terms – a virtual "gated community" mainly interested in keeping to itself. As such, any admonitions of sympathy for, or solidarity with, the common people can only be read as thinly-veiled hypocrisy:

Cannes in many ways is a nirvana of limousine liberalism where nods to cosmopolitanism, experimentalism and political correctness are nodded often ... The movie crowd, as much as its stars lend their names to fashionable causes, lives in the alternate universe of upscale make-believe. You can sympathize with the masses and still steer clear of them.

Sullivan's piece was simply the opening salvo of a concerted effort by the *Times* to delegitimize *Fahrenheit*'s success by characterizing all the hooplah surrounding its run as nothing more than the liberal elite loudly slapping itself on the back in a gratuitous show of self-congratulation. According to this strategy, Moore's success is defined specifically as "no big surprise." Suzanne Fields scoffed that Moore "was a lock for a prize in Cannes. He's the darling of the Hollywood/Cannes clagues" (A23). Scott Galupo

concurred: “That the glitterati in France, New York and Hollywood have embraced Mr. Moore’s sensational schtick isn’t surprising. The man from Flint provides slick, easy assurances of what they already believe” (“Meet” D01). Similarly, the Right-wing periodical, *Human Events*, kept track of the industry awards *Fahrenheit* received throughout the year, going so far as to feign shock when *Fahrenheit* “was nominated for a grand total of zero awards” at the 2004 Oscars (“No” 16). And when the anti-Moore documentary *Celsius 41.11* debuted, the magazine described it as a populist response to an out-of-touch Hollywood elite: “With Hollywood and New York head over heels over Michael Moore’s vehemently anti-Bush film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, it was only a matter of time before the rest of the country got its own motion picture” (Gizzi 29).

This depiction of Hollywood as an elite enclave of haute liberalism was given wings when many Democratic members of the US Congress showed up to the film’s gala premiere in Washington DC. The conservative press made hay of the event, seamlessly transposing the Cannes/Hollywood-Elite-frame onto the Democratic establishment. “A half-dozen bodyguards and a velvet rope separated man of the hour Michael Moore from the hoi poloi Wednesday night,” wrote Scott Galupo in the *Washington Times*.

... when the filmmaker celebrated the opening of his controversial new movie, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, at Adams Morgan’s Left Bank eatery. Clad in dark suit and New Balance sneakers, Mr. Moore immediately plopped down in a booth next to Miramax Films chief and *Fahrenheit* champion Harvey Weinstein to receive thumbs-up greetings from Massachusetts Rep. Edward J. Markey, Illinois Rep. Rahm Emanuel and New Jersey Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg, all Democrats.

“Moore’s” B06

Galupo goes on to gleefully stoke the image of Democratic politicians partying it up “Hollywood style,” listing off the names of various liberal luminaries who “sipped wine and sampled such delicacies as roast venison in a peppercorn chocolate sauce.”

Perhaps the best example of the way in which conservatives attached Moore to a liberal Hollywood elite out of touch with average Americans came when the Right-wing activist group, Citizens United, infamously put up billboards in L.A. just after the 2004 election, thanking “Hollywood” for giving Bush the presidency. The sign read: “4 More Years. Thank you Hollywood!” and was adorned with the images of various liberal-identified stars such as Whoopie Goldberg, Ben Affleck and Barbara Streisand (“Oscar” 2). Tellingly, Moore’s own image was the most prominent – set off from the other celebrities and slightly enlarged.

Thus, by relying upon a populist strategy of anti-elite conspiracism, the Right was able to turn the wild success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* into a political disadvantage. The more the industry embraced Moore, the more he looked distant and “out of touch” from the average Americans for whom he claimed to speak. Right-wing activists were able to corner Moore into a damned-if-you-do; damned-if-you-don’t kind of position, whereby popular success seemed to come only at the expense of his political credibility.

Nowhere is this catch-22 more apparent than in the way in which the Right articulated Moore’s reception by and within the popular press. As argued, Moore’s success is not only dependent upon the mainstream film *industry*, but also upon the critical establishment that surrounds it. In the contemporary context, the indie/art cinema circuit is the only option for any documentary that hopes to maintain viability within the public sphere. And this circuit is dependent upon the discursive power of film critics and

reviewers. In Moore's case, the success of films such as *Roger & Me* and *Bowling For Columbine* (and, by contrast, the failure of a film like *The Big One*) was contingent upon their positioning by the critical establishment as intellectual fare for an educated, middle-upper class audience of independent/art film enthusiasts. Of course, this articulation of Moore's films only added fuel to the fire where Right-wing populist strategies were concerned. Even as Moore attempted to define his films as popular fare for a mass audience, he was nonetheless obliged to endear himself within a discursive context that contradicted the notion of mass appeal.

At this point it seems important to address what might seem to be a glaring contradiction: Moore's articulation within the popular press as an "indie-film auteur" would seem, at first blush, to undercut the Right's depiction of Moore as a member of the "Hollywood elite." As argued, indie-film usually constructs itself specifically *against* mainstream Hollywood, not with it. And, indeed, Moore himself has often struck such a pose, describing himself as a working-class infiltrator, undermining the corporate imperatives of the mainstream media industry from within.<sup>163</sup> However, in the world of Right-wing populist discourse, the indie/art world is not understood to be *against* Hollywood at all, but rather its "most radical" outpost. According to this logic, indie films that champion liberal and Left-wing causes are understood to be nothing more than Hollywood revealing its "true colors."

The work of conservative film critic Michael Medved is illustrative of this interpretation. Medved is a nationally renowned film-reviewer-turned-political-commentator who hosts a conservative talk radio program. Banking off his long

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<sup>163</sup> Indeed, this was the hook around which both *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth* were built: that Moore had somehow "tricked" the industry into giving him his own show, and now he was going to use the bully-pulpit to hoist them by their own petard.

experience as a film critic (especially his 12-year stint as co-host of the popular television program, *Sneak Previews*, with Jeff Lyons), Medved transformed himself during the 1990s into the leading conservative voice on the “liberal media” and its purported attack on cultural values. In his national bestseller, *Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War Against Traditional Values*, Medved brings the culture wars to Tinseltown, arguing that “Hollywood no longer reflects – or even respects – the values of most American families” (10). He provides a laundry list of Hollywood’s cultural offenses, such as its ridicule of religion, glorification of criminal violence and cynicism towards the nation’s history and institutions (such as the military) (10). This assault on traditional values, he argues, has resulted in the alienation of the American public at large: “tens of millions of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children” (3). In keeping with the legacy of Right-wing populism, Medved blames this tilt towards moral decay on what he sees as elitism run amuck. Specifically, he argues that Hollywood’s focus on such “dark and disturbing material” is nothing more than a vain attempt to achieve artistic legitimacy in an elite world of taste-makers who value “only work that could be described as ‘daring,’ ‘unorthodox,’ or ‘experimental’” (27).

Thus, for Medved, the realm of indie/art cinema is not *anti*-Hollywood, but rather “true” Hollywood – or as he describes it – Hollywood as it likes to see itself:

Hollywood’s predilection for nihilistic content is demonstrated more clearly in those infrequent entertainment endeavors that are known as prestige projects – intended to impress critics and other insiders rather than to please ordinary moviegoers. Not surprisingly, Hollywood shows its values system most unmistakably when it attempts to make serious statements ... Of course, the studios have the right to make such movies,

and one could argue that in doing so they've demonstrated the sort of courage and selflessness rarely associated with Hollywood. No one ever expected that *Naked Lunch* or *Closetland* would become box-office blockbusters; decisions to proceed with these projects could never be explained in purely financial terms. That's why these films are so revealing when it comes to exposing the philosophical underpinnings of today's Hollywood: this is the sort of art that leading filmmakers choose to create when they are freed of all commercial considerations.

*Hollywood* 28-9

Here, Medved makes an argument that actually resonates, on some level, with scholars such as Pribram, who have critically examined the "discourse of indie film." While I strongly disagree with Medved's particular definition of "traditional values," his analysis of the priorities *behind* many indie/art-house productions is fairly accurate. As I have argued, for both the industry *and* the critical establishment, it is precisely this "quest for artistic legitimacy" that is truly at stake in many indie projects (29). And it is from this set of priorities that Medved sculpts his populist critique.

Medved deftly turns this "quest for artistic legitimacy" into evidence that Hollywood has turned a blind eye to the wants and needs of "average Americans." Citing statistics showing that college graduates are more likely to describe themselves as "frequent moviegoers" than those without a degree, Medved argues that movie going has become "a form of entertainment that appeals primarily to an elite audience" (*Hollywood* 7). As such, Medved's work reveals the dangers that await politically-committed filmmakers whose work is positioned as "art-house fare."

In the summer of 2004, Michael Moore's political detractors followed suit, exploiting Moore's reception within the popular press to depict him as an esteemed member of the liberal, Hollywood elite. In many ways, it was the peculiar manner in which many liberal journalists defended *Fahrenheit 9/11* that invited such a move. For,

what Medved is at pains to critique in *Hollywood vs. America* is a version of the “art defense.” As I have argued, the “art defense” is a rhetorical strategy that unwittingly works to undermine Moore’s political goals. While this strategy deflects accusations of dishonesty and “bias,” it also downplays the radical aspects of his films by rearticulating them as intellectual/artistic experiences for middle-class audiences. In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, this articulation took on a specifically partisan hue. As I have discussed, the film was defined, by its own supporters, as a kind of “catharsis” for the Left, providing liberals with an emotional outlet through which they could convene and vent their frustrations. Deploying a strategy I have defined as “damning by faint praise,” film reviewers disparaged *Fahrenheit 9/11* as blatant propaganda and shameless infotainment, while simultaneously praising it as a brilliant work of political art geared towards an audience that would “appreciate” it. According to this logic, Moore may be nothing more than a propagandist, but he’s “our propagandist,” or in the words of David Edelstein, “a blowhard whom the Left could call its own.”

For these critics, what made Moore’s propaganda worth supporting were his artistic bonafides. As Andrew O’Hehir argued in his rave review from *Salon.com*, Moore has not only become “an increasingly skillful entertainer and propagandist,” but “a crusading artist – like Dickens, Solzhenitsyn and Springsteen.” Thus, Moore’s journalistic flaws were trumped by his artistic genius. *Fahrenheit 9/11*, he argued, “has something of Whitman, something of Twain, something of Tom Paine. Love him or hate him, Michael Moore is becoming one of the signal artists of our age.” In this way, *Fahrenheit 9/11* was not simply defined as blatant propaganda; it was positioned as propaganda that was geared towards a select audience – made up of educated viewers

who appreciated both cinematic genius *and* liberal politics. In this way, Moore's largely enthusiastic response from the popular press only helped to further solidify the impression that Moore was the yin to Mel Gibson's yang; an indie-auteur for the "liberal elite."

This was an opening that Right-wing populists could not resist. Jonah Goldberg's piece for the *National Review*, entitled "It's a Wonderful Lie," serves as a perfect example. Goldbergh begins by citing a series of quotations that seemingly condemn *Fahrenheit 9/11* as biased propaganda, such as: "a 110-minute hatchet job that doesn't even bother to pretend to be fair," and, "it's loaded with spin, sins of omission and obvious vitriol" (12). He then points out, with mock-incredulity:

These are all from *rave* reviews of the film. It's hard to recall a similar moment in American discourse. One after another, leading liberal commentators have said a) that Michael Moore is a consummate liar, propagandist, and "cheap shot artist," and b) that he is a force for good, a prophet, "a credit to the republic" (in the words of the *New York Times*). Aren't these things at odds with one another?

12

Goldberg claims that this "liberal schizophrenia" is proof there is a conspiracy afoot, whereby the liberal media defend and protect anyone on the Left, no matter how dishonest he or she may be. "I do not recall the *New York Times* hailing Rush [Limbaugh] as a 'credit to the republic' for his willingness to raise discomforting issues," scoffs Goldberg. "The title of 'valuable provocateur,' is reserved solely for those who provoke from the Left" (12).

Many on the Right picked up on this seeming contradiction. Kevin Aylward, of the conservative *wizbangblog.com*, pulled a similar list of contradictory quotes from



supportive reviews, concluding: “The contortions of logic required to defend or praise the film (even if only backhandedly) is damn hysterical to watch” (“The Press”). Both James Bowman, of the *New Criterion*, and David Horowitz, writing in his online publication, *frontpagemag.com*, singled out David Edelstein’s review as particularly discrepant. Horowitz mocked what he called an “intelligent but ultimately tortured review of Moore’s film by David Edelstein” (“Where”), while Bowman wrote:

Obviously Michael Moore has found in Edelstein the same kind of patsy that John Edwards found in Tom Shales. No wonder he hardly even bothers to pretend that he is a real documentarist. Why should he when mere innuendo and malicious suggestion are welcomed even by those who know that they are innuendo and malicious suggestion?

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Thus, with virtually no one in the popular press willing to defend Moore’s arguments outright, conservatives turned the catharsis argument into proof that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was getting “cream-puff treatment from the media” (Galupo, “Meet” D01). Michael Wilson opened *Michael Moore Hates America* by claiming that: “I hold Michael Moore less accountable for his lies than I do the apparatus that allows him to be untruthful.” *Moorewatch.com* referred to Moore as a “media darling,” arguing that “the vast majority of the people in the major media agree with Moore’s viewpoints and will do virtually nothing to challenge them” (“Michael Moore Is”). *Powerlineblog* argued that the “old-line media ... have embraced the wild-eyed propaganda of the likes of Michael Moore,” arguing that with all of its rave publicity, “*Fahrenheit 9/11* can only be a mega-hit” (John “A PR”).

The problem for Moore was that, in many ways, it was difficult to argue with this assessment. Throughout his career, the press has lauded Moore's films as works of genius, while saddling them with the "bias caveat." Rather than defend Moore's political commitments, they have defended his status as an indie-auteur who provides serious entertainment for an art-house crowd. In 2004, such wish-washy support lent credence to the idea that the press was defending someone they knew didn't *really* deserve it, simply because they liked what he had to say. In so doing, the press reinforced the image of itself put forth by conservative critics like Michael Medved: that of an insular, elitist, liberal establishment so enthralled with itself that it was willing to simply ignore the values of "mainstream society," no matter the consequences. In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, those consequences encompassed "the truth," itself – a fact that the popular press seemed to corroborate. As William Raspberry put it in his review: "Some of [Moore's] facts may be wrong ... but his attitude is right" ("Fiery" A21). It was precisely this kind of language that invited Right-wing attacks. Over and over again, critics like Edelstein and Raspberry argued that *Fahrenheit 9/11* might indeed be propaganda, but it was "our kind of propaganda." With that kind of damning by faint praise, all the Right had to do was agree.

### **Celebrity Propaganda: Demonizing Michael Moore**

By emphasizing the patronizing tendencies of his films and exploiting their interpretation as art-house-entertainments within the popular press, the Right managed to turn Moore into the very symbol of the "liberal elite." This process was greatly aided by Moore's own soaring popularity. In many ways, it seemed that the more press coverage Moore received in the summer of 2004, the more pronounced this elitist image of him

became. Indeed, it was Moore's status as political celebrity that transformed him into such a useful symbol for Right-wing populists.

As I argued in the last chapter, the "discourse of celebrity" through which Moore has been increasingly framed often works to delegitimize his working-class image. As Moore's fame has grown, his working-class "bonafides" have lessened, transforming his Flint background into a carefully constructed "pose" used to sell films, books and TV shows. Within the celebrity frame, Moore has become less a political filmmaker with something to say, and more a political entertainer with something to *sell*.

This kind of celebrity discourse was useful to the Right for two reasons: not only did it undermine the political legitimacy of Moore's films, but it changed the subject from his films (and hence the arguments they put forth) to *Moore*, himself. As I outlined in the last chapter, many critics began to mine Moore's personal life for inconsistencies that contradicted his working-class image. They also began to focus increasingly on Moore's "business" sense and his talent as a media "marketeer." In this frame, the radical edge to his ideas was understood to be nothing more than a way to whip up media controversies that garnered him great publicity. His willingness to speak out in public while others kept silent was read as nothing more than a self-serving need for the spotlight. Moore's personal *integrity* became the issue. This shift was perhaps best symbolized by Moore's infamous interview with Katie Couric on the *Today Show*, in which the anchor's "hard-hitting" analysis of *Fahrenheit 9/11* boiled down to a rather simple-minded referendum on Moore as a person: "Some people say you're not helping the Democrats, because you're seen as a bit of a jerk ...." ("Michael Moore Discusses His").

It was this tendency for critics to turn a cynical eye towards Michael Moore, himself, that proved most useful to Right-wing populists. And it was this “fear” that Moore was becoming the “face of the Democratic party” in the summer of 2004 that they gleefully exploited. As Moore’s public image began to erode under a discourse of inauthenticity and shameless self-promotion, he became the perfect symbol with which to peddle their image of the “liberal elite.” As such, the Right engaged in what Berlet and Lyons define as a strategy of “demonization,” in which one individual becomes the symbolic point against which a broad coalition of political forces can unite. Berlet and Lyons argue that “demonization” is a discursive process whereby “targeted individuals or groups are placed outside the circle of wholesome mainstream society” (7) By personalizing political grievances and attaching wrong-doing to a single “scapegoat,” populists create a common enemy against which a vast number of competing interests can unify: “The scapegoat bares the blame, while the scapegoaters feel a sense of righteousness and increased unity” (8).<sup>164</sup>

In the summer of 2004, Right-wing populists used a similar strategy to construct Michael Moore as a “scapegoat” for the nefarious objectives of the liberal elite. The tendency in the popular press to describe Moore as an opportunistic marketeer who used a fabricated working-class persona to peddle liberal ideas gave Right-wing populists the very “scapegoat” they needed. This interpretation of Moore’s celebrity image allowed conservatives to “demonize” Moore as a self-interested propagandist willing to go to any

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<sup>164</sup> The manner in which Right-wing populists attacked Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky scandal in the late 1990s serves as a useful illustration of this demonization strategy. Berlet and Lyons argue that during the Lewinsky affair, the Right used Clinton’s personal “sins” as a metaphor for the political sins of the left, in general. The *personal* bent to these attacks allowed a variety of conservative interests to find common cause in the impeachment of an immoral President. As Russ Bellant described this strategy: “Different sectors on the right didn’t have to agree on the person they would choose to replace Clinton; all they had to do was agree that they wanted Clinton to go” (Berlet and Lyons 306).

length to grab the limelight – an image they then connected to the Democratic Party, as a whole.

### **Isn't It Rich: "Capitalizing" on Moore's Celebrity**

Conservative attackers never failed to mention Moore's financial *success* when criticizing *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In a typical move, Jacob Laskin of *Frontpagemagazine.com*, began an article on the film by informing readers that: "*Fahrenheit 9/11* has sealed Michael Moore's status as one of the richest figures of the crackpot Left" ("Hezbollah's"). Conservative pundits such as Andrew Sullivan and Mark Steyn felt that ironically pointing out Moore's considerable wealth was the most damning indictment one could offer. "What a country!" wrote Steyn. "Moore has got rich peddling cynicism to the naïve" ("Democrats" 48). Sullivan chose a similar statement by a reader for his blog's "Quote of the Day" section: "It sure is a great country, where someone like Michael Moore trashes the president and gets away with it – and makes so much money!" ("Quote"). Indeed, during the summer of 2004, *Moorewatch.com* adopted the phrase, "It's all about the money," as a ubiquitous refrain which they used to explain virtually every aspect of *Fahrenheit*'s run. Thus, when Lions Gate announced that they would legally contest the MPAA's awarding of an R rating for *Fahrenheit*, *Moorwatch.com* offered this explanation:

What a crock. This is about money, pure and simple. There are a lot of people who won't legally be able to see this film now. ... Never forget folks. When it's got to do with Michael Moore, it's *always* about the money. Always.

Lee "Rating"

Throughout the summer of 2004, *Moorewatch.com* found unseemly financial motives underlying all of Moore's actions – indeed, they saw dollar signs even when Moore *didn't* act. Thus, when Moore was uncharacteristically silent during the national hooplah over Ronald Reagan's death, moorewatch explained:

Michael Moore is a professional agitator. He lives to express his opinion, no matter how controversial, and he gets paid exceptionally well for doing so. ... So with the death of Ronald Reagan, one of the most significant media events in recent memory, he's all of a sudden silent? He has no opinion on the matter? Or has he (gasp!) suddenly developed a sense of decorum? (Yeah, right). This is about money, folks. Mikey knows if he were to come out with a piece on Reagan the media would pick up on it in about five seconds, and he would be savaged in the realm of public opinion. Even people who hate Bush loved Ronald Reagan ... Tearing into Reagan would cost him big at the box office. This isn't about respect, it's not about decorum, it's about money, and Mikey wants to make millions of it.

Lee "No Ronnie"

In this way, Moore's conservative critics turned the popular success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* to their rhetorical advantage, constantly emphasizing the fact that, whatever else the film meant, symbolized or achieved, one thing could be absolutely sure: it made Michael Moore a heckuva lot of money.

Significantly, this was not an interpretive strategy that the Right concocted out of whole cloth: it was taken directly from Moore's own celebrity discourse. As argued, much of the writing on Moore in the popular press concentrated on pointing out the inconsistencies and paradoxes that could be found by comparing his working-class image to the "real Michael Moore." In countless profiles and articles we learned that: Moore battled with members of the Writer's Union during his *TV Nation* days; Moore isn't really from Flint, MI, but a neighboring middle-class suburb; Moore doesn't even live in

Michigan any more, but rather in a multi-million dollar apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. According to the logic of celebrity discourse, these “discoveries” were proof that Moore’s working-class image was a sham: a carefully constructed pose meant to sell movies, books, and the very concept of “liberalism,” itself. Thus, for instance, in an article “defending” *Fahrenheit* as an act of political courage, *New York Daily News* editorialist Michael Daly felt the need to begin with this extended caveat:

Michael Moore can be as piggish and bullying with his staff as the worst corporate villain. He is a man of the people who installed a hot tub on the balcony of his Manhattan apartment and who seems to relish flying about in the Time Warner corporate jet while on book tour. One prominent photographer described him as the most vain and difficult subject of her long career. He appears to be no less capable than your basic politician of nudging the truth about himself when it is a little too awful, or even when he just wants to make it a little niftier. He can be almost as pompous as a newspaper columnist. Yet, there is no denying Moore's moxie.

“Moore Will” 12

This incessant need to acknowledge Moore’s “personal failings” – and his personal financial *stakes* in his own movies – followed Moore everywhere in 2004. Critics seemed incapable of getting past the juicy paradoxes that inevitably arise when a political activist attempts to use the mass media as a means to get his or her message out.<sup>165</sup> As Katie Couric put it, during a second interview with Moore on the *Today Show*:

“Someone says – they’re curious to know if any of the profits you received from making these documentaries like *Bowling for Columbine*

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<sup>165</sup> But these personal “facts” hardly undercut Moore’s working-class “authenticity,” or his political commitments to working class images. For instance, the fact that Moore’s family actually lived in the middle-class suburb of Davison, MI is not proof that Moore is lying about his working class roots, but rather perfect evidence of the kind of middle-class prosperity that the union movement *brought* to workers like Moore’s father in the 1950s and 60s, and that has since eroded thanks to the anti-union tactics of corporate America.

and *Fahrenheit 9/11* go to the families who lost their loved ones at Columbine, New York City, Iraq, or do you just capitalize off the tragedies of others?”

“Michael Moore Discusses *Fahrenheit*”

The Right pounced on such articulations, amplifying the accusation at the heart of Couric’s question.

Ultimately, what the discourse of celebrity did was allow the Right to go personal with their attacks on Moore. As *Moorewatch.com* explained on their *Fahrenheit 9/11* flyer, the main point of their website was to help viewers “learn more about the man behind the message.” This wasn’t about a film or the ideas it gave voice to, but rather the slick, self-centered filmmaker behind it. As such, *Moorewatch.com* regularly made hay out of popular press attacks on Moore’s celebrity image. For instance, after Moore’s success at Cannes, Keneflick reprinted sections from a profile in *The Observer* in which the “revelations” about Moore’s childhood in a middle-class Flint suburb and current Upper East Side abode originally surfaced. He then offers this judgment:

This is a point I’ve made a hundred times in the past. Michael Moore is not, in any sense of the word, “working class.” He’s a left-wing elitist from a wealthy middle-class family who has never actually held a real working-class job. He’s a professional muckraker and political activist, which in and of itself is fine, but it’s hardly working-class. Working-class people have, at one point in their life, actually held a real nine-to-five job. Mikey worked on the auto assembly line for one whole day. Man of the people, or left-wing elitist with a carefully-crafted slovenly image? You be the judge.

Lee “Observing”

Moves such as this abounded in Right-wing attacks on Moore, as conservatives exploited Moore’s celebrity-status to prove he was a liar and a hypocrite. Conservative bloggers



constantly referred to him as a “multimillionaire” (“Douchebag” *Wizbangblog*), a “limousine liberal” (John “Michael,” *Powerlineblog*), and “one of the many jet-setting liberals who preach environmentalism while flying around on jets” (Malkin “Gulfstream,” *Michellemalkin.com*).

Indeed, most of the professional Moore-critics, such as Michael Wilson and Hardy and Clarke, framed their critiques around Moore’s “hypocritical” persona. For instance, Wilson begins his film by juxtaposing his own modest existence with Moore’s contemporary, “jet-setting” lifestyle: “Meanwhile, this guy was flying around in corporate jets, living in palatial apartments and making millions and millions of dollars, by simply voicing his opinion.” This comment is accompanied by shots of Moore in full-celebrity mode, accepting an award on stage at Cannes and standing on the red carpet with his arm around Harvey Weinstein. In this way, Wilson focuses his entire critique around the purported inauthenticity of Moore’s working-class image, a theme that resurfaces again and again throughout the film. Thus, Wilson ends the movie with his interview of David Horowitz, about whom he says: “Whether you like him or hate him, at least he doesn’t pretend to be anything other than what he is.” Perhaps no other statement better encapsulated the Right’s critique of Michael Moore.

David T. Hardy and Jason Clarke employ the same exact strategy in *Michael Moore is a Big Fat Stupid White Man*. They begin their book with a chapter entitled, “Michael Moore’s Resume: Notes on a Life of Smoke and Mirrors.” The chapter serves as nothing more than a compiling of all the charges of “hypocrisy” made against Moore throughout his career: Moore is a tyrant as a boss; he fabricated the Disney-scandal as a “publicity ploy” to launch *Fahrenheit 9/11*; etc. “We’ve collected more than enough

evidence,” they claim in their “Open Letter to Michael Moore,” “that *you* are the most fictitious character of our times!” (12). Thus, thanks to the celebrity discourse that surrounded Moore, Right-wing populists were easily able to demonize him. As conservative blogger Rachel Lucas put it, making an observation that was also an indictment: “Claiming to represent ‘working stiffs’ while being a famous multimillionaire is becoming problematic” (“Michael”).

With more than enough “evidence” to paint Moore as a hypocrite, the Right’s attack on Moore’s character steadily progressed, or regressed, with reckless abandon. With no one in the popular press willing to defend the filmmaker outright, the door opened for conservatives to say what ever they wanted about Michael Moore, and so they did, transforming attacks on his character into baseless assessments of his psychological make-up. Some conservative critics went so far as to psychoanalyze Moore in print, describing him not only as a manipulative huckster, but as a self-involved, paranoid personality. The stark cynicism inherent to contemporary celebrity discourse was on full display, as conservative critics treated Moore to the kind of pop-psychologizing usually reserved for the likes of Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan.

This angle was pushed heavily by Hardy and Clark, who devoted an entire chapter of their book to explaining how Moore’s “career and public persona fit the textbook case of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder” (11). Moorewatch.com constantly logged instances of Moore’s “egomaniacal” tendencies, describing one such instance as “the latest sign of Moore’s rampant egomania and narcissistic personality disorder” (Lee “The World”). Rachel Lucas wrote an entire article entitled, “Michael Moore: A Psychological Analysis,” in which she argued that Moore suffered from the psychological strain of

keeping up his own public-masquerade: “the dissonance between what Moore knows to be true and what he so desperately tries to convince other people is true has become a psychological burden for him, and he is beginning to crumble under the pressure” (“Michael”). Meanwhile, Wilson deferred to Hardy, himself, as an expert-witness for his film. Hardy appears throughout *Michael Moore Hates America* acting the role of psychiatrist, making diagnoses such as: “If you look at the symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder, Michael Moore appears to parallel a lot of them, if not all of them.” Once again, this line of attack borrows from the celebrity discourse surrounding Moore in the popular press, especially the contention of many journalists that Moore’s public “outbursts” at venues such as the Oscars were nothing more than self-aggrandizing publicity-grabs.

### **“The Party of Michael Moore”**

All-in-all, the Right’s clever re-articulation of Moore’s celebrity image in 2004 amounted to an instance of what Berlet and Lyons call “packaged scapegoating” (244). By this, they mean “the skillful coding and presentation of scapegoating in forms easily digested by the mass media” (244). According to Berlet and Lyons, the increasing demand by (understaffed and under-funded) newsrooms for ready-made, packaged information that can be easily reformatted into a quick news story has created an atmosphere in which “the ability of ideological groups to slip glib but dubious material directly into the corporate media” has been greatly enhanced. The narrative of Michael Moore as a hypocritical, egomaniacal, liberal elitist bent on spreading his own Left-wing ideas through the nation’s multiplexes was just such a story. So powerful was this image,

that the Right not only used it to diffuse the legitimacy of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but they deployed it as a clever symbol for the Democratic Party as a whole.

As Laclau argues, and as has been described in this chapter, populism refers to “a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject” (Laclau, “Populism” 43). To briefly summarize, this goal is achieved by discursively constructing “an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps” (43). This division is created via the construction of an equivalential chain of social demands in which “the equivalential moment prevails over the differential nature of [these] demands” (43-4). The construction and consolidation of such a chain must take place via “the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality” (44). This element, what Laclau calls *empty signifiers*, are characterized by a certain “poverty” of meaning: “as their function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content” (40). Empty signifiers are, according to Laclau, both “enriching and impoverishing;” impoverishing in that they are “emptied” of any particularistic content, but enriching in that – thanks to their broad generality – they can be used to unify a broad range of competing demands.

In Right-wing populism, the “liberal-elite” has served as just such an empty signifier, inviting a wide range of conservative interests and cultural resentments to combine in one coalition against a “common enemy.” Thus, it was through the deployment of this empty signifier that the Right sought to delegitimize Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. This strategy not only worked to delegitimize Moore, but also to turn him *into* the very symbol of his own delegitimization. In many ways, Moore became the

*embodiment* of the “liberal elite” and, as a result, was turned into an empty signifier in his own right. As the conservative attack on Moore grew legs, the Right suddenly found itself in possession of a potent symbol with which they could tarnish the entire Democratic Party. Thus, at times during the summer of 2004, the Right seemed to be running less against John Kerry than Michael Moore.

This is not surprising. As Laclau argues, “an assemblage of heterogeneous elements kept equivalentially together only by a name is ... necessarily a *singularity*,” and, as such, the more heterogeneous the elements being bound together, the more dependent they are upon this “transcendent singularity” (*On Populist* 100). Since “the extreme form of singularity is an individuality,” populist movements have often congealed around an individual who acts as the empty signifier, *par excellence*: the “Leader” (100). As Francisco Panizza puts it: “... if populism can be defined as a process of naming that retroactively determines what is the name of ‘the people,’ the name that best fills the symbolic void through which identification takes place is that leader himself” (19). The Right’s articulation of Michael Moore represents a unique instance of this process in reverse. Rather than constructing the image of a leader to represent “the people” (although, in many ways, the Republican Party attempted to cast Bush in such a role), the Right used Moore as a convenient symbol for the people’s populist “other” – he was transformed into the leader of the “liberal elite.”

As the 2004 election approached, and the hooplah over *Fahrenheit 9/11* continued to resound, the Right began to critique the Democratic Party’s “embrace” of Michael Moore as their newly anointed leader. Conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks got the ball rolling when he facetiously lamented:

In years past, American liberals have had to settle for intellectual and moral leadership from the likes of John Dewey, Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Jr. But now, a grander beacon has appeared on the mountaintop, and from sea to shining sea, tens of thousands have joined in the adulation.

“All Hail”

David Horowitz picked up on Brook’s claim and ran with it, writing in his frontpagemag.com: “Behind [*Fahrenheit*’s] impressive box office success lies its maker’s capture of the Democratic Party’s imagination, not to mention its heart and soul. This is the really significant dimension of the Michael Moore moment” (“Where”). By cleverly labeling the summer of 2004 the “Michael Moore Moment,” Horowitz neatly transferred all the negative associations with Moore’s personal character – hypocrisy, egomania, out-of-touch elitism – to the Democrats, as a whole. Michael Reagan’s article in frontpagemag.com, only a few days later, serves as a template for this strategy:

America is witnessing one of the most despicable political campaigns in our long history – a presidential race filled with lies, distortions and outright hatred – and the offender is not the mythical Republican attack machine the Democrats keep talking about, it’s the national Democrat party itself. If anybody doubts the truth of this I invite them to look at one Michael Moore – slime master extraordinary, a practiced prevaricator, hater of America and radical socialist who has produced what nobody can deny is nothing less than a Democrat campaign commercial masquerading as a documentary. Moore, however, is simply a symbol for an angry party gone mad. Utterly convinced of the fiction that President Bush stole the 2000 election from Al Gore who by divine right as a Democrat was entitled to occupy the White House which his party regards as their private property, the Democrats are in a state of uncontrolled rage. The symbol of the Democrat party is no longer a donkey, it’s a crazed jackal.

“Michel Moore’s”

Writing about the Democratic National Convention in *Human Events*, Ann Coulter argued that: “Despite colossal efforts by the Democrats to fake out Americans and pretend the Democrats are normal Americans who love their country, every once and a while they make a mistake and give us a ‘tell’” (“Democrats” 772). That “tell,” she argues, was none other than “noted patriot Michael Moore,” who was the “belle of the ball at the convention.”

Descriptions of Moore as the defacto leader of the Democratic Party resounded throughout the conservative echo-chamber in the summer of 2004, cropping up over and over again on Right-wing blogs. Regular references were made to the “Michel Moore Wing of the Democratic Party” (Malkin “Goat,” *Michellemalkin.com*; Bill “Recommended,” *Indcjournal.com*), to Moore as the “mouthpiece” of the Democratic Party (Patrick “Michael,” *Blogsforbush.com*), as “intellectual leader” of the Democratic Party (John “Moore,” *Powerlineblog.com*), and the “face of today’s Democrats” (Captain Ed “The Keynote,” *Captainsquartersblog*). Throughout the election cycle, Moore became a throw-away punch-line for the Right, allowing them to simply dismiss any criticism of the war as “pure Michael Moore” (John, “The Democrats” *Powerlineblog.com*). Rather than address criticism of the war head-on, conservatives talked instead about “the embrace of the lunatic fringe (Michael Moore, et. al.) by Democrats in this election cycle” (Captain Ed, *Captainsquartersblog.com* 6/29), and made specious claims such as: “John Kerry took his talking points directly from *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Now Moore is serving as the de facto attack dog for the Democrats ...” (Patrick “Michael,” *Blogsforbush.com*).

The Right’s labeling of Moore the de facto leader of the Democratic Party in 2004 could not have been more absurd. John Kerry never made mention of Moore throughout

the election campaign (perhaps weary of the uproar that surrounded Moore's participation in an event for Democratic hopeful Wesley Clark the year before). Indeed, as pointed out, Moore was not invited to the Democratic National Convention as an official guest of the party. And even the liberal "blogosphere" didn't rally around Moore-as-leader. As I have previously pointed out, mentions of Michael Moore on conservative weblogs out-numbered those on liberal weblogs by a rate of more than 2-1 in 2004 (Adamic and Lance, 13). Indeed, the only effort to provide Moore with any kind of political "embrace" was that of film reviewers and liberal pundits who claimed *Fahrenheit* as their outlet for catharsis, even while they admitted it was nothing more than well-made propaganda.

As argued, it was this undermining version of "support" that the Right exploited. Indeed, Horowitz bases his claim that Moore has "captured" the Democratic Party's imagination around Edelstein's waffling review of the film, which Horowitz describes as "Edelstein's cave-in to bad sense" ("Where"). Edelstein's review and others like it, Horowitz claims, reveal that a troubling alliance has been forged:

between once sensible liberals and mischievous leftists. ... Edelstein's review shows that he understands the squalid duplicity of Moore, but nonetheless can't extricate himself from the seduction of the idea that the ends of this film – sabotaging the current war effort – justify the disreputable means: "It delighted me. It disgusted me. I celebrate it. I lament it."

Thus, using liberal critics' own words against them, Right-wing populists capitalized on the reception of Moore and his film, engaging in a form of mock "worry" over the new direction the Democrats had taken. For instance, Jonathon Last of the



*Weekly Standard* wondered if John Kerry could “survive” Moore’s histrionics at the DNC. Arguing that the box-office success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* had allowed “the people on the left to pretend that everyone in America agrees with them,” Last mocked the manner in which such an out-of-touch radical had been “embraced by the Democratic establishment” (“Here”). Similarly, Scott Galupo, writing in the *Washington Times*, quipped that it was “no surprise” to see Moore being embraced by “the glitterati in France, New York and Hollywood,” but found the fact that “the Democratic Party in Washington is flirting with him ... more troubling” (“Meet” D01). In this narrative framing, Moore was seen not as a potent weapon for a Democratic victory, but as an albatross that would lead to their inevitable defeat.

### **Conclusion**

Reacting to the crowd response given John McCain when he mentioned Moore by name in his speech to the Republican National Convention, the conservative *Powerlineblog.com* displayed a rare instance of strategic honesty, laying bare the Right’s populist strategy: “what a brilliant stroke to direct the pent up anger of Republicans, who have seen their president vilified for the past two years, against an unlikable gadfly rather than a true political opponent ... The Republicans need to do more to hang [Moore] around the Democrat’s neck” (John “Last”). In 2004, this is exactly what they did, transforming Moore’s tarnished celebrity-persona into a virtual symbol for the Democratic Party as a whole. This move is perhaps best encapsulated by a TV ad, run by the Bush campaign, in which a clip of Moore’s Oscar speech is interspersed with clips of prominent Democratic politicians giving fiery speeches, in an ad that claims to depict

“The Faces of John Kerry’s Democratic Party: The Coalition of the Wild-Eyed.”

Significantly, Moore’s is the only image of a non-politician.

Given the ease with which the Right deployed such a strategy, I would argue that Moore’s laudable efforts to bring political documentary into the mainstream – and to make an anti-war message “popular” – resulted in an act of failed populism. The patronizing aspects of his mode of address, his articulation within the public sphere as a celebrated indie-auteur, and his own status as celebrity-provocateur, ultimately undermined Moore’s ability to create the kind of progressive, populist movement he hoped for. Instead, he offered the Right all the ammunition they needed to turn Moore into a symbol of the “liberal elite.” As such, I would argue that political documentarians like Moore need to pay more attention to the historical context within which they operate. As Laclau argues “populism is an ontological and not an ontic category – i.e. its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content ... but in a particular *mode of articulation* of whatever social, political, or ideological contents” (34). In order for progressive political documentarians like Moore to enter into the political fray and be successful, they must learn this lesson, a lesson that Right-wing populists have understood for decades. By playing right into the stereotype of “liberal elitist,” Moore did much to seal his own fate, allowing his opponents to re-articulate his image, from the populist leader he and his supporters often envision, to its mirror image: an imposter in populist clothes.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION: A NEW SELF-CURE?

*“OK, I get it. It's a game of chess, and so far I've been in checkmate.  
I need to find a different way to get to where I want to go.”*<sup>166</sup>

– Michael Moore

In conclusion, I return to the moment I invoked at the beginning of this dissertation: John McCain's mention of Michael Moore in his speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention. The remark garnered so much enthusiasm on the floor of the convention hall, McCain felt obliged to repeat it, telling the roaring crowd: “That line was so good, I'll use it again!” Indeed, the applause McCain got after telling the crowd they shouldn't let anyone “tell them” what to think about the Iraq War (“certainly not a disingenuous filmmaker”) constituted his biggest response of the night. McCain had barely finished enunciating the word “filmmaker” when the audience burst into a round of escalating applause, laughter, boos and catcalls that lasted for well over a minute, causing McCain to pause his comments, and finally implore the crowd to settle down, before continuing with his speech. The crowd was responding not only to McCain's well-chosen punch-line, but to the fact that Moore, himself, was sitting in the press box that night, high above the convention floor. When McCain called Moore out, the crowd immediately turned their gaze from McCain to Moore, jeering enthusiastically, while Moore raised his hands aloft, gesturing for them to keep it up in a show of “it-ain't-bothering-me” mock-support.

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<sup>166</sup> Breznican A1

In many ways, this moment serves as a perfect illustration of the most problematic aspects associated with Moore's rhetorical strategies as a political documentarian and the discursive logics that have worked to define his films and his image within the public sphere. As I argued in the Introduction, McCain's deployment of the phrase, "don't let anyone tell you," exemplifies the strategies of Right-wing populist rhetoric in the way that it invites the audience to imagine itself as standing up against a condescending elite that thinks it "knows better." As such, McCain implicitly invokes the language of class resentment that the right deployed against Moore so often throughout the summer of 2004.

More than McCain's comments, however, the moment itself is telling for the way in which it (metaphorically) situated Moore firmly within the "liberal media elite" (Moore was serving as a guest-columnist for *USA Today* that evening) and emphasized the extent to which Moore had become a national celebrity – a figure so familiar that he did not have to be mentioned by *name*. It would have been a rare person in the crowd (or watching at home) who didn't know which "disingenuous filmmaker" McCain was referencing that night.<sup>167</sup> For his part, Moore did nothing to dispel this celebrity-status, hamming it up from the press box and turning the moment into one of his patented spectacles of audacity.

This moment exemplifies the way in which Moore's celebrity-status often causes the filmmaker "authenticity" problems. As Moore waved his arms, seeming to bask in the

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<sup>167</sup> Indeed, it certainly seems clear that the mainstream media knew who McCain was calling out. When McCain uttered the line for the first time, an MSNBC camera cut immediately from McCain to a close-up of Moore in an effort to capture the filmmaker's response. The cut was so immediate it seems clear that MSNBC producers were working from the pre-speech script, no doubt provided them by the RNC, and hoped to highlight the "drama" they assumed would play out live. For video, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzybUF6RCWk>.

glow of the spotlight, it was impossible *not* to read into this image the popular charge that Moore was nothing more than a Barnum-style master of self-marketing and a consummate “media whore.” If the knock on Moore was that his real “commitments” were to fame and fortune, rather than class-solidarity and social change, the image of him taking center-stage at the Republican National Convention could not have done much to rebut this popular smear.

In the end, what this moment illustrates is the extent to which Moore had not only failed to become a liberal thorn-in-the-side to Bush and the Republicans, but the way in which he had instead become a convenient symbol around which the Right could rally, living proof of the “liberal elite” they so often warned against. Indeed, this moment reveals the manner in which Moore became a kind of red herring for the Republican party in 2004. For, at least on that particular evening, the Republican crowd directed their loudest jeers not towards John Kerry, but instead towards that “disingenuous filmmaker.” As Andrew Sullivan – one of the Right’s more moderate voices – argued in a post-election assessment later that Fall:

A large part of the pro-Bush vote - especially among blue state residents – was a vote against the left elite and the cultural attitudes it represents in the public imagination. It was a vote not so much for Bush or his often religious policies (or even the war on terror), but against the post 9/11 left, against Michael Moore and political correctness and Susan Sontag and CBS News, among a host of others.

“Un-Credibles”

Here, Sullivan testifies to the manner in which Moore’s working-class image and political commitments had become rearticulated within the public sphere by the time *Fahrenheit 9/11* finished its historic run. No longer (indeed, perhaps, not *ever*)

understood as the working class Joe from Flint, MI, Moore was now, for many both inside and outside the conservative political sphere – the poster-child for liberal elitism in its most “insidious” form.

In the end, Moore’s self-proclaimed project – to popularize the political documentary form and deploy it towards progressive, political ends – has been a deeply problematic one, at best. Far from constructing a “working-class” image of progressivism, or achieving any kind of popular consensus around Left/liberal perspectives and causes, Moore seems to have reinvigorated some of the most problematic aspects of Left discourse within the last half a century and, in the process, reinforced some of the Right’s most effective rhetorical strategies. This dissertation constitutes an attempt to explain how this all transpired. How did one of the Left’s most unapologetically “working class” voices become a living, breathing symbol of the condescending, liberal elite?

In Chapter Two, I argued that while Moore has done much to transform political documentary into an engaging and entertaining format that can (and does regularly) draw large audiences and garner public attention, he has not done much to alleviate the problems associated with the form’s traditional mode of address. Many scholars have argued that documentary, as a cultural form, has historically served an ideological function. By claiming the ability to represent the “real” and tell the “truth” about the world, documentary has served as a means for those in power to shape and define that world in particular ways including, and especially, those human subjects singled out for such explication. Documentary has been, in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s words, a conversation “of ‘us,’ about ‘them,’” a conversation in which “we” are authorized to speak and to know,

while “they” are always silenced. As such, documentary has historically been one way in which social hierarchies are maintained, between those who observe and define, and those who are observed and defined.

This has often been the case where *political* documentary is concerned, even when used by progressive filmmakers with the express purpose of overturning social hierarchies. Filmmakers who sought to expose the conditions of the oppressed – abject poverty, the exploitation of the working class, or the injustices of racism – simultaneously claimed the authority to speak for and on behalf of those subjects, to “know” their pain, to “understand” their condition. As such, these films constituted acts of advocacy-from-above, in which oppressed subjects of all kinds were assigned the role of passive victim, a social “problem” to be analyzed and evaluated by those with the power and ability to “do something about it.” Thus, even when they advocated on behalf of the oppressed, documentaries often worked to reinforce structures of social power.

Consequently, many scholars have argued that documentarians should adopt a more “reflexive” mode of address and produce films that, in the words of Jay Ruby, “speak with and alongside” subjects, rather than “for and about” them. In this way, documentary might be envisioned as a means through which oppressed subjects can regain a sense of agency within the social realm by taking part in their own representation and speaking to their own experiences. Such a form could change our very image of the world, as one made up of many voices, many experiences, many understandings and many perspectives, all of which are endowed with the authority to take part in shaping that world.

For some scholars, Moore's reflexive-style of documentary does just that. In this view, by placing himself at the center of his films, and transforming the documentary format into a kind of autobiographical "quest" to find answers and speak truth to power, Moore's films become a way to "give voice" to the working class, with Moore standing in as its representative. However, as I have argued, far from giving voice to the working class, Moore's films instead put that working class "on display." Rather than situating himself in and among his subjects, and providing them with a platform through which to voice their own experiences, Moore constructs himself as the only "power" on-screen, the only one in possession of the "truth." Indeed, *all* of Moore's subjects are represented as subordinate to his controlling voice-over and cinematic-gaze: mere cogs in Moore's grand, narrative schemes. As such, Moore's films reinforce, rather than subvert, the tendency for documentary to objectify its subjects, while claiming the authority of the filmmaker to do just that. Indeed, Moore's formally reflexive style – the way he frames his films within entertaining, quest-narratives in which the filmmaker, himself, becomes the main protagonist and central point of audience identification – intensifies documentary's objectifying tendencies. Moore's heroic tales of political investigation transform the documentary from a staid and sobering call-to-duty into a virtual "fantasy of advocacy," whereby the authority of the powerful to speak "for and about" the oppressed is not only reinforced, but fetishized. In the end, Moore's films don't relinquish the cultural authority claimed by the traditional documentary film: they *celebrate* it.

The traditional documentary mode of address is doubly problematic where class issues are at the forefront, as they so often are in Moore's documentaries. As I described



in Chapter Three, class differences (at least in part) are currently defined according to what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital.” According to this logic, being working class means not having the “right” kind of knowledge about the world, or the ability to understand it in the “proper” way. As such, the working class is subordinated to a middle class that is implicitly authorized to evaluate – indeed to *classify* – the behavior of those beneath them. From this perspective, class hierarchies are based less upon economic differences and more upon the cultural *authority* vested in the middle-to-upper classes to observe, to evaluate and to judge. This “discourse of class” constructs what Beverly Skeggs (referencing Raymond Williams) has called distinct “structures of feeling,” one based upon feelings of security and self-confidence for those inhabiting the upper classes, and one based upon anxiety and doubt for those in the lower classes. Within such a classifying discourse, the working class find their lives, their experiences, and their understandings of both, to be devalued and delegitimized, an existence marked by what Sennett and Cobb have called the “hidden injuries of class.”

According to Barbara Ehrenreich, this hierarchical relationship has been written into the very fabric of contemporary society, in which a series of middle-class professions – such as middle-managers, physicians, teachers and social workers – are authorized to manage and confer judgment upon the lives of those beneath them. In such a world, she argues, relations between working people and the middle class are, more often than not, “a one-way dialogue” in which “commands, diagnoses, instructions, judgments, definitions” come from above, while only submissive compliance is authorized from below. As such, the relationship between the middle and lower classes has been, by and large, an antagonistic one, even when the middle class has sought to construct some

measure of solidarity. Indeed, Ehrenreich argues, it is an “allied,” rather than antagonistic, relationship between these two classes that has been “the defining dream of the American left: that discontented members of the middle class might join the working-class majority in a political effort to redistribute both power and wealth downward, to those who need them most” (*Fear* 256). However, this goal is continuously undermined by the very logic of class difference that produces a knowledgeable “middle class” in the first place. As Ehrenreich puts it:

It is far easier to sketch the alliances required for such an undertaking than to create them in the flesh, easier to see the “others” as distant “constituencies” – the building blocks of strategic fantasy – rather than as potential colleagues and leaders. Even the middle class left, where the spirit is most willing, has an uneven record of reaching across the lines of class. Left and right, we are still locked in by a middle-class culture that is almost wholly insular, self-referential, and in its own way, parochial. We seldom see the ‘others’ except as projections of our own anxieties or instruments of our ambitions, and even seeing them – as victims, “cases,” or exemplars of some archaic virtue – seldom hear.

*Fear* 257

As I have argued, Moore’s “fantasies of advocacy” are, in many ways, mediated versions of the classifying discourse described above. By defining the working class as a social “problem” in need of fixing, Moore’s documentaries become one more version of the “helping professions”: claiming to speak on behalf of the working class, while simultaneously working to shore up the cultural authority of an audience that is invited to not only sympathize with, but evaluate and judge, the lives and behaviors of those they see on screen. The result is that, rather than challenge contemporary class-relations, Moore’s documentaries actually work to reinforce class-distinctions.

In Chapter Six, I demonstrated how the classifying discourse constructed by Moore's fantasies of advocacy not only works to reinforce contemporary class distinctions, but leaves the way open for political attacks from the Right. Since at least the late 1960s, the US right, broadly defined, has employed a strategy of what Chip Berlet calls "Right-wing populism" to delegitimize leftists, liberals, and progressives of all kinds. Following this strategy, conservatives have worked to align the (white) lower-middle and working classes with upper class, business elites by taking advantage of working-class resentment inculcated by a classifying discourse utilized by many within the middle-class Left. Right-wing populists have sought to rhetorically divide the world between a majority of decent, hard-working, "average Americans," and a self-centered, arrogant, "liberal elite" bent on imposing their view of the world upon society at large. The problem, as Laurie Ouellette has pointed out, is that the antagonistic relationship, between knowledgeable liberals and a helpless/hapless working class, constructed by those engaged in acts of (intended) benevolent social advocacy reproduces "the very same 'us vs. them' opposition circulated by conservatives" (199). So, too, Moore's fantasies of advocacy, far from encouraging a sense of social solidarity between the middle and lower classes, paradoxically reinvigorate the antagonistic *divide* between middle class liberals and the working class that right-wing populists are so adept at exploiting. The strategic consequences of Moore's problematic mode of address became clear in the summer of 2004, when the right latched onto Moore and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, turning them into a virtual symbol of "liberal elitism" that they then proceeded to flog incessantly throughout the run-up to the presidential election.

It is also important to look beyond Moore's films and their problematic mode of address. For, to focus entirely upon his rhetorical strategies would be to lay all the blame for Moore's political failings upon Moore. Such a focus would be to ignore the many relevant and crucial political arguments he has *added* to the public discourse. While Moore's rhetorical strategies may be found wanting, his films have, nonetheless, acted as rare sources for progressive (indeed, radical) perspectives within the mainstream media, especially where economic issues are concerned. As the vast majority of research in this area has shown, the mainstream media tend to over-represent the interests of the business community when dealing with economic issues, while downplaying (and in many cases "erasing") the economic disparities that exist between the lower and the middle/upper classes.<sup>168</sup> As such, Moore's overt *commitment* to challenging the current economic system and its many injustices must be acknowledged, despite his faults. However, this acknowledgment is something the mainstream media have often proven to be unable – perhaps unwilling – to provide.

As discussed in Chapter Four, Moore has been forced to deal with a mainstream media landscape that is deeply opposed to the legitimate airing of alternative political views. Over the course of Moore's career, his films have been the subject of many public controversies concerning the role of committed, political documentary within the public sphere. More often than not, his films have been delegitimized as credible political arguments by both his opponents *and* his supporters. Specifically, his films have been defined according to three discursive logics – what I have called the "discourse of documentary," the "discourse of independent film," and the "discourse of infotainment" –

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<sup>168</sup> See Herman and Chomsky; DeMott; Lewis, Hartley, Harrison; Aronwitz; McChesney; Croteau and Hoynes; Kumar.

all of which have worked at various times to de-emphasize the political potency of Moore's films and the integrity of Moore as an alternative political voice.

During the initial run of *Roger & Me* (1989) Moore's detractors attacked his film according to the "discourse of documentary," in which any evidence of political bias was enough to delegitimize the integrity of his work. His supporters, however, chose *not* to defend his political arguments, but instead his artistic achievements. Interpreting *Roger & Me* from within the logic of the "discourse of independent film," Moore's supporters invoked the notion of artistic license, praising the filmmaker for constructing a documentary that was aesthetically innovative, intellectually challenging and emotionally moving. Within such a perspective, the theme of economic injustice was relegated to the sidelines, while the debate focused upon Moore's innovative style and whether or not *Roger & Me* "counted" as a true documentary.

Perhaps worse, however, was the way in which this art/indie discourse not only rearticulated the political relevance of Moore's film, but re-envisioned the very image of his own core *audience*. More than anything else, the "art defense" reinforced the fact that *Roger & Me* was not a film speaking with and alongside the working class, but instead speaking *to* an audience of educated film-goers hungry for a cinematic experience that flattered their self-image as intelligent and serious-minded, an audience primed and ready for a "fantasy of advocacy." Thus, while the discourse of independent film may have worked to defend Moore from those who would tarnish his integrity as a journalist, it only created more problems for his goal of encouraging a popular solidarity between the middle and working classes around progressive politics.

Similar framing strategies worked in subsequent years to delegitimize the political meanings and relevance of all Moore's films. For instance, when Moore attempted to shake the label of "art house auteur" and return to his populist roots with *The Big One* (1997) he found himself under attack again, only this time from the very people who defended him during the controversy surrounding *Roger & Me*. Critics invoked the "discourse of infotainment" to argue that Moore had sold out his artistic integrity to make a didactic, simplistic, mass entertainment. In an attempt to overcome this "failure," Moore and his producers actively courted the independent film world again in 2001 by marketing *Bowling for Columbine* as an intellectually challenging, politically-edgy piece of documentary-art. While critics responded accordingly, lavishing the film with praise, they also downplayed the film's political commitments in a way that repeated the critical reception of *Roger & Me* – paradoxically commending Moore for making a film that posed more questions than it did answers and that was geared less towards advocating a political point of view than it was stoking a public debate.

Indeed, so impressed was the critical community that they bestowed Moore with the Oscar many thought he should have won for *Roger* in 1989. But while Moore had regained the favor of the critical establishment, the art/indie framing of *Bowling* backfired on him once more. When he used the Oscar stage to voice his political commitments publicly – specifically his opposition to Bush and the decision to invade Iraq – he found himself under attack again, this time for betraying those in the film world who had stood up for him. By declaring his staunch commitment to a (then) controversial political cause, Moore had proven himself unworthy of the support shown him by the critical community.

Thus, what the history of Michael Moore's public reception reveals is the way in which the mainstream media, as a whole, work to deny the legitimate airing of alternative perspectives and radical political views. Whether Moore is being attacked or defended, supported or denounced, the most radical aspects of his work have always been held at bay. And no strategy employed by Moore to challenge this logic seems to have worked. Whether he has presented himself as a serious journalist, independent auteur, or populist entertainer, Moore has found himself consistently delegitimized as a committed documentarian.

Furthermore, the only avenue to public legitimacy offered Moore has been via the world of independent/art cinema – a discursive realm that often reinvigorates the worst aspects of Moore's classifying discourse. For, as many scholars have argued, the discourse of art/indie film is *also* a classifying discourse, a logic through which, historically, middle-upper-class audiences have sought to “distinguish” themselves from those beneath them. By defining itself against the trivial and “escapist” fare offered up by mainstream Hollywood, the art cinema (and later, the indie film world) has defined itself as a medium offering “serious” and “challenging” movie-going experiences for an audience with enough cultural capital to appreciate them. It is not difficult to see how seamlessly Moore's “fantasies of advocacy” fit within such a logic. Thus, in many ways, Moore has found himself trapped within a catch-22; the only way for him to attain legitimacy within the public sphere is to embrace a logic that downplays his political relevance, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that he is a member of the patronizing, liberal elite. This is precisely the discursive vortex into which Moore stepped when he released *Fahrenheit 9/11* in the summer of 2004.

This time around, Moore seemed bent on being everything to everyone: committed documentarian, indie-auteur, and mainstream entertainer, all rolled into one. As such, critics found themselves at an impasse. They were still, of course, unable to defend him outright as a journalist or documentarian. Given the blatant partisan goals of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (underwritten by Moore's then-still-recent remarks during the Oscar ceremony a year before), they could no longer credibly praise his film solely for its "artistic" merits. Not only this, but Moore's clear intention to combine political argument with *entertainment* values (a kind of unapologetic "infotainment") further mitigated against the interpretation of *Fahrenheit* as purely indie/art-house fare. Given all this, critics opted for a different interpretive strategy, what was, perhaps, the most delegitimizing interpretation of all: that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a form of entertaining "catharsis" for the left. According to this logic, *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a brilliant political entertainment geared towards letting embattled liberals blow off a little steam. By employing such a logic, critics could safely applaud Moore's unapologetically committed documentary – and even champion its cause – without ever having to acknowledge that it should be taken *seriously* by the public at large.

Once again, such a framing not only devalued Moore as a credible, political voice, but it reinforced a popular image of his core audience as a "select" clientele. This time, however, the indie/art-house audience often invoked by critics was re-imagined in explicitly political terms. By defining *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a form of "liberal catharsis," critics reinforced the notion that Moore's film really wasn't speaking with, alongside – or even *to* average Americans. Instead, it was a film that could speak only to a self-satisfied



liberal audience, elated that someone had finally come along to confirm that they had, in fact, been *right* all along.

The contradictions inherent in Moore's films and their reception within the popular press all converge upon the figure of Moore, as political celebrity. It is undoubtedly Moore's construction of *himself*, as a funny, but dogged, protagonist on-screen, and tireless political activist off-screen, that have made his films so popular, and himself a virtual brand-name. However, once again, this success has come at a cost. While Moore has seen his public stature soar, and his audience expand exponentially, he has also seen his working-class "status" increasingly questioned, and his personal integrity continuously denounced. As I argue in Chapter Five, Moore's decision to turn himself into a brand-name, "working-class hero" has opened him to the "discourse of celebrity," a discursive logic that undermines his authenticity as both working-class activist *and* "trustworthy" documentarian.

As Joshua Gamson argues, there are essentially two types of "stories" that explain the phenomenon of celebrity in contemporary culture. The first is an idealistic narrative, usually peddled by Hollywood, in which small-town "nobodies" make it big. The second is a much more cynical story, often peddled by tabloids and celebrity magazines, in which celebrity, and the various personalities who inhabit it, are understood to be entirely artificial, manufactured images that exist only to be sold. Both narratives have been used to define and explain "Michael Moore" throughout his career, and both have had a delegitimizing effect upon his credibility as a political filmmaker and working-class activist.

In his early days, Moore's persona was often interpreted through an "indie film" version of the first celebrity story. As *Roger & Me* continued to receive accolades, the popular press became enthralled with the celebrity-story enabled by this success, the improbable tale of a down-on-his-luck journalist picking up a camera for the first time to make a documentary that became the toast of the critical establishment. Critics focused less on Moore's description of an unjust economic system and, instead, fixated on his rise to financial success. Such a reading of Moore's star-image, with its Horatio Alger-esque undertones, implicitly undermined the economic critique levied by the film, itself. But it dovetailed perfectly with the popular press's framing of *Roger & Me* as the artistic triumph of a new, indie-auteur. Moore became a living example of the unknown, "struggling artist" who finally "makes it big." In such a framing, the symbolic nature of Moore's working-class autobiography lost its political potency, as Moore's humble circumstances became less a marker of his working-class authenticity, and more a marker of his *indie* credibility.

As Moore's career wore on, however, he refused to dull the radical edge of his work and it became impossible for critics *not* to interpret him as a political activist. Nonetheless, the discourse of celebrity held sway. Rather than contextualize Moore, first-and-foremost, as a "working-class" filmmaker, the popular press defined him as an irrepressible political "provocateur," willing to say and do anything in public to cause a stir. Critics once again de-emphasized Moore's political arguments to focus, incessantly, on his *individual* battles with various corporate villains, such as Nike head, Phil Knight. The working class people and perspectives for which Moore claimed to speak were relegated to the background, as critics focused almost exclusively on the "spectacle of

audacity” created by Moore’s outrageous political stunts and confrontations. Such a framing only worked to reinforce the worst aspects of Moore’s “fantasy of advocacy,” as it was the very *act* of advocacy that was highlighted. Interpreted within the discourse of celebrity, every issue Moore took on became rearticulated within an heroic story about *Moore*, himself, as political advocate and provocateur.

Thus, as Moore’s fame grew, his connection to the working class milieu he so often invoked became more and more attenuated. The incessant focus in the popular press on Moore’s rise to cinematic stardom, and his ability to personally take on such cultural luminaries as Phil Knight, Rudy Giuliani, Dick Clark and Charlton Heston, led to a concomitant devaluing of his working class “bonafides.” Moore could no longer claim to be just an average, working-class Joe from Flint, nor could he claim to be just a political documentarian. The cynical version of celebrity discourse took over, as critics began to define Moore as a shrewd businessman and savvy image-maker. According to this logic, Moore’s working-class persona and political commitments could only be understood as part of an ingenious marketing scheme geared towards selling a host of media products to a specific political market. Michael Moore became “Michael Moore,” just another celebrity brand-name.

This interpretive logic followed Moore everywhere, undermining virtually everything he said and did. Thus, his Oscar speech was read as an utterly “predictable” and self-centered media-grab, while his public admonitions of Disney for refusing to distribute *Fahrenheit 9/11* were read as one more spectacle of audacity, concocted to drum up publicity and sell movie tickets. The celebrity discourse surrounding Moore worked to solidify the critical consensus that *Fahrenheit* was nothing more than a bit of

wildly entertaining “catharsis for the left.” As with the critical reception of his films, the public reception of Moore’s celebrity persona ultimately worked to reinforce the notion that Michael Moore was nothing more than a cinematic huckster selling fantasies of advocacy to an audience of liberal fans eager to buy what he had to sell.

Thus, as I argued in Chapter Six, Moore’s reception within the public sphere worked to reinforce the most problematic aspects of his documentary mode of address. Not only were right-wing populists able to paint Moore as a condescending, liberal elitist, they were able to peg him as an outspoken member of the “liberal media,” a mythical bogeyman often invoked by conservative pundits and activists. Moreover, they were able to focus their attacks squarely on the figure of Moore, himself, thus drawing attention *away* from his films, and the arguments they put forth, and directing it towards his personal “character.” Painting Moore as a self-absorbed media-hound eager to tell the rest of America how to think, act and live, right-wing populists turned Moore into a convenient symbol for all that was wrong with contemporary “liberalism.” Thus it was that John McCain was able to send the conservative throngs into a thundering clamor of hoots and jeers during the Republican National Convention simply by mentioning Moore and his film. In many ways, Moore had become the “easiest” of targets for Republican strategists in 2004: a liberal albatross to hang around John Kerry’s neck.

Given all this, I would argue that the “Michael Moore phenomenon” stands a cautionary tale to any political documentarian who hopes to achieve a popular audience for progressive causes via the mainstream media. However, it is necessary to make clear that I am in no way arguing that the mainstream media is not a credible “route” for such an endeavor. Quite the contrary. Given the contemporary media landscape, especially

where documentary is concerned, the mainstream media is really the only route left for political documentarians who hope to get their messages out to a wide, popular audience. Over the course of its history, documentary has traditionally had three main exhibition outlets open to it: public/educational settings such as libraries, universities and PBS; mainstream commercial television; and the indie/art cinema circuit. The public/educational route is obviously the least equipped to deliver a broad, popular audience. Not only this, but as Patricia Zimmerman has argued, the very idea of “public space” set aside for politically committed work has come under increasing attack by the political right in recent years. During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, a coalition of Religious Right and conservative policy groups, such as the Christian Coalition and Accuracy in Media, attacked PBS as well as other institutions which sought to maintain a public infrastructure for the production, distribution and exhibition of political, socially-conscious documentary. By cutting off public funding, these groups hoped to create “a form of ideological and financial quarantine for independent documentary work” (3). “The cumulative effect of these conservative tidal waves,” Zimmerman argues, “was to weaken the foundations and wash out multiple layers of public infrastructures, universities and art institutions that support and champion noncommercial media” (3). Thus, while documentary series like PBS’s *P.O.V.* represented options for Moore when he was first trying to find a distribution outlet for *Roger & Me*, these options were (and are) few and far between, and the competition remains fierce.<sup>169</sup>

Mainstream, commercial television didn’t offer much of an option for Moore either. On commercial television, documentary is obviously tied to the demands of an

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<sup>169</sup> Indeed, Moore initially attempted to get funding from *P.O.V.* to complete the film, but was turned down. For a full description, see Bullert 161-2.

advertising-dependent industry and, as such, “television documentaries tend to be shorter and cheaper and as a consequence also typically tackle ‘safer’ issues” (Roscoe and Hight 26-7).<sup>170</sup> In recent years, this situation has begun to change, as cable stations – specifically, HBO – have positioned themselves as a new alternative space for politically-committed documentary. But at the time of *Roger*’s release, mainstream television was not a realistic option. Indeed, once Moore had achieved some success, the television industry did finally come calling; but, as described in Chapter Four, it seemed insufficiently “committed” to his political causes.

Thus, theatrical release has been the only credible option available to Moore. This also meant playing by the film industry’s rules. As described in Chapter Four, the only marketing scheme available to political documentaries was that of the “quality indie blockbuster,” as developed by studios such as Miramax. Indeed, at the time of *Roger & Me*’s purchase by Warner Bros, Miramax had already succeeded in marketing a committed documentary via the indie/art-house circuit – Erroll Morris’s, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) – with the help of “indie-guru” John Peirson, who would later represent *Roger* (Pierson 139). Thus, the “mold” was already in place when *Roger* was released, and is still in effect to this day.<sup>171</sup>

Thus, I hope that my analysis of Michael Moore is understood not only as a critique of the filmmaker and the decisions that he has made over the years, but also as a cautionary tale for any political documentarian attempting to navigate the treacherous political waters of the contemporary media landscape. Political documentarians who, like

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<sup>170</sup> See also: Rosenthal and Corner 3-4.

<sup>171</sup> Indeed, films such as Morgan Spurlock’s *Supersize Me* and Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* have utilized similar art-house strategies to catapult their films to popular success.

Moore, attempt to use the mainstream media as a forum within which to make their arguments will inevitably find themselves beset by a series of potential problems and pitfalls that may serve to undermine their causes. For Pribram, this is a problem that should be addressed by reviewers, themselves, whom she argues should have “as part of their mandate” the injunction to offer “multiple and alternative readings for [independent] films” that go beyond the “art film” frame (108). However, as Meagham Morris has argued, film reviewing is best understood as an institutionalized practice that goes beyond the particular mandates of individual critics; the manner in which films get interpreted is dependent upon a “professional consensus about ‘what really matters’ when writing about film ...” (113). It is just this “professional consensus” that reveals itself within the discursive logics I have discussed at length in this dissertation. As such, documentarians would do well to be wary of the ways in which their films will be articulated by such discursive logics once their films enter into the public sphere.

More than this, filmmakers need to take heed not only of the arguments they make, but of the various rhetorical strategies they deploy to make them. As I have argued at length, the mode of address deployed by the traditional documentary is one fraught with contradictions – and more often than not devalues and dehumanizes the very subjects/communities it seeks to lift up. As such, filmmakers would be wise to consider not *only* the political perspectives they represent, but the *politics of representation*. In the end, documentary – like any media text – is a *symbolic* tool. Its primary function is to add to what Julie Bettie calls the “cultural resources” from which people make sense of the world (51). Political documentarians who work for progressive causes, and seek to aid oppressed communities, would do well to consider the manner in which they are

constructing particular images *of* those communities. Documentaries that purport to “diagnose” social problems from above often devalue the experiences, understandings and actions of those “below.” Instead, documentarians should concentrate on developing filmic strategies that lend value to the experiences of the oppressed and that depict them as *equal actors* in the process of social change. Ultimately, I would argue that documentary should reconceptualize itself as a cinematic form. Historically, documentary has been understood primarily as a “mode of seeing.” Instead, I would argue that filmmakers start thinking about documentary as a “mode of listening.” To do so would mean relinquishing the central pleasures offered up by the form itself, its voyeuristic appeals and its *authorizing* functions. Audiences would no longer be flattered as privileged advocates, invited to look into and upon a realm of social injustice that they are entitled to “do something” about.

Such a call begs the question: if documentarians relinquish the primary pleasures offered by the documentary form, will they also give up its ability to entertain and “capture” an audience? Michael Moore has proven that the pleasures offered by the traditional documentary mode of address can be transformed into thrilling, fantasy narratives of heroic advocacy, a model that has been replicated by documentary filmmakers from Morgan Spurlock to Al Gore. Would giving all this up also rob the documentary of its ability to *entertain*? Interestingly enough, one documentarian has recently shown that documentary *can* take a more “ethical” approach to the politics of representation and *still* maintain its ability to entertain.

His name is Michael Moore.



In June of 2007, Moore released *Sicko*, his fifth feature-length documentary, and with its release signaled a new shift in both his filmmaking practices and political strategies. "I decided to make a different film this time," Moore told reporters at Cannes that year. "I wanted a different tone and I wanted to say things in a different way." As a result of this new approach, he said he hoped that audiences would focus on the film's message, not the controversy (*Lawless*). Moore specified what he meant by this during an interview with *USA Today* just before the film's U.S. debut:

Did going to (former NRA president) Charlton Heston's home reduce school shootings in this country? I don't think so. Did trying to get onto the 14th floor of General Motors [in *Roger & Me*] to see [chairman Roger Smith] convince GM to start making cars that people want to buy? No. Did *Fahrenheit* stop the re-election of George W. Bush? So a lot of thought went into, "OK, I get it. It's a game of chess, and so far I've been in checkmate. I need to find a different way to get to where I want to go."

Breznican A1

Here, Moore talks candidly about the strategic consequences of some of his narrative strategies, copping to a specific failing on the part of his films. As a result, Moore claims that he has changed his filmmaking-ways. And to an extent, I agree with him. While it is beyond the purview of this dissertation to subject *Sicko*, and its subsequent public interpretations, to a detailed analysis, it does make sense to conclude by offering a few, brief, preliminary observations about how Moore's "new tone" may point documentary film in a new direction.

Even a cursory examination of *Sicko* reveals many differences in Moore's overall mode of address and, specifically, his depiction of human subjects. Indeed, Moore signals this difference at the outset of the film. *Sicko* begins with a scene that could have been

taken from any one of Moore's previous documentaries: home video-footage depicts a man named Adam stitching up a gruesome-looking wound on his own knee, while Moore explains that Adam is one of 50 million Americans with no health insurance. As such, we are initially on familiar ground, with Moore playing the knowledgeable authority to a victimized exemplar who illustrates the social plight of the uninsured. However, it is a moment that is short-lived, for, as Moore's voice-over explains: "But this film isn't about Adam." Instead, Moore argues, the film is "about" a much broader slice of the American population than those living without health coverage: "Yes, there are nearly 50 million Americans with no health insurance," Moore explains. "They pray everyday they don't get sick because 18,000 of them will die this year simply because they're uninsured. But this movie isn't about them. It's about the 250 million of you who *have* health insurance."

Here, Moore signals an important shift in his overall narrative strategies; this is not going to be a typical documentary in the "social victim" tradition. Moore overstates his case a bit – *Sicko* does document the stories of many people without health insurance (including the homeless people literally dumped on street corners by hospitals unwilling to foot the bill for their well-being), however, what he signals here is a more inclusive outlook on the social world. Moore's admonition that *Sicko* is a film about "all of you," is also a way of saying that it is a film about "all of us." What Moore tells his audience in this opening is that this will not be a film for and about one population, and addressed to another. Instead, his opening remarks constructs an imagined audience of equals; whether you have insurance or not, he seems to be saying, we're all in this together.

This new, more ecumenical approach infuses much of *Sicko*'s entire narrative, especially where human subjects are concerned. For instance, gone are the working class "dupes" of Moore's previous film. In *Sicko*, the working class people – and, indeed, *everyone* we meet, from cancer patients to practicing physicians – are full-blown characters who seem to be *in* on the joke (as well as the argument), rather than the object of it. The first half of *Sicko* offers up a series of vignettes in which a variety of people, many of them marked as working or lower-middle-class, share their health care horror stories. However, unlike the unemployed auto-workers of GM in *Roger & Me* or the naive soldiers in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, these subjects not only have horror stories to tell, but *opinions* to proffer. In *Sicko*, the subjects we meet have clear-cut ideas about what's wrong with the healthcare system and why they are getting "screwed."

In one sequence early on, Moore explains the ways in which insurance companies reject particular claims by labeling certain conditions as "pre-existing," or certain treatments as "experimental." However, it is not *Moore* who articulates this argument, but four patients who explain *to* Moore (and, hence, to us), exactly how this process works. All of these subjects are depicted as fully aware and "educated" as to fact that the system is cheating them, and a few of them even lace their explanations with the kind of sarcastic inflection Moore usually reserves for himself in such scenes: "We don't consider that *life-threatening*," says Diane, her voice dripping with indignation, before Moore tells us that she later died from her "non-life-threatening tumor."

In sequences such as this, Moore overturns the trope of working-class dupe that has so often driven his films, and instead depicts subjects as fully aware and engaged with a system that is failing them. Not only this, but he allows his subjects the authority

to analyze and interpret their own lives and situations, rather than relegate them to the role of exemplar – living illustrations of their own social plight. Indeed, this is the case not only for those subjects who Moore has traditionally depicted as social *victims*, but also those he has often painted as social *villains* or, as I have defined them, class “traitors.” In *Sicko*, gone are Moore’s trademark ambush sequences in which he corners a variety of white-collar office personnel, forcing them to spout the corporate line in a way that implicitly equates them with Capitalism. In their place are much more in-depth interviews with people who work inside the health insurance industry and feel awful about the role they are forced to play. As Moore tells us, while attempting to find people with health care horror stories to interview for his film, “I started to get hundreds of letters of a different sort, from people who work inside the healthcare industry. They’d seen everything, and they were fed up with it.”

In *Sicko* the kind of mid-level employees that Moore has portrayed in the past as acquiescent, corporate pawns are now portrayed as fellow citizens with a unique and important perspective to voice. One such subject, Becky Melki, a young telephone operator “in charge of keeping sick people away from one of America’s top insurance companies,” is allowed one of the most emotional moments in the film, when she gives tearful testimony to the way she felt dealing with a couple who were elated to be filling out an insurance application when she knew full-well that they were likely to be denied. In *Sicko*, both people *dependent upon* the insurance industry, as well as *working within it*, are equated in solidarity against the unjust logic of the system. All are depicted not as victimized dupes, but as “victims” of a different sort: angry, active and, most of all, *aware*.

Finally, as Moore's claim that these subjects were "fed up with it" implies, Moore's film not only allows his subjects a more authoritative role in the articulation of his film's argument, but he also cedes much of the "action" to them, as well. Unlike his previous films, *Sicko* does not shy away from stories of "everyday activism" and, instead, introduces us to a bevy of subjects who took on the health care industry in their own way. Thus, the women depicted above, who criticize the manner in which insurance companies deny claims, are *also* women who, as Moore explains, "battled" their respective insurance companies. Here, rather than advocate on behalf of these subjects, Moore depicts subjects who are advocating for themselves, allowing these subjects to take on the heroic role he usually occupies. For instance, he humorously details the case of Maria Watanabe by explaining:

While vacationing in Japan, Maria became ill and got the MRI that Blue Shield of California had refused to approve. The doctors in Japan told her that she had a brain tumor. Blue Shield had said repeatedly that she didn't have a tumor. That's when she said: "Well, I'm pretty sure I have a *lawyer*."

In another scene, Moore stages what feels like one of his patented stunt-sequences, as he follows a woman named Adrian Campbell, who crosses the boarder into Canada to purchase inexpensive drugs. However, Moore presents the sequence as Campbell's own quest – this is something she has been doing for years, aided and abetted by her Canadian boyfriend posing as her husband. As such, Moore seems less an instigator, and more a follower in this scene, as Adrian takes him under her wing and shows him how it's done.

These types of confrontational victories were usually reserved for Moore. But in *Sicko*, all sorts of subjects take on the role of activist, whether it be the doctor and former

case-reviewer who testifies in Congress against the practices of HMOs, or the woman who explains how she took on her hospital's board of trustees in an effort to get treatment for her cancer-stricken husband. In all these cases, Moore overturns the trope of "enlightened activism" for a new trope of "everyday activism," in which the world is filled with people who are victimized, yes, but also aware and engaged with the system within which they are trapped.

Ultimately, *Sicko* represents the attempt by Moore to construct a documentary that speaks with and alongside, rather than for and about, its subjects. Indeed, it is telling that one of the film's central set-pieces involves not an audacious, mano-a-mano confrontation with a corporate villain, but an in-depth *conversation* in which Moore's subjects seem to take control of the film's argument. Sitting around a table in a Parisian restaurant with a number of ex-pats, Moore remains uncharacteristically silent as this gregarious group talk enthusiastically with each other about the advantages they enjoy under France's national health care system. In the end, the greatest difference between *Sicko* and Moore's previous four films is that this one feels less like an exposition, and more like a dialogue.

Perhaps most important, however, is that Moore's new ethos of shared-authority extended beyond the cinema doors. Moore forged a partnership, based around the film, with the California Nurses Association and its national arm, the National Nurses Organizing Committee, who were lobbying at the time for the passage of congressional bills in California and on the national level that would expand Medicare by establishing a single-payer health system (Colliver G1). Joining with other health care groups, such as Physicians for a National Health Program and the Health Care Workers Council, Moore

and the CNA/NNOC formed the “Scrubs for *Sicko* Campaign,” in which nurses and doctors staged rallies at individual theater openings of Moore’s film, passing out information on the bills and urging people to support healthcare reform (“Nurses”). This move signaled a new desire by Moore to get involved with a pre-established movement, rather than initiate one around his own celebrity-persona, as he did during *Fahrenheit 9/11* when he took it upon himself to barnstorm across the nation in his self-titled “Slacker Uprising Tour,” rallying college students at rock concert-styled speaking events. Here, Moore seemed less a political ringmaster than a convenient publicity tool for the CNA/NNOC to utilize.

Additionally, many of the “characters” from *Sicko* became active participants in the healthcare reform movement *and* on Moore’s website. Donna Smith, one of the people who travels with Moore to Cuba in the film, and Adrian Campbell, the single-mom who sneaks into Canada to buy drugs, became (and still are, as of this writing) featured writers on the “Sicko Blog,” which editorializes on the state of healthcare today and chronicles the efforts of the universal healthcare movement. Smith even used her new-found fame to help start her own organization: the APUHC (American Patients for Universal Health Care). Thus, while the tangible results of the “Sicko movement” are difficult to assess, and beyond the purview of this study, what can be said is that Moore seems committed to constructing an image of the world starkly different from the one he has offered in the past. No longer based upon a central divide between those who “get it” and those who don’t, Moore seems committed to depicting a world made up of shared activism and political possibility, one in which he is a participant, rather than a heroic advocate.

This “new tone” in Moore’s narrative strategies seems to have encouraged a reconsideration of Moore and his work within the popular press. A brief look at some of the film’s reviews reveals a new attitude taken by the critics in regards to *Sicko*. For instance, many reviewers made note of Moore’s less-authoritarian approach, giving him credit for relinquishing his own prominent role as heroic protagonist. “[T]he film shows that while Mr. Moore remains a radical partisan, he has learned how to sell his argument with a softer touch” claimed Manhola Dargis of the *New York Times*. “He’s still the P. T. Barnum of activist cinema, but he no longer runs the entire circus directly from the spotlight” (E1). And Roger Ebert lauded:

It’s a different Michael Moore in *Sicko*. He still wears the baseball cap, but he’s onscreen less, not so cocky, not going for so many laughs. He simply tells one story after another about Americans who are sick, dying or dead because we have an undemocratic, profit-gouging health care system.  
“Dr.” B1

As Ebert’s comments imply, what critics found most important about this “new” Michael Moore was the fact that he gave so much air-time to his subjects. Thus, Ty Burr argued:

for once you don’t feel Moore is exploiting other people’s tragedies (any more than they want him to, at least). Some people were willing to use the director right back; there’s a tart little segment about a father desperate to get a second cochlear implant for his baby girl (the insurance company would only pay for one), who drops Moore’s name in a phone message to the claims department. Bingo - the implant is approved.  
“Moore” D1

Christy Lemire, of the Associated Press, concurred:



In exposing the ills of America's health care system, the pot-stirring documentarian introduces us to regular folks with and without health insurance and lets them tell their stories of frustration, pain and loss. In doing so, he puts a human face on an enormously daunting topic, one that sounds inherently dry and non-visual.

In this way, Moore's new narrative strategies struck such a chord with journalists that, for once, the battle over whether or not Moore's new film "counted" as a documentary was sidelined, while critics instead focused upon the people Moore depicted, and the way in which he depicted them. Indeed, *New York Times* columnist A.O. Scott offered an analysis of the film that came close to acknowledging the mainstream media's own complicity in reinforcing some of the worst aspects of Moore's (past) films:

It has become a journalistic cliché and therefore an inevitable part of the prerelease discussion of *Sicko* to refer to Michael Moore as a controversial, polarizing figure. While that description is not necessarily wrong, it strikes me as self-fulfilling (since the controversy usually originates in media reports on how controversial Mr. Moore is) and trivial. Any filmmaker, politically outspoken or not, whose work is worth discussing will be argued about. But in Mr. Moore's case the arguments are more often about him than about the subjects of his movies.

"Open" E1

But with *Sicko*, Scott argues, Moore has managed to change the subject:

Some of this is undoubtedly his fault, or at least a byproduct of his style. ... In *Sicko*, however, he refrains from hunting down the C.E.O.'s of insurance companies, or from hinting at dark conspiracies against the sick. Concentrating on Americans who have insurance (after a witty, troubling acknowledgment of the millions who don't), Mr. Moore talks to people who have been ensnared, sometimes fatally, in a for-profit bureaucracy and also to people who have made their livings within the system. The testimony is poignant and also infuriating ....

Even in praising Moore’s new-found style and ecumenical approach, some reviewers were still, in Scott’s own words, concentrating on the filmmaker, rather than on his argument. But this was not entirely the case. Moore’s new-found focus on human subjects and their stories seems to have encouraged journalists to shift the emphasis of their articles, at least slightly, away from Moore’s style and towards his content. For instance, the *New York Times* ran an early article under the headline: “Film Offers New Talking Points in Health Care Debate,” and then went on to discuss those talking points in detail, thus implying that Moore’s film may actually have an important contribution to make to the public discussion (Freudenheim C3). And *USA Today* offered an article detailing the debate “sparked” by *Sicko*, arguing: “Like *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Moore’s other movies, *Sicko* is less documentary than poke in the eye” (“Flawed” 12A). However, despite this repetition of the “bias caveat,” the “debate” this article was intent on pursuing was not one over *Sicko*’s “documentary status,” but the critique it levied against the US healthcare system: “The question is,” the article continued, effectively dismissing the debate over Moore’s unconventional style, “whether a humorous overplay can stir a serious debate about the nation’s health care system.” The rest of the article went on to tackle this very question. As, too, did many other reviewers, who spent more time explaining and discussing Moore’s support for a single-payer healthcare system than they ever devoted to his analyses of corporate capitalism, the “culture of fear” or the Iraq War. Exemplifying this trend was Roger Ebert, who began his review with a personal health-care anecdote, detailing his own then-recent illness and relationship to the healthcare industry, before reviewing *Sicko*.

Perhaps the most important shift in Moore's public articulation was in the realm of the conservative blogosphere, where the anti-elitist, populist rhetoric of years past was almost nonexistent. A brief look at the websites analyzed in Chapter Six reveals that the main way in which conservative bloggers attacked Moore this time around was to emphasize his dalliance with Castro's Cuba in an attempt to paint him as a "socialist-sympathizer." This was the tack taken by *Moorewatch.com*, who announced the week before *Sicko*'s release that it would be "one of the main goals of this site" to "debun[k] Michael Moore's claims of the wonders of socialist medicine" (Lee, 6/19). They promised that, "over the next few weeks, we're going to explore [Castro's Cuba] in more detail so that everyone knows exactly what Moore is praising when he glorifies Castro's government" (JimK 6/17). True to their word, over the next two months, *Moorewatch.com* published a variety of e-mails and letters (purportedly) from "real Cubans" who rebutted Moore's description of the Cuban healthcare system (Lee 6/21), and published pictures depicting decrepit conditions in Cuban hospitals (Lee 6/12). Other conservative websites followed suit, including *Wizbangblog.com* (Byrd), *Captainsquartersblog.com* (Morrissey), and David Horowitz's *Frontpagemag.com* (Horowitz "At").

Conservatives also employed a similar critique of Moore's depiction of European models of nationalized healthcare, more often than not publishing e-mails and letters from "actual Canadians" and "a real Brit," etc., criticizing their own "socialized" systems while praising the US privatized system.<sup>172</sup> While the Right's reversion back to a Cold war-style of rhetoric (perhaps best exemplified by Horowitz's emphasis on the fact that

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<sup>172</sup> For examples, see *Wizbangblog.com* 7/30; *Moorewatch.com* 7/13, 7/27, 8/06, 8/15, 6/29; *Andrewsullivan.com* 6/29.

the healthcare workers participating in *Sicko* rallies wore “red scrubs” [“At”]) is concerning, this attack-strategy feels somewhat anemic, compared to the populist barrage the Right levied against Moore in 2004. Indeed, for the most part, the arguments they made against *Sicko* (such as lamenting the long waiting-times for specialist care in Canada) were arguments that Moore’s film had *already* rebutted. And, perhaps more to the point, the Right’s emphasis on rebutting Moore’s *arguments* about nationalized healthcare seems to indicate that, by and large, Moore’s persona and documentary style no longer had the lighting-rod potency they once did. This time around, the Right seemed resigned to simply debating Moore *on points*, as the conservative publication *Human Events* did; they only published three articles on *Sicko* in the summer of 2007, all of which attacked Moore’s depictions of the Canadian, British, French and Cuban healthcare systems, but stayed away from any searing, personal attacks (Elder; Andersen; Fontova).

Thus, while it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to offer a definitive analysis of the public discourse surrounding the release of *Sicko*, it is fair to say that, for the most part, Moore-supporters and opponents, alike, seemed less apt to use Moore’s celebrity-persona and reflexive style as a means to displace and re-articulate his political goals and commitments. Indeed, an August, 2007 Kaiser Family Foundation poll which studied “The Reach and Impact of *Sicko*,” found that while only 4% of respondents had seen the film, almost half (42%) had heard or read about it and, of that total, 45% had said they had a discussion with friends, co-workers or family about the US healthcare system as a result of the movie, and 43% said they were more likely to think there is need for

reform.<sup>173</sup> Thus, it is not over-stating the case to claim that Moore's film did, in fact, play some role in encouraging real public discussion – and possibly even reconsideration – of the healthcare system.

Of course, some of the old discursive habits did remain. The month following the film's premier at Cannes, and leading up to its U.S. debut, was dominated by reports on Moore's battle with the Bush administration over his allegedly illegal trip to Cuba.<sup>174</sup> Similarly, there was a great focus in the press on Moore's war of words with then-presidential hopeful, Fred Thompson, who criticized Moore's Cuban trip in print.<sup>175</sup> And perhaps the biggest news-story to come out of *Sicko*'s theatrical run was the televised confrontation between Moore and CNN's Wolf Blitzer and Sanjay Gupta, over what Moore believed to be a slanderous "fact-checking" piece the network ran on the film. In all of these instances, the "Michael Moore narrative" trumped any discussion of healthcare reform, as Moore and his status as audacious political provocateur took center stage.

This was especially the case during the CNN flare-up, when Moore began the interview by demanding an apology from Blitzer for how the network had disparaged *Fahrenheit 9/11* three years before. The argument between Moore and Blitzer was so heated that CNN (clearly enjoying the fireworks, if not the criticism) invited Moore back

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<sup>173</sup> The study found that self-identified "liberal" respondents (43%) were much more likely to have a positive impression of *Sicko* than self-identified conservatives (9%). Thus, the persona of Moore, himself, still seems to have a sharply partisan hue. *However*, it is also important to point out that, despite these impressions of Moore and his film, there were still a solid number of conservative respondents who said they were in favor of healthcare reform (29%, compared to 56% of liberals) and said the film prompted them to have a discussion with friends, co-workers or family members about the healthcare system (23%). This finding would seem to point to the importance of Moore's decision to downplay his own star-image this time around. For more on the Kaiser study, see PRNW 8/27; <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/7688.pdf>.

<sup>174</sup> See: Germain "Michael"; Germain "Moore"; Marr "For"; Holson U.S.; Triplett.

<sup>175</sup> "Dialogue"; Marr, "Moore's" 15; Germain "Michael."

the next day to appear on *Larry King Live* and debate with Gupta one-on-one. In moments like these, Moore's personal image and celebrity story threatened to overshadow the goals of his film. Indeed, it is telling that while the media was willing to revel in these high-profile spectacles of audacity, they virtually ignored the political movement surrounding the film's release and, specifically, the efforts of nurses and physicians' groups to get a single-payer healthcare bill (HR 676) passed by Congress. Thus, while Moore seems to have made a move in the right direction with *Sicko*, the film's release also reveals the difficulties that await political documentarians who attempt to use mainstream success as a way to get their messages out.

In the end, I would argue that *Sicko* appears to mark (potentially, at least) an important transitional moment in the career of Michael Moore. While he is still, of course, not shy about utilizing his own star-image and brand-name to promote his films and causes, he seems to be acutely aware of the consequences that attend such a strategy. His new commitment to a more ethically reflexive type of documentary is a refreshing change, and seems to have born some fruit in the way that it encouraged a different, more issue-oriented reception within the public press while also helping to mitigate against some of the populist, Right-wing attack strategies that were previously used against Moore. Most importantly, this shift in tone has *not* had an effect on Moore's ability to succeed within the mainstream marketplace. While *Sicko* did not trump *Fahrenheit*'s still-unprecedented box-office take, as of this writing it stands as the third most successful documentary of all time, just behind *March of the Penguins* (2005), and ahead of

Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* as well as the wildly-popular Al Gore documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).<sup>176</sup>

According to the Internet Movie Database, Moore's next film will "look at the global financial crisis and the U.S. economy during the transition between the incoming Obama Administration and the outgoing Bush Administration" (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1232207/>). Once again, class issues and class identity will likely be Moore's central concern. It remains to be seen how Moore will handle such complex material this time around, as the country enters a dark time of economic distress and an uncertain future. But whether Moore continues to adhere to the kind of committed documentary he produced in *Sicko*, or reverts back to the "fantasy of advocacy" he has relied upon in the past, his new film will have an important impact, not only for the role it will play in the contemporary political imaginary, but in setting the discursive terrain for future political documentarians who are eager to follow in Moore's enormous footsteps.

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<sup>176</sup> <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>

## APPENDIX A

### MICHAEL MOORE: FILM AND TELEVISION WORK

#### Feature Length Documentaries

*Slacker Uprising* (2007; DVD and online release only)

*Sicko* (2007)

*Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)

*Bowling for Columbine* (2002)

*The Big One* (1998)

*Roger & Me* (1989)

#### Feature Length Fiction Film

*Canadian Bacon* (1995)

#### Television Work

*The Awful Truth* (TV series, 1999-2000)

*TV Nation* (TV series, 1994-5)

*Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint* (short documentary for PBS, 1992)



## **APPENDIX B**

### **KEY TO FILM SEGMENT TRANSCRIPTIONS**

VO: Voice-over

VIS: Visual

DIA: Dialogue

MUS: Music

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