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Fear and goading

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BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE Various cinemas

Michael Moore's first film, *Roger & Me* (1989), was a documentary pursuit of Roger Smith, chief executive of General Motors at a time when GM was North America's largest car manufacturer. In it, Moore chased Smith across the North-Eastern United States, trying in vain to persuade him to visit Flint, Michigan, Moore's hometown, to apologize to its citizens for having transferred GM's factories from Flint to Mexico. The attempt was unsuccessful. But Moore's style -the baseball cap, stubble and slouch, his ill-fitting jeans and hobbled gait -became something for left-wingers to cheer, right-wingers to bemoan. His new film, *Bowling for Columbine*, is about guns, and has grossed more than \$10 million -a lot for a documentary. Has that success anything to do with the fact that the film was released the day the Washington Beltway sniper claimed his eighth victim? The criticism directed at both the film and the author suggests not. *Bowling for Columbine* was first shown at Cannes, where it won a prize. In the United States, its reception has been mixed: Moore has been described as "dangerous", "irresponsible" and a "schlub". Oprah, on the other hand, called *Columbine* a "must see".

The film owes its name, like much of its message, to irony. On the morning of April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two seniors from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, went bowling. Later that morning, they walked into school with an assortment of handguns, assault rifles and homemade bombs, and opened fire. When the shooting stopped, fourteen students and one teacher lay dead, the killers among them. Similar shootings in Britain (Dunblane) and Australia (Tasmania) in 1996 had been followed by legislation to restrict gun possession. Britain, for example, banned all handguns. The Columbine killings, however, provoked debate, legislative proposals, but little change. No one has succeeded in dissuading gun lobbyists from their view that the Second Amendment to the Constitution protects a citizen's right to bear arms. The National Rifle Association (NRA) is America's leading pro-gun advocate, though there are many others less well known, including a gay organization, The Pink Pistols, and Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership. Once a group for hunters and sports-shooters, the NRA now spends most of its \$137 million annual budget on supporting pro-gun political candidates at election time, and then on lobbying them to vote "the right way" when bills appear before Congress.

But no amount of cash will secure a politician, let alone a whole Congress. In the last round of elections, several governorships went to candidates who supported stronger gun controls. A majority of voters support stricter laws, but not a complete ban. Advocates for something tougher than ballistic fingerprinting are now trying the courts. They hope that, like car and cigarette makers before them, gun manufacturers will be held at least partly, if not wholly, responsible for gun deaths. They may be successful, but the anti-control lobby is already promoting state laws to limit liability. The main problem is not the NRA per se, but that a great many Americans just love guns.

Moore, who once won a junior marksmanship trophy from the NRA, accepts this. In fact, after *Columbine*, he decided to mount a challenge to the incumbent NRA President, Charlton Heston. If he won, he would have returned the organization to its sports-hunter roots. Somewhere along the line, he realized that a documentary might be a more cost-effective way to make his point. At any rate, Heston grants him an interview, and Moore puts him on the spot, asking him if he would care to apologize to the people of Littleton for holding an NRA rally, in Littleton, ten days after the shooting.

The Columbine massacre is a structural pivot about which a larger film revolves, moving from hilarity to horror,

sympathy to disgust. Moore understands the value of "telling it in the cut", though he can be a little trigger happy. We leap across the country faster than an Atlas rocket (seen at the Lockheed Martin factory in Littleton), and switch angles more often than a

CNN newscast. Every screen medium is used, from 35mm real footage, to 1950s television stock, to digital cartoons. At one point, zipping from rain-soaked Michigan to the sunny palm trees of LA, we find ourselves chasing Dick Clark, host of the 1960s TV show *American Bandstand*; Moore's accusation is that Clark's theme mall in Michigan is responsible for the killing of a six-year-old. This seems like a red herring, though it does allow Moore to indulge in his favourite activity: star chasing. And there is a tediously childish cartoon history of America that fails to make its main point stick: that Americans not only have guns but use them because they are scared of blacks.

According to Moore, Americans live in a "culture of fear". It is the constant television procession of images of fear that underlies our readiness to shoot one another. Moore "discovers" this on a trip to Canada, where he goes to find out why Canadians, who have almost as many guns per household as Americans, have fewer gun deaths. Canadians, he concludes, are less afraid. They leave their front doors unlocked (Moore tries the doors); they talk about strange notions such as public health care and equal opportunities (this from three truanting school kids); in Windsor, Ontario, a police officer remembers a shooting a year ago, but that was committed by a man from Detroit.

After each slaughter involving guns, there is, inevitably, a culprit to blame.

What Moore has done, and this may be the true secret of his current success, is to direct the search for culpability inwards. Our fear, he suggests, is to blame. It is too easy, he argues, to apply a kind of magical thinking. If you want to blame the carnage on the "influence" of the shock-rocker Marilyn Manson, or of the video game *Doom*, you might as well blame it on the fact that Harris and Klebold went bowling. This is a promising thought but one that needs careful handling. More than once, the audience's laughter at Moore's straight-faced shtick falters. A home security expert in Littleton looks foolish as he explains to Moore how his products will keep you safe. Moore responds, "What if I had a spear?"; but when the man breaks down, Moore comforts him. The weakness of *Bowling for Columbine* is its reductionism, at a time when broadmindedness and diplomacy are crucial. There is just enough intelligent sympathy, to counterbalance the heavy-handed effects which threaten to provoke in us the very fear that Michael Moore purports to abhor.

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