



Bowling a Strike for Columbine

Michael Moore hits the screen with both barrels blasting

BY ROBERT ECKSEL

"I've invited my fellow documentary nominees on the stage with us. They are here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in a time when we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons, whether it is the fiction of duct tape or the fiction of orange alerts. We are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush. Shame on you. And any time that you have the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up."

From Michael Moore's mouth to God's ear. But it's too bad the denizens of Hollywood — that hotbed of liberalism, that hot tub of wretched excess, that Tinseltown La La Land blamed for all of America's sins — caved into the fogies who run the Academy and kept their left-wing traps shut. Granted, those who speak the truth always suffer the consequences, but lying is and will always be a sissy game, so leave it to Moore, winner of an Oscar for the Best Documentary of 2002 for **Bowling for Columbine**, to stick out his neck, to tell it like it is, to incur the wrath of yellowbellies from sea to shining sea.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are the big villains of the Columbine High School massacre. This dynamic duo suffered the taunts of lunkheads until they had enough. Then they did their thing, went on a historic rampage, and blew their worlds sky high. Harris and Klebold lived their lives like they were stars of their own music video. They went down in a blaze of glory, not with a whimper but with a bang.

But as anyone who has ever scratched any surface knows, things are never as they appear. The easy answers are usually the wrong answers. And the questions? Where to begin? The trenchcoat mafiosi Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were definitely guilty of mass murder, but as Michael Moore alerts us in **Bowling for Columbine**, there's plenty of guilt to go around.

After many years of dogged work finessing his accusations in such films as **Roger & Me** and **Pets or Meat** and on the tube with *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*, Moore has established himself as America's premier documentary guerrilla filmmaker. His work is shot on a shoestring in the



most inhospitable conditions imaginable, yet Moore unflinchingly pursues his prey. Once he has his quarry in his sights, it's ready, aim, fire, lights, camera, action for this freedom-loving documentarian.

Michael Moore is a tireless advocate of direct action. This director takes us there. **Bowling for Columbine** gives us a fly-on-the-wall perspective of the gun nuts foraging at the heart of America's paranoia. A parade of right-wingers in camouflage talk about their weapons the way a priest talks about salvation. These people believe what they believe, no matter how shallow their analysis. They shoot first and ask questions later.

Bowling for Columbine introduces us to the almost-famous James McNichol at his ranch in the middle of nowhere. Brother of the imprisoned-for-life Terry McNichol, a co-conspirator in the Oklahoma City bombing, James McNichol is armed to the teeth and extremely dangerous. Almost anything will set him off. At Moore's prompting, McNichol rants and raves like a conspiracy buff high on crack. But McNichol has his quieter moments. His description of Timothy McVey is a classic understatement: "He's a nice guy." Before bidding adieu to Moore and the audience of **Bowling for Columbine**, McNichol, in his filmic coup de grace, put a loaded handgun to his temple of doom.

A fadeout from McNichol segues into a whirl of half-dressed chicks nestling Uzis against reconstructed breasts. Gunshots, fire, smoke, death, and cleavage accompany John Lennon's "Happiness is a Warm Gun." (When I hold you in my arms/ And I feel my finger on your trigger/ I know nobody can do me no harm/ Because happiness is a warm gun, Mama — bang, bang, shoot, shoot.)

Michael Moore the cineaste shifts gears in **Bowling for Columbine** again and again. Forever deadpan and disbelieving, yet with humor and compassion in reserve, Moore draws the humanity from those he interviews. A Littlefield, Colorado real estate agent confesses, "Columbine changed how we talk," before collapsing into tears. Lockheed Martin, the world's biggest weapons manufacturer, employs 5,000 of the Littleton locals. By way of explaining the mayhem at Columbine High School, a Lockheed plant manager suggested, "What happened at Columbine is a microcosm of what's happening around the world."

At this point in the documentary, Moore could pack up his gear and call it a day. An indictment. Proof beyond a reasonable doubt. Guilty as charged. Lock the door and throw away the key. But Moore has been at this game too long for such slim pickings. As his work matures, as his vision expands, as his films grow more subtle and sophisticated, so too does **Bowling for Columbine**. **Columbine** gives us found footage spotlighting U.S. atrocities across the globe. The Shah. Guatemala. President Diem in Vietnam. Allende in Chile in 1973. Pinochet. El Salvador in 1977. Nicaragua. Noriega. Iran. Iraq. The collapsing Twin Towers. In a few masterful strokes, Moore gives us a shorthand history of America the Imperial and its Consequences. Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn aren't to everyone's taste. Sometimes the common touch is called for. So it's baseball caps off to Michael Moore! He's the man!

Michael Moore connects the dots between Columbine High School and the rest of the world. His film is a patchwork quilt on one hand, a jigsaw puzzle on the other. **Bowling for Columbine** shoots jabs to the right, jabs to the left, there are wild swings and misses, and one-punch kayos. Double M gives us a smarmy Bill Clinton mouthing pieties about the war in Kosovo. He films the fossil Charlton Heston raising a rifle over his head and intoning with all the urgency of Moses on Mount Sinai: "From my cold, dead hands." The actor opens his mouth and out spews the same



old agitprop. Heston, God bless his gun-toting soul, is a bona fide throwback, a stuffed shirt bursting with reactionary homilies, a spokesman for the arrogance of the heartless.

Even though Moore is almost fifty years old, he hasn't forgotten that pop culture is the thing. The creators of *South Park* are in the film to comment on gun violence in America. Shock-rocker lightning rod Marilyn Manson appears and is an articulate and astute cultural weatherperson. This superfreak knows which way the wind blows: "The President is shooting bombs overseas and I'm just singing rock 'n roll, but somehow I'm the bad guy." Moore and Manson agree that a perpetual "campaign of fear" leads to perpetual campaign of consumption. Have a ball at the mall. I shop therefore I am.

Moore flashes us from the present to the past, before boomeranging us back to the future. Black-and-white newsreels relocate us in last century's favorite horrors. Hitler. The French massacre in Algiers. The British killings in India. As sampled by Moore, life on earth is nasty, brutish, and short — and he wants to turn it around while there's still time. If footage of genocide fails to reveal how skewed our reality is, maybe some hard numbers about gun deaths per year worldwide will do the trick.

Germany 381
France 255
Canada 165
United Kingdom 68
Australia 65
Japan 39
America 11,127

America wins. We got the highest score. We're the best. But that's a few too many corpses in the good old U.S.A., too many strangers, too many sons and daughters, too many loved ones blown away in a deadening plague of violence.

Bowling for Columbine kicks in some groovy animation. (Look kids! Cool! A talking bullet!) Moore explores the phenomenon of *Cops* with the show's mealy-mouthed "liberal" producer. There's a segment on killer bees scaring the bejesus out of the nation, which segues into local news scapegoating African American males. "If it bleeds, it leads" is the dubious media mantra. It seems we're locked in a never-ending loop-de-loop of fear and threat and death and denial and distraction, TV as an open wound, followed by more guns and butter.



Moore deplores the madness we live daily but are too busy or too zonked to notice. He spotlights the hypocrisy that has shot our reality so full of holes. He's a populist rabble-rouser whose medium is his message in part and only when it suits him, an iconoclast committed to smashing idols. The imperatives of decency and common sense and the will of the people are the director's *raison d'être*. Michael Moore is a fine and dandy Everyman gunslinging with a movie camera.