# Toronto International Film Festival 2002: Films on social and historical questions

## Part 6

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*This is the sixth in a series of articles on the Toronto International Film Festival 2002, held September 5-14.*

A number of films screened at the Toronto film festival dealt more or less directly with social and historical problems.

American radical gadfly Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine* has valuable moments, as well as quite wrongheaded and irritating ones. Moore takes as his starting point the tragic shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (in suburban Denver) on April 20, 1999, in which 15 students lost their lives and another 23 were wounded.

In considering the "gun culture" in the US, the filmmaker first turns his attention to the National Rifle Association and its right-wing president, actor Charlton Heston, as well as the Michigan Militia, whose members are armed to the teeth. Moore also interviews James Nichols, brother of Terry Nichols, the individual convicted along with Timothy McVeigh for the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995. The filmmaker's intentions here are a little muddy.

Some of the material is revealing. Moore notes that Eric Harris, one of the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre, grew up in Oscoda, Michigan, home to a Strategic Air Command base and a center for activity during the Gulf War. Harris's father was an Air Force pilot. Moore observes that the biggest employer in Littleton is Lockheed Martin, the world's largest weapons maker.

When the director asks a Lockheed Martin public relations spokesman on camera if he sees any connection between the production of weapons of mass destruction in the town and the violence at the high school, the latter naturally demurs. He asserts blandly that adults, when they are angry with each other, "don't simply start dropping bombs on one another."

Given that cue, the film then quite powerfully proceeds to list murderous US interventions and military actions around the world over the past half-century, from Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s, to Vietnam, Panama and the Persian Gulf and beyond. Moore points out the role of the US in financing and inciting Islamic fundamentalism, including figures such as Osama bin Laden. He furthermore remarks that the shooting at Columbine occurred on the same day as the heaviest bombing of Serbia by US-led NATO forces.

*Bowling for Columbine* establishes certain points about the official encouragement and prevalence of violence in American culture. Moore is not able, however, to put his finger on a number of truly critical issues—above all, that the growth of militia groups and the like, with their right-wing populist views, has been associated with a crisis of political leadership and perspective in the working class. It is nearly futile to speak about the growth of the Michigan Militia, for example, without examining the void created by the decay and current worthlessness of the trade unions, in particular the United Auto Workers.

Moreover, it is necessary to grasp the direct link between the glorification of guns in America and the individualist approach to moral, political and social questions. Individual heroics have proven no answer to the social chasm in the US. The "great equalizer," the gun, has proven to be no equalizer at all. One has to account for the fact that the American ruling elite, in the country with the greatest number of gun owners, has had an easier time closing factories, laying off employees and gutting social programs than any other in the advanced capitalist world.

Unwilling or unable to address these more complex historical and social problems, Moore settles for the explanation that white Americans own guns because of their historical fear of blacks!

One of the valuable portions of the film treats the case of the six-year-old boy who shot a little girl, also six, in an elementary school outside Flint, Michigan, Moore's hometown and the subject of his 1989 documentary recording its decay, *Roger & Me*. Moore examines the circumstances of the boy's mother, Tamarla Owens, one of thousands of single mothers in Michigan who were cut from the welfare rolls and moved into state-run work programs.

Owens was obliged to travel five hours a day, by bus, to a mall in suburban Detroit, where she held two low-paying jobs. Despite working approximately twelve hours a day, she was unable to keep up her rent payments and was facing eviction at the time of the tragedy. She had left her young son at her brother's house, where he allegedly found a loaded gun lying around.

The shots of desolate, devastated neighborhoods in Flint, once a center of automobile production, are among the most effective in the film. Here, one might say, in this poverty and the social equality it underscores, is to be found the most profound explanation for the myriad of social ills that Moore's film touches upon, but cannot fully explore. The filmmaker, despite many provocative and appropriate salvos, remains a critic on the fringe

of the establishment and a supporter of the Democratic Party.

In the wake of last year's terrorist attack on New York City and Washington, French producer Alain Brigand asked 11 directors to make films 11 minutes, nine seconds and one frame in duration (after the date of the attack as it known in most of the world, 11/09/01). While certain of the short films are thought-provoking, and generally critical of US foreign policy, the work as a whole does not speak to a particularly high level of understanding among filmmakers of the events or the world situation.

Segments that stand out include the one directed by Samira Makhmalbaf from Iran, who has filmed in an Afghan refugee camp in Iran. Here young children work at brick making and attend a "school," if they can be enticed to show up, which is no more than a dusty passageway; the students have few books and only bricks to sit on. The teacher attempts to explain what has happened in New York City to her pupils, who have no conception of a skyscraper or any other feature of a modern city. The film is one of those that manages to evoke genuine sympathy for the victims of the attack and, at the same time, highlight the disastrous conditions in Afghanistan and the region that might breed a terrorist response.

The always inventive Egyptian director Youssef Chahine conveys Arab and Palestinian fury at the US and its policies primarily through the medium of a conversation between the director himself and the ghost of a US marine killed in the terrorist attack in Beirut in 1983. Chahine makes some legitimate points about the catastrophic and deadly results of US actions around the world. His reference, however, to the argument that American civilians may make legitimate targets since they live in a "democracy" and have elected the governments which carry out imperialist policies, even if Chahine does not precisely solidarize himself with this view, is quite reactionary.

Idrissa Ouedraogo from Burkina Faso has directed a piece about a young boy in Ouagadoudou, the African nation's capital city, whose mother is ill and has no way to pay for medicine. When he hears of the $25 million reward offered for the arrest of Osama bin Laden and thinks he spies the latter in his city, the boy organizes his friends to help him capture the Saudi fundamentalist. They fantasize about the ways they could spend the money. Bin Laden inevitably slips through their grasp. The point is made about the desperate state of the population and its somewhat remote relationship to the anti-terrorist crusade of the Bush administration.

In the segment directed by British director Ken Loach, a Chilean exile, in a letter to the families of the New York City suicide bombing, points to the events of another notorious September 11: in 1973, when the Chilean military, backed by the US, overthrew the Popular Front regime of Salvador Allende and established a brutal dictatorship. The criticisms of American foreign policy and hypocrisy are all to the good, but Loach has lost whatever traces of Trotskyist political principle he once possessed—the piece is a glorification of the social democrat Allende and his Stalinist allies, whose reformist policies opened the door for the military.

Mira Nair, from India, has filmed a moving account (based on a true story) of a Moslem woman in New York City whose son disappears at the time of the September 11 bombing. Eventually the FBI comes to investigate, and the media subsequently floats the story that the young man is a suspected terrorist. It turns out, on the contrary, that the woman's son, a police cadet, had raced to help people at the World Trade Center and had died in the collapse of one of the buildings. At the funeral the woman bitterly addresses her dead son, "First, they call you a terrorist, now they call you a hero."

The American actor/director Sean Penn has created an odd little allegory. A widower (played by veteran actor Ernest Borgnine), whose small apartment is literally in the shadow of the twin towers, imagines that his dead wife is still alive. With the light of the sun blocked by the giant buildings, he seems to exist in a half-dream world. The collapse of the World Trade Center opens his eyes; in the light he suddenly grasps the reality—that his beloved wife is long since dead. The film presumably suggests that September 11 was a horrifying event which opened people's eyes to various harsh realities.

Garrett Scott's documentary *Cul de Sac: A Suburban War Story* recounts the life and times of Shawn Nelson, the unemployed plumber who stole a tank in 1995 and drove it through the streets of Clairemont, in suburban San Diego, California. Through interviews, news reports and industrial films, Scott explains the circumstances that produced Nelson's mad act, which ended with his being shot dead (avoidably by all accounts) by police.

The decay of Clairemont, a product of the postwar boom in the defense industry, is at the center of the film. General Dynamics once employed 30,000 people in the San Diego area. The drying up of those and other high-paying jobs devastated working class neighborhoods. Residents, including friends of Nelson's, point to the sharp decline in living standards that took place between the 1970s and the 1990s. Clairemont became and remains a center of methamphetamine use and drug use generally, to which Nelson also succumbed. In the last days of his life he was digging a mineshaft in his backyard, convinced that deposits of gold were to be found there. *Cul de Sac* pointedly depicts a condition of economic and moral disintegration.

*This concludes the series. See accompanying interview with documentary filmmaker* Travis Wilkerson.