

# Review

## *Bowling for Paranoid Nationalism*

A review of Michael Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine* after reading Ghassan Hage's book *Against Paranoid Nationalism*<sup>1</sup>

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In *Bowling for Columbine* Michael Moore exposes an American society suffering from what Sydney University anthropologist Ghassan Hage would call a chronic scarcity of hope. Moore's film does not try to explain the Columbine High School massacre. Nor does it explain why over 11 000 people are murdered in America each year by firearms. But the film does seek to dispel the myths that shock-rockers, violent cinema or *South Park* are behind this orgy of gun violence. Given that on the morning of the massacre the two killers went ten-pin bowling, Moore asks wryly why no one argued that bowling had transformed these teenagers into mass killers.

*Bowling for Columbine* is not a carefully constructed, balanced and forensic documentary. This is a chaotic, eclectic and polemical tour through an America in the grip of an overwhelming fear. Saturated in the pornography of mass killing, Americans are taking no chances with ideas of trust, society or reciprocity. Against a threat born of irrational paranoia, Moore shows Americans taking the lives of each other in the process.

Moore chats to ordinary people who claim to be helping themselves. Early in the film he introduces us to members of the Michigan Militia, a group of combat fetishists who numbered among their members the men found responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Speaking to current members, Moore hears their genuine belief that the government and law enforcement are inadequate or not to be trusted. They hone their skills with automatic weaponry and war games. They do this because, they say, their world is unsafe. Nobody else will protect them and their families from the mass violence of contemporary America.

Violence is not only perpetrated through attacks upon others, but there is a violence in gun ownership, in gun manufacture, and in a gun discourse that demands every American take a position on guns. The possibility of eliminating the central motif of violence has evaporated long ago. In a culture of perpetual fear, there is no notion of waiting for a hostile attack before assuming a defensive position. The point is to be violent *first*. Pre-emptive strike.

Moore also tries to explain the economics of fear. He identifies those corporations that manufacture social fear in order to profit from it. These include arms manufacturers, security firms, private prisons, the mass media. He interviews Marilyn Manson, the rock star most blamed for adolescent fury. Manson is the film's most astute commentator, noting that a culture in the grip of unshakeable paranoia is an ideal marketplace, a habitat

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<sup>1</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for hope in a shrinking society*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 2003.

manufactured to generate consumption. Fearful people consume rapaciously, irrationally, endlessly. Fear props up the careers and profits that generate it and depend upon it.

In one of his more shameless acts of bravado, Moore takes two young men, victims of the Columbine shootings, to the headquarters of K-mart. It was from a K-mart store that the teenaged Columbine murderers purchased the ammunition that killed 15 and wounded 23 others, permanently disabling the two young men who collaborate in Moore's stunt. The trio hangs around the lobby all day. K-mart punctuates its embarrassed disregard for their presence by occasionally sending a mid-level administrator down to offer sympathetic platitudes. The trio returns the next day with an enormous media posse. Before the cameras, K-mart issues a statement undertaking to implement the gradual withdrawal from sale the caches of ammunition. K-mart's decision is not that of a good corporate citizen. More than anything, this scene demonstrates that there is no possibility for a moral stand in a society of corporatised violence where business decisions are tools of either profit or PR (or both).

Fear is perpetuated by a media whose message is designed to touch nerves, not minds. Moore wonders why, when the murder rate has dropped by over 20%, reporting of homicides has increased by 600%. He speaks to the producers of info-tainment, news, and current affairs programs who tell him, more or less explicitly, that out-of-control black men generate high ratings. The producer of *COPS*, that iconic reality-TV series showing the workaday routine of police on the beat in America, candidly admits that fear and violence are the reasons for the show's success.

On a quiet day in South Central Los Angeles (a locale that features regularly on *COPS* as a seemingly out-of-control ghetto of crime), Moore meets just such an ordinary cop. He asks him why no-one is arrested for causing the air pollution that has blanketed the city and completely obscured the Hollywood sign, killing more Los Angeleans than do firearms. The cop ignores him. Moore also speaks to the news cameramen who loiter around South Central LA, waiting for telegenic crime stories, similarly demonstrating no interest in the air pollution.

Perhaps the most poignant segment of Moore's film is his examination of the case of Kayla Rolland and the little boy who killed her. Kayla, a six-year-old, was shot by a six-year-old classmate at their elementary school in a poverty-stricken town near Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan. Tamarla Owens, the boy's mother, was the obvious scapegoat in the media's coverage. However, Moore reveals that through a harsh work-for-food-stamps scheme, Owens had to leave home before dawn for her commute to two jobs that together did not pay enough to meet the cost of her rent. Without options, she was forced to leave her son with her crack-dealing brother, in whose home the boy found the illegal firearm with which he killed his classmate. Moore paints American welfare-to-work programs as violent intrusions into family and community life. Those who have to deal with their consequences (police, District Attorneys) say the schemes have no merit. But they are popular in the politically-expedient rhetoric of 'mutual obligation'.

Moore compares the American mantra and practice of 'mutual obligation' with Canadian ideas about welfare and health, since Canada has comparable levels of gun ownership but miniscule levels of gun violence and gun death. Moore says:

'If you were poor in Canada ... the majority of the country wants to embrace you. They want to help you. What we want to do is, we want to beat up on the poor. We want to say, you're poor? We're going to make you suffer even more'.<sup>2</sup>

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2 <<http://www.alternet.org/print.html?StoryD=14589>>. This site contains a transcript of Moore's appearance on *Donahue*, 20 November 2002.

Ghassan Hage's book describes, and Moore's film demonstrates, the marginalisation and exclusion of scholarship and expertise in sociology and criminology, replaced by populist and anecdotal 'explanations' supported by claims that 'I feel, therefore it is.' Hage describes it as 'zero tolerance towards crime and zero tolerance towards the social explanation of crime' (2003:140). When Moore goes looking for answers, he doesn't speak to scholars. He asks people who are in a position to *feel* something: police officers on the beat, news cameramen loitering around South Central LA, students who were shot at Columbine High School, teenage truants in a parking lot. His most eloquent informants are two men who are consistently held responsible for teenage violence: Marilyn Manson and the creator of *South Park*, Matt Stone. And so it's hardly surprising that, at the end, Moore remains baffled by the phenomena he pursues. In a media culture that fears intelligent commentary, social dysfunction remains incomprehensible, perhaps because we don't want to know the truth and perhaps because not knowing provides endless fodder for fear-generated modes of entertainment.

Moore undertakes a blistering critique of the info-tainment industry, which repeatedly transmits images of transgressive young black men in order to put a face to otherwise inexplicable fears. However, in refusing to target legitimate sources of information, Moore himself perpetuates a discourse that is more entertaining than informative. His stunts and pranks and stats and facts reveal a methodology supported by anecdote and innuendo.

This type of methodology adds new voices to the dispute, but not with the intention of arriving at a point of understanding. Certainly it adds key issues to the conversation ('What are you afraid of?' 'What do you mean when you claim to act upon a constitutional right?'). But it is a conversation characterised by disproportion and scapegoating on one side, and sarcasm, interruption and trap-setting on the other. There is no path towards reaching an understanding.

Moore's spontaneous visit to Charlton Heston reveals the National Rifle Association president to be a racist and an idiot. Whilst Heston's candour is jaw-dropping, surely the point of speaking to him is to learn something about the astonishingly seductive techniques of the American gun lobby. At first, Heston claims that he carries a weapon because of fear. When pressed, he admits that he is not personally afraid. Pressed further, he explains that he arms himself because he has a constitutional right to bear arms.

There is no analysis into the pervasive populist American rhetoric of rights-based claims. Hage's commentary on the social 'gift' seems an appropriate comparison. For Hage, a society based upon an ethical structure contains mechanisms for the exchange of social gifts (he uses the example of the pedestrian crossing, where a social obligation requires people to yield to each other and, in that process, to recognise each other, to co-exist, and to live ethically with difference). The exchange of gifts, for Hage, is the 'symbolic exchange of recognition', without which there is no sociality (2003:148). For Hage, the ethical 'gift' is the true basis for 'mutual obligation', and it is from this point that he unravels the Howard government's rhetoric in which relentless pressure is maintained upon the most disadvantaged individuals and groups until, when they cannot withstand it any longer, their eruption is used to justify repeated calls for their social exclusion.

When Heston claims to have a 'right', he demonstrates no conception of genuine mutual reciprocity. For him, his 'right' is something he is entitled to take, with no obligation to reciprocate. His 'right' is not supported by any social structure that requires an endless exchange of gifts: give, receive, give back ... There is no mutual recognition between the rights-taker and the rights-giver. Without mutuality, there can never be any ethical social structure that is produced and reproduced, permanently requiring members of the social group to give to, as well as take from, the social collective.

Visiting Toronto, Moore tests the purported myth that the city's residents leave their homes unlocked. Barging into a series of homes, Moore finds bemused but friendly Canadians politely greeting him as he intrudes. This is ultimately the point of Moore's film. He compares societies by their standards of care and community, portraying Canada as a society where responses to the unknown or unfamiliar are based upon curiosity and concern. They appear to welcome strangers and offer welfare to those in need. When Moore says, 'Guns don't kill people. Americans kill people', he is right. When a paranoid society has 250 million firearms at its disposal, violence explodes from the barrel of a gun and in the debates about the value of guns as social commodities. The America filmed by Moore is a crowd of individuals, each required to look after themselves. Their scepticism of those who govern them has made them believe, with good cause, they must be self-reliant. They become suspicious and afraid of each other and of outsiders. When a society is ordered by mutual paranoia, violence is the only possible outcome.

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