## A Biography of Michael Moore Jeffrey S. Smith Central Michigan University

Michael Moore is one of the most important (and notorious) American documentary filmmakers of the last two decades. From taking on automotive giant General Motors to campaigning for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader in the 2000 election, from Roger and Me to TV Nation to Downsize This!, Moore has been, and continues to be, one of the most outspoken opponents of big corporate greed and one of the strongest proponents of the rights of the common man in recent history.

Michael Moore was born in Davison, Michigan, just outside Flint, in 1954. His mother and father were both Irish Catholic, and working class. After a brief attempt at the religious life at the age of 14, he returned to finish out his scholastic career at Davison High School, where he was on the debate team, worked with Student Government and even wrote a play for his High School to perform. Moore said, "It was a religious theme and it ended when Christ [came] down off the cross and [was] nailed back up. The people who nailed Christ back up were modeled on people in my town. They could recognize themselves." (Champion, 1998)

In 1972, Michael was awarded an Eagle Scout Award for his slide-show project in which he exposed the worst polluters in his area. He then took many jobs, none of which lasted long. In 1972, he ran for and won a seat on the school board, and at the age of 18 became the youngest member ever to sit on the Board in the city of Flint. Once on the council, he attempted to get the teacher that had encouraged him to run for the post fired. He ended up dropping out of the University of Michigan Flint because he was too busy with legal actions against his own city to concentrate on his studies.

Moore became disillusioned with civic politics, and decided to get his message out through different means. He tried his hand at radio but found it unsuitable as the

platform he was looking for after a broadcast turned into a shouting match. He moved on to print, and started up "The Flint Voice", a newspaper which later expanded to become "The Michigan Voice". Moore served the newspaper as editor for ten years, during which he took on stories that no other papers would touch due to their volatile subject matter. He managed the Voice until another offer came along.

He was offered the Editorship of "Mother Jones" magazine in San Francisco, a periodical he felt had dropped off into a comfortable "yuppie" obscurity and had forgotten its working-class roots. He accepted the offer and his girlfriend, Kathleen Glynn, quit her job to join him in his new position. He set about trying to re-vitalize the magazine's roots in the hopes of returning it to its former socio-reactionary state. He brought in many new writers almost immediately and set about trying to reshape the content of the magazine. Unfortunately, one of the ad people was fired on his second day for being a member of the Democratic Workers Party, a Marxist group, setting a bad tone for management-worker relations to come.

When Moore refused to print a blatantly false and misleading article about the Sandanistas in Nicaragua, one that stated "the Sandanistas were Leninist souvenirs of the New Left and that they had betrayed the promise of the revolution", (Champion) the owner of the magazine promptly fired him. Moore launched a two-million dollar lawsuit against the magazine for unlawful dismissal that was settled out of court after an ugly and public confrontation.

Moore apparently decided that the mainstream mass media wouldn't suit his needs after all, having tried newspaper, radio and magazine, and decided to turn his attention to film. In 1989, Moore released the documentary film "Roger & Me", a

scathing look at General Motors' decision to close down their facilities in Flint, the main source of employment for his hometown's citizens. In the film, Moore tried effortlessly to meet Roger Smith, the Chairman of General Motors, although he is ultimately unsuccessful in his attempt. In and around this pursuit, he managed to put together a film that detailed, in gritty realism, the plight of the working class citizens of Flint. He exposed the nature of their difficulty, showing that it was solely based on the "side-effect" of corporate greed that turned a once-thriving city into a modern industrial ghost town.

In an interview with Spencer Rumsey of New York's Newsday in early 1990, Michael responded to a question about the success of his film being linked to 'latent anti-Reaganism', saying "The anti-Reaganism is not latent. That's why the movie has become successful. I knew the film would be popular. I trusted what I saw around me in Flint and Detroit. And it ain't just happening in Flint and Detroit." (Rumsey, 1990) His view of the success of the film only served to fuel his firmly held belief that the Reagan and Bush administrations, with their ill-fated "trickle-down economics" had robbed the middle class of its status and its former job security. His film demonstrated feelings that the working class had been more and more put upon by the Republican-led administration and were in a downward spiral. This message was well received by audiences and accounted for much of the film's popularity, making it one of the more well-received documentary films in recorded history.

After the success of "Roger & Me", Moore's next project was a short sequel to his first film, entitled "Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint" which premiered in 1992. He returned to Flint to check in on the major characters that had come to audience's attention

in the first film, such as Ben Hamper, the Rabbit Lady and others. Their lives had taken many a different turn since the first film, some getting along fairly well, others scraping by after yet more downward turns. In a September 20, 1992 article in the Detroit Free Press, columnist Diane Katz reported on the Rabbit Lady. "The hand-lettered sign posted for years in Rhonda Britton's drive, the one that read "Pets or Meat," is gone now. All that remains of the rabbits she bred to subsidize her widow's benefits are tufts of gray fur matted with blood strewn across her overgrown grass. First came health department bureaucrats, who ordered an end to her backyard butchering. Then came the dogs, who slaughtered the last of her stock in a midnight raid on the tilting hutches. Rhonda works at Kmart now, relying on food stamps and Medicaid to supplement part-time wages. Her dachshund and Doberman puppies, penned in a drafty laundry room, are for sale cheap. There's no cash to buy their food. Instead, Rhonda is raising rats to sell to snake owners, which get along dandy on table scraps and reproduce with abandon. Proving her point, the 40 or so rodents scurry madly about the four glass tanks crowding the living room, oblivious to their futures as snake supper." (Katz, 1992)

Moore's next project wasn't one of his own making, but one he participated in as an interviewer. The film was an unapologetic view of the groups in the Unites States that are trying to transform America from the "Land of the Free" into one Aryan nation called Blood In The Face. Although Moore's name was listed low in the credits, the awareness his previous films had gained him caused his participation in this documentary to be noticed.

Moore had used print newspaper, radio, magazines and now film to send his message, but he still wasn't reaching enough people. Only one venue remained for him

to use to get his "working-class" missives to the people it would most benefit: television. In 1994, <u>TV Nation</u> premiered on NBC, a news-magazine formatted show that allowed Moore to do what he did best several times during the course of each program.

TV Nation covered several topics each week. In the first program, they took the show to Mexico to see if, due to the recently passed North American Free-Trade Agreement, they could produce their show more cost-effectively there than in the US. They also looked at the truth behind the prejudicial treatment of black New Yorkers by city cab drivers by watching a distinguished black actor try to get a cab versus a convicted white felon. They looked at Appleton, Minnesota, where a prison had been built using private and public funds, to help the local economy, but had no prisoners and realtors in the Love Canal area, near Niagara Falls, attempts to bring people back to the "less toxic Love Canal". Finally, Moore traveled to Russia to try to get the missiles still aimed at his hometown of Flint, Michigan, turned to other targets.

After one season of basically hands-off treatment by NBC, whom Moore says were relatively permissive with him regarding his choice of subject matter, Moore received a better offer from the FOX television network, and moved his operations there. In 1995, it re-aired on the new network, a co-operative production with the British Broadcasting Company. Strangely enough, Moore was denied office space at both NBC and FOX for his shows production, but he produced a second season there, and found the higher-ups at FOX much more restrictive. Constant memos, notes and phone calls would come in to Moore on a weekly basis regarding the network's nervousness regarding one segment or another, and the program ended after its second season.

The next project Moore undertook marked both his return to film and his first venture into fictional satire. Canadian Bacon was filmed in 1995, starring Alan Alda, John Candy, Bill Nunn, Kevin J. O'Connor, Rhea Perlman, Kevin Pollack and Rip Torn. The film also featured cameos by Stephen Wright, James Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Michael Moore and Ben Hamper. The story told of an American President whose popularity was waning and who decided to invade Canada to raise them, and the effects it had on those who lived there. The film was shot for \$10 million and was directed by Haskell Wexler, the director of One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest.

Unfortunately, the release of the film was delayed for two years due to a struggle between Moore and Propaganda Pictures, the distribution company. The film was also hit hard by the death of John Candy in 1994. Moore said, ""John wanted to do more of what he used to do, sharp-edged satire and not what Hollywood expected of him," When Candy died in March of '94, a little bit of the film died with him. "John was my supporter and he was no longer there to back me and my vision of the film so I lost fights with the studio about content." (Champion)

Moore received a lot of resistance from studio executives due to the films biting political nature, but it did little to dissuade him from making his film his way. Then, when the film was finally released, another film named <u>Wag The Dog</u> came out shortly thereafter, with a plot that was very similar to that of <u>Canadian Bacon</u>. Moore is reported to be considering legal action on a copyright infringement charge, but nothing has been done as yet.

Moore then turned to the one print medium he had yet to use, and published his book <u>Downsize This!</u>: Random Threats from an <u>Unarmed American</u>, a collection of

scathing political essays about various corporate, political and social issues of the day.

One of his chapters contained the advice that people should cease to vote for the candidates themselves and instead vote for the lobbyist or special interest patron who was ultimately responsible for their candidacy.

After contracting for a 47-city book signing tour, Moore realized that his trek through the country could easily be made into a film. The Big One was released to theatres in 1997, detailing his venture into a corporate-sponsored tour (arranged by Randomhouse Publishing) to promote <a href="Downsize This!">Downsize This!</a>. This tour resulted in a well-publicized conflict with Borders Group after their Fort Lauderdale, Florida outlet received word from the home office in Ann Arbor, Michigan, banning Moore from speaking or signing any books at any Borders outlet in the United States.

It was revealed, by Moore himself, that he had been banned from the Borders chain "because I made the mistake of uttering a five-letter word, the dirtiest word in all of corporate America -- "union." (Moore, 1996) When visiting the Borders in Philadelphia, he arrived at the store only to find about 100 workers picketing in support of Unionizing. Moore stated that he'd never crossed a picket line, and had no intentions of doing so now, and was prepared to cancel the book signing. Then, as if struck by true working-class inspiration, he asked permission to bring the picketers inside with him. He received the permission from the management and, after completing his talk, handed the microphone over to the head of the picketers so she could have her say as well. Everyone behaved well, the incident was almost so appropriate it appeared staged, and everyone went away happy, or so Moore thought.

The upper management at Borders was not happy with the decision to allow the picketers into the store with Moore. But instead of making their displeasure known to that stores manager, they made it known to Moore. The VP of Labor Relations for Borders had approved of the decision at the time, but when Moore arrived in New York, for his book signing in at the Borders in the World Trade Center, he was met by two Borders Executives who had flown in from Michigan. They informed Moore that the incident in Philadelphia had been termed a "commotion" and they were barring him from any further entry into any Borders outlet. As Moore himself said, "I couldn't believe I was being censored in a bookstore.". (Moore)

After writing his public rebuttal in <u>The Nation</u>, a magazine of independent social commentary, Moore pledged the proceeds of his next 1000 book sales to the Borders unionization effort, and told the Borders management "If, after this column is published, you retaliate by removing my book from your shelves, or hiding it in the "humor" section or underreporting its sales to the New York Times list, I will come at you with everything I've got." (Moore)

Michael then returned to Television and began writing a program called <u>The Awful Truth</u> for Channel 4 in the United Kingdom. This program had the same style and basic content as <u>TV Nation</u> had had on NBC/FOX. The program was picked up by the Bravo network, but its inclusion in only one-third share of the cable systems around the country kept it from many of those who wanted to see it. <u>The Awful Truth</u> currently airs on Wednesdays at 10:00pm Eastern, part of Bravo's "Counter Culture Wednesdays".

Last year, Moore made a name for himself all over again as an outspoken supporter and activist for Green Party Presidential candidate Ralph Nader. Speaking at

rallies all over the country, Moore brought a documentary tone to a campaign that ended up being all about anything but third-party candidates. Moore touted the philosophy that all major party candidates were in the pocket of one corporate special interest or another, so voting for them was voting for a "corporocracy" and not a true democracy, or even a republic.

Moore continues to write The Awful Truth in the UK, with 12 new episodes slated to start running in March, 2001, and continues to be an outspoken activist for working-class social and political issues. The latest message on his website (www.michaelmoore.com) is a combination of his trademark satire, strong sentiment, and legitimate thanks. Moore continues to be one of the few strong voices for the common man against the Corporate and Political tyrants of this country, and shows no sign of stopping... fortunately for us all. With the conglomeration of our media outlets in the US, voices that cannot be bought, voices that speak their beliefs with no dollar-amount backing are worth more than all the money paid to the Florida Elections people last December. Viva La Resistance!

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