

## PETS OR MEAT: CLASS, IDEOLOGY, AND SPACE IN *ROGER & ME*\*

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Wolfgang Natter<sup>†</sup> and John Paul Jones, III<sup>‡</sup>

Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989) is a deceptively simple film. On one level, it unfolds as the story of Moore's failed attempt to confront then General Motors chairman Roger Smith. Along the way, it disturbingly documents the social and economic consequences of a series of GM plant closings in Flint, Michigan. Woven throughout the film are different class-based perspectives on the city's crises. During the course of Moore's ironically framed quixotic adventure, the viewer meets a number of Flint's residents, many of whom eagerly unload their social philosophies in response to his innocently posed questions regarding the causes and consequences of the loss of some 30,000 GM jobs.

Yet the film is much more than merely a series of interviews and documentary footage interspersed with Moore's attempt to establish a dialogue with Roger Smith. It is an incisive commentary on the dismantling of the fordist social contract in the contemporary United States, and arguably, the most important popular account of these events. As Moore reenacts the story, production, social relations, and ideology forged an alliance under high fordism which gave Flint not only years of economic security, but as its corollary, a sense of shared community identity. As the narrator, Moore himself, intones near the

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† Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures and Committee on Social Theory, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506

‡ Department of Geography and Committee on Social Theory, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506

film's beginning, "we enjoyed a prosperity that working people around the world had never seen before. And the city was grateful to the company." With the state, capital, and labor thus wedded, Flint's working people shared a sense of participation in the country's Golden Age of capital.

All this changed in the wake of the economic restructuring accompanying the crisis of fordism. The film's depiction of the social effects of this restructuring – unemployment, evictions, crime – is juxtaposed in ironical fashion to other images which reveal new forms of ideological mystification based on competitive individualism, as well as surprisingly resilient forms characteristic of the previous era. The contradictions inherent in each are exposed like moraines brought into relief by the melting away of the fordist economy. The similarities and differences between these two forms of ideology is one of the key features of *Roger & Me* which will receive attention below.

A second feature we explore is the restructuring of Flint's space into ever more distinct public and private spheres, played out in part through Moore's allegorical search for Smith in the towers of capital and its private clubs. As its title indicates, the film takes as its point of departure a premise which must appear absurd in the contemporary United States, namely, that Roger and Michael inhabit the same common space. Instead, we find that the territories of the privileged, e.g., corporation headquarters and private clubs, are policed to ensure that opposition is held at bay. Whereas Moore's self-consciously nostalgic commemoration of Flint as it existed in the 1950's depicts a common place joined by a shared sense of progress emanating from a capital-labor alliance, the new space of Flint has been bifurcated into an elite landscape of private enclaves amidst urban decay. It is within the former sphere that Roger Smith lives, and the latter in which the effects of economic transformations are lived. Accompanying this spatial differentiation is the demise of a public sphere, Flint's *res publica*, in which capital and labor once were, even if unequally, partners. Absent from the film are common places where the causes and consequences of capital's flight – as well as what is to be done now – might be debated. Power relations are thus dramatized by Moore as spatialized configurations.

Third, we address critics of Moore who have assailed him and dismissed *Roger & Me* on the grounds that it is not an objective documentary. Moore's overtly perspectival account of Flint's decline has been vilified by such critics as Pauline Kael and Harland Jacobson for its factual distortions and ideological "demagoguery." We defend Moore by analyzing the filmic conventions whose successful implementations have traditionally provided the attribute of objectivity to documentary representation. Moore breaks with these conventions (and their hidden

ideology) by explicitly placing his own politics on display. Viewers – pro or con – must thus confront the unavoidably political character of filmic documentary. In this sense, the film is more “objective” than any supposedly “neutral” documentary might aspire to be.

Fourth, we provide an assessment of why no significant form of labor resistance is portrayed in the film. The working people of Flint are, in fact, largely portrayed as passive witnesses to the onslaught of a series of GM layoffs. Why, one might ask, did Moore not include scenes of organized protest to the factory shutdowns? What are the consequences for political action arising from Moore’s decision not to make resistance by workers an organizing principle of the film? Such questions are of utmost importance today precisely because of the inability of organized labor to as yet effectively counter the restructuring of contemporary capital.

Finally, we offer a close viewing of a sequence of scenes at the film’s midpoint in which many of the above themes crystallize. The resident who offers bunnies or rabbits, “pets” or “meat,” emblematically suggests the flexibility with which capital has responded to its own crisis of survival.<sup>1</sup> A montage sequence establishes the connection between her management of the rabbits in a primitive factory system and capital’s treatment of labor. In this sequence the woman reveals capital’s operative essence: under one set of conditions labor is cuddled as pet; in other circumstances it is discarded like so much meat.

The narrative principle organizing Moore’s film is montage. It juxtaposes past and present, class perspectives of the rich and poor, views of capital as both a private and social power, and the seemingly impersonal laws of the economy against their personalized effects. The trope of irony which organizes the film’s stylistic juxtapositions does not permit a reconciliation of these differences, but instead exposes them as unresolved contradictions. It is between the positions thus revealed as unreconcilable that the viewer is forced to choose.

### **The Ideology of Community**

Michael Moore was born in the community of Flint, but there are even more compelling reasons to make it the empirical site demonstrating the consequences of economic restructuring. As both the birthplace of GM and the United Auto Workers (UAW), Flint was perhaps the apogee of fordist economic and social relations. On the economic side, fordism was characterized by large scale manufacturing, vertically integrated production systems, the standardization of production, massive economies of scale, and a rigid and finely tuned division of labor on the shopfloor. It was sustained by a social contract between capital and

labor which exchanged labor peace for job security and shares in productivity gains, and by Keynesian macroeconomic policies which maintained a close articulation between production and consumption.

Fordism was buttressed by an ideology which reinforced its organization of production and consumption. Both mass education and the media served to homogenize political and cultural practices. Sustained thereby was a pervasive rhetoric of equality which not only made it possible to deny the existence of injustice based on race, ethnicity, and gender, but which also castigated as "un-American" any activity which questioned the limits of this unofficial compact. Individuals were not only encouraged to develop an organic allegiance to family, community, and country, but also a dedication to the firm, as manifested by hard work, sobriety, and punctuality. This mutually reinforcing relationship between the social and the economic combined to create what GM referred to as the "partnership of progress," within which the advancement of the individual, the firm, and the community were to occur in tandem. While fordism was clearly not without tensions, on the whole its ideology successfully masked and contained the conflicts subsumed within this relationship.

As demonstrated by Moore, the social web of community "forged" by fordism transcends the merely spatial, for community is also an ethical, political, and economic concept, and one which is open to redefinition as circumstances warrant. Moore's narrative strategy is to juxtapose a self-consciously valorized version of community in 1950s Flint to a contemporary version which exposes its disingenuous, persuasive, and ideological character. This maneuver provides the basis for his critique of Flint's decline in individual, family, and class terms.

Moore begins his film with a depiction of Flint during the period of his own childhood. The documentary footage which conveys the period is in equal part composed of family and public history. The private and the public are woven together in what will be the film's account of this past as history. The dual face of cooperation and camouflage inherent to fordism is referenced in Moore's use of historical footage made in Flint during his youth. Using images from GM films, television programs, and home movies, together with patriotic and popular music, Moore re-presents images of the community as a realized sublation of the private and the social. He personalizes this era by describing a family in which, "everyone worked for GM," from dad, to uncles and cousins, and where, Moore playfully intones, "every day was a great day." Moore inserts documentary footage from the parade marking GM's fiftieth birthday as testimony to the partnership achieved by fordism. Workers on floats celebrate with banners reading "Working Together." The soundtrack plays a spirited song touting the virtues of the collective: "Teamwork, teamwork, the nation's secret was team-

work." Former GM chairman Curtice espouses a vision of progress by adopting the theme, "the promise of the future," in his keynote address, i.e., a vision of the future as an unending continuation of a fordist present. GM's invincibility is assured by the fabric of fordism. To the sounds of "America the Beautiful," Curtice promises his listeners that workers can expect to "advance" *along with* the company: "our wish is that he continue to prosper; most of our employees, even those who at times cause problems, are conscientious and hardworking men and women." Management, Moore's documentation suggests, thus contained the acknowledged conflict under the guise of cooperation and progress whose twin guarantors were the benevolence of capital and a labor force with a work ethic reminiscent of Horatio Alger.

Fordism's unraveling ruptured this tenuous alliance. GM's response to the pressures of international competition, as Moore narrates it, was to close eleven plants in the United States, open eleven plants in Mexico, use the money saved to diversify production into high technology firms and weapons manufacturers and threaten further job losses to extract wage and benefit concessions from the UAW. As Moore's montage illustrates, GM's previous "commitments" to the community no longer sway corporate decisions.

The interviews and images following this sequence reveal the class-bifurcated consequences of economic restructuring. Whereas previously, individual and community were ideologically conjoined in an ongoing vision of progress through partnership, contemporary Flint underscores the tenuous nature of this reconciliation. What from one class perspective must appear as the betrayal of the partnership of progress for all "productive" members of the community, from the other becomes an inevitable and unavoidable adjustment to the changing demands of the marketplace. From this latter perspective, individuals must renounce any expectation of a company's inherent responsibilities towards the community. The tenuous reconciliation of individual and community achieved during the era of high fordism appears now as it in fact always was, a belief system contingent upon the necessities of capital. Fordism's failure as a system of production brings into relief the mystification – Teamwork! – required to resolve the contradictions between individual and community in an inherently competitive economy.<sup>2</sup>

Though "community" perseveres as an ideology in Flint, the conditions for membership in it have been dramatically redefined. Those voices in the film who champion Flint as a "nice place to live" are members of the upper class who continue to enjoy the full range of social privileges – golfing, shopping, ballet, and like-minded friends. Yet *their* sense of community does not extend to fellow Flint residents bearing the brunt of economic transformation (though did it ever except

as an ideological effect?), i.e., the circumference of community has now been baldly redrawn in terms of class. Those who continue to be encompassed by the circle of community exculpate themselves by explaining the plight of those excluded in individualist terms. One member of the privileged class of female golfers Moore interviews maintains that the unemployed "can't be helped," while another offers the vague advice that the unemployed should "try to find another job or do something else in training." The third of this group remarks (while teeing up, after all, her own ball), "A lot of them take the easy way out."

The contradictory nature of the relationship between individual and community surfaces with exceeding clarity in the words of a participant in the city's annual Great Gatsby Party. He first evokes the partnership of progress by noting "We started something and we're going to finish it. We're going to be the leaders . . . We started the industrial revolution, an art form that's never been created in the history of mankind." The ideology of the collective, however, is shattered moments later when he felicitously suggests that those having a rough time should "start yourself, get your own motor going." Precisely the status of the "we" is at stake here, as is the question of what responsibility the "leaner" community owes towards the excluded.

Tom Kay, whom Moore portrays as a Flint-based GM spokesperson, likewise absolves the company of any responsibility towards the whole by repeatedly insisting that the city remains ripe with opportunity for motivated individuals. He opines, for example, "There's still as much opportunity here as there was when Billy Durant started the motor company down here on Water Street."<sup>3</sup> Those who don't seize available opportunity are, so his logic would suggest, simply lazy. Furthermore, whereas former GM chairman Curtice invoked progress and the mutual advancement of community, company, and workers, Kay severs the combination while unveiling the true nature of the corporation:

I don't understand your connection that . . . because General Motors was born here, it owes more to this community. I don't agree with that . . . It's a corporation that is in business to make a profit, and it does what it has to do to make a profit. That's the nature of corporations. . . . It's why people take their money and invest it in a business, so that they can make money. It isn't to honor their home town.

Thus revealed, community is not a web of social relations materialized in space, but rather a convention within a particular discourse, a contingently created social meaning. Indeed, it is the corporation that holds the power to redefine the relationship between the individual and the

social and, consequently, to alter the very meaning, status, and force of "community." Community, once the vessel containing the fordist compromise, can now be discarded as ballast which unnecessarily inhibits the free movement of capital. The *investment* in the concept of community which characterizes fordism proves precisely to have been nothing but that.

### Private Space/Public Space

Moore's apparently simple filmic compositions demonstrate a keen sense of the implications of the above for the re-marcations of private and public space, and indeed, for the inseparability of space, on the one hand, and capital, ideology, and the state, on the other. At the macro level, for example, is the spatial allegory of Moore's incessant search for Roger Smith. Much more than the ostensible organizing principle of the film, the quest symbolizes the distance which overtly separates capital from community. Space is shown to be restructured into private and public spheres which align with class cleavages brought into relief in contemporary Flint. Moore repeatedly emphasizes the socio-spatial distance separating high capital (the Detroit Athletic Club, the GM building in Detroit, Grosse Pointe and its yacht club) from the landscape of decay bearing the brunt of its decisionmaking. Images of burned-out and boarded-up residences heighten the sense that the working middle class has disappeared from Flint's landscape. The contrast is made even sharper by the fact that virtually all images of working class people take place under the gray skies of winter while the rich enjoy summer afternoons golfing and watching polo.

Cutting back and forth between these images sharpens the viewer's sense of the disjuncture between the spaces inhabited by corporate barons and the disenfranchised. The private nature of capital is epitomized in the vertical space of GM's corporate building, where everything above the first floor is private, and hence accessible only on the terms of those who control its space. Moore provocatively attempts to invade these private spaces of capital and is each time instructed that his rights as a citizen are overridden by the right of privacy enjoyed therein. These private enclaves stand in marked contrast to the "private" homes of those being evicted by Deputy Sheriff Fred Ross. In spite of the intensely personal trauma of eviction, Moore never includes scenes of the evicted refusing access to his voyeuristic camera, thus highlighting the class character of what constitutes the private.

The issue of GM's public accountability to the community, and not merely to its stockholders, is artfully staged as an opposition between public and private spaces in a sequence in which Moore is shown being

prevented from interviewing workers at a GM plant closure. As the film shows, workers willingly speak to Moore until interrupted by a GM "public relations" official. He is ushered from the grounds of the factory by security personnel after being told by the official that this is "a very sad time and its a very private, personal time." In this instance, not the private ownership of property, but the sanctity of the private emotions of employees is the ruse used to deny Moore the opportunity for interviews. The "benevolent" corporation's concern for the welfare of its employees is rhetorically invoked even as its material presupposition is evaporating. During this exchange, and in order to entice him to remove his camera from the plant, Moore is offered the consolation of speaking – on the sidewalk – with the representative of the company. However, the official changes her mind in a fit of pique, "you don't represent anybody," she decides, "you are a private person and no, I won't speak to you." Moore's futile reply is consistent with his demand for the public accountability of capital, "we're not outsiders, we're from Flint." In place of the prevented discussion, we see Moore's camera panning from left to right the silenced workers who stare from behind the plant's windows.

Consistent with Moore's emphasis on representing the geography of Flint's crisis, the film also documents the city's misguided attempts to create a common space where the practice of public congregation might be recaptured. As Moore relates these attempts, the Disney-like spaces developed by the local state were not venues for public commingling, but were instead boosterism projects, spectacles designed to forestall the erosion of Flint's economy and thereby protect locally dependent capital.<sup>4</sup> Each of these efforts, from Water Street Pavilion and the Hyatt to Autoworld, was a dismal failure. The "glass, steel, and plants" of Water Street Pavilion did not deliver the "color and excitement of it all" as promised. The Hyatt, which is said by a local official to boast amenities "comparable to those found in other cities," went bankrupt. And the 100 million dollar theme park Autoworld, constructed to recapture Flint just as it was, failed to fulfill Governor Blanchard's promise on the occasion of its opening that "today is the first day in the rebirth of the great city of Flint." Recreating an idealized past shorn of any suggestion of the insecurity of the fordist compromise, the dome-enclosed Autoworld is eventually encircled by chain link fence; the public declined to purchase such glaring contradictions.

The sole site where the commingling of class is said to occur is the Star Theatre of Flint, centerpiece of the city's cultural life. Partially funded by GM, it provides entertainment and escape at reduced rates for the unemployed during Flint's hard times. On the one hand, the theatre exemplifies in the rhetoric of its director the principle of corporate benevolence; on the other, it provides a form of entertainment



with all the characteristics of the culture industry, as defined by Adorno and Horkheimer. The “stars” put on parade – the likes of Pat Boone and Anita Bryant – reproduce and re-inscribe the prevailing ideology of the ruling class. Bryant, for example, tells her audience to “hang in there and take it one day at a time,” to not “fret or worry about the future,” to “go forward and be positive about life,” and, finally, to “look at the positive within yourself and your community.” She further veils the underlying tensions of the period with her vacuous optimism in an exchange with Moore, in which the emptiness of her prognosis, at least as it pertains to anyone not enjoying the benefits of Reaganism, is evident. She begins by summarizing a recent quotation from Thatcher:

Cheer up America . . . you live in a great country, you’re a free country, you have a great President, and not everything is perfect, but cheer up because you live in a free America.

Legitimated by Thatcher’s judgment, Bryant goes on to spell out its implications:

So we live in a free society. Today is a new day. It’s an opportunity to do something with yourself. If nothing else, you know, thank God for the sunshine, and for the fact that you’re not starving to death, and go out and do something with your hands, I don’t know.

The forms of circumscribed communication possible in the space of the Star Theatre are true to the mission of the culture industry in their reproduction of civility (in the same city then boasting the country’s highest crime rate). Thus demarcated, the public space of the theatre cannot be a site of contestation or critical reflection, but a place founded on escapism and nostalgia for the virtues of a fordist past.

In summary, the film’s spatial representations mirror Moore’s grim assessment regarding capital’s detachment from its responsibilities as well as his pessimism over the possibility for the exercise of community. On the one hand, Moore is never able to meaningfully confront Smith; on the other hand, the consequences of Flint’s collapse appear as a bifurcated social landscape. The state’s response – to transform Flint’s built environment – is admittedly a form of spatial praxis, but not one destined to re-establish the preconditions for either capital accountability or the practice of community.

### Objectivity in *Roger & Me*

Michael Moore has been castigated by some popular critics who argue that *Roger & Me* presents a biased portrait of its subject matter. For instance, Harland Jacobson's stinging interview with Moore in *Film Comment* (1989) raises serious questions of factual documentation in the film. Pauline Kael, writing in *The New Yorker* (1990), assails Moore for his glibness, calling *Roger & Me* "a piece of gonzo demagoguery" that made her feel cheap for laughing. His interviews, she goes on, make everyone in Flint look like "phonies or stupes." She accuses Moore of unfairly laying sole blame for Flint's demise on Roger Smith and for mixing the temporal sequence of events to suit his own political message. Kael laments, "I had stopped believing what Moore was saying very early."

What is one, in fact, to make of the issue of objectivity in this film? We should first caution Kael to remember that all films, documentary or otherwise, are constructions, and thus involve choices at every level, beginning with pre-production planning and ending with post-production editing and distribution. The promise of film simply capturing or mirroring what occurs in the world without the intrusion of "subjectivity" – a position from which Kael condemns Moore – is illusory. Even a hypothetical single camera recording a single place without temporal interruptions, is after all, a positioned camera, thus producing a particular frame, and not another, at a particular place and at a particular time. The processes of selection and omission which govern fiction film are equally at play in documentary film. As all film is inherently and unavoidably perspectival, there arises a potential for the misuse of the concept of "objectivity," particularly when it is taken to mean the finished (and hence fixed) presentation of an already given social reality and not a rendered process. This danger looms nowhere larger than in the making of "documentaries," which explicitly take as their subject matter events which have occurred in the social world. Since Kael presumably knows this, her criticisms seem less directed at what belongs to the nature of the filmic apparatus itself than to the perspective which Moore brings to the materials he has selected to portray.

To further emphasize the perspectival nature of film, we assert, following Jauss (1970), that the horizon of audience expectations as to what a documentary should be makes any such viewing, properly speaking, a *re-viewing*, in the sense that genre conventions define the parameters of reception. These same conventions also discipline the filmmaker's strategies of subject matter presentation, particularly when he or she aspires to a larger audience. The "reality effect" of the docu-

mentary is, as with fiction film, the outcome of a set of successfully performed narrative conventions. As regards the genre of the documentary, however, one should not confuse adherence to convention, nor the effect which results, with neutrality. Instead, narrative conventions must be understood as socially mediated, thus complicating any simple notion of "objectivity," no matter how closely any film adheres to them. That narrative form "already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it," as Hayden White (1987: xi) proffers in the context of texts, is no less true of film.

Criticism of Moore's overtly "subjective" rendering of his subject matter is grounded by a notion that a neutral or objective account of the events is possible and that Moore has violated the standards which would enable it. Such perspectives, undoubtedly held by both Kael and Jacobson, fail to problematize the social construction of the system of narrative conventions by which they judge Moore. Their expectations – distanced commentary and temporal continuity – would seem to be formed through the viewing of traditional documentaries, and they feel he has violated these conventions in his overtly perspectival portrayal of the plant closings, their social effects, and the state's response. That the portrayed events are already the outcome of an interpretative process is made plain by Moore, who demonstrates that perceptions of the events in Flint depend all-importantly on one's stake vis-à-vis the economic transformations the film documents. The possibility of a "fair" account of Flint à la Kael rests on an assumption of neutrality that is simply not possible given the violence of the subject matter.

Moore's post-film appearance in Flint on the nationally televised Phil Donahue Show underlines that one's judgement regarding the accuracy of his story is all-importantly a matter of class. Held in the Star Theatre, Flint was finally witness to contestation and dialogue in a common place, now over the events portrayed in *Roger & Me* (which sparked a debate that the "thing itself," i.e., GM's layoffs, could not). The discussion, like the film, revealed pronounced class biases. Elites questioned why Moore "did not show some of the nicer areas of Flint," as if that was what the film would require in order to be balanced, while ex-GM workers affirmed his sensibilities by telling him that he had the story "just right."

Finally, we would offer that the film fulfills the dictionary definition of objectivity even more than any supposedly factual documentary account hiding behind the guise of objectivity might claim (Weber, 1991), since Moore explicitly incorporates his perspective of the events into the structure of the film. First, Moore signals from the very outset a highly personal statement – as witnessed not only by the opening scenes of his family but also in the title itself – shattering any illusion that this is to be a de-personalized, non-perspectival mirror of Flint's

decline. Second, the over-arching narrative line, Moore's search for Roger Smith, is inherently political. He inverts capital's strategy of assigning blame to the unemployed individual by making Smith personally accountable for the corporation's decisions. It is impossible to conceive of this narrative strategy in distanced, apolitical terms. Third, the director not only manifestly inscribes his politics into the film at various junctures, he repeatedly leaves traces of various objections his interlocutors direct towards his own subjectivity. For example, Tom Kay is heard accusing Moore of "espousing a philosophy" in response to a question regarding the company's civic responsibility. Revelers at the Great Gatsby party urge him to not "pick on the negative," thus further disarming any possibility of viewing *Roger & Me* as an unbiased film. Moore could have excised this footage, but to have done so would have falsely elevated himself above the dialogue. He chooses instead to reveal his own stance, measured against that of others, and it is through such admissions that his film is objective, in the sense that its perspectivalism is apparent to all.<sup>5</sup>

### Politics of Resistance?

One disturbing feature of *Roger & Me* is Moore's failure to include any semblance of collective resistance against GM's plant closings. For the most part, labor is shown to passively acquiesce – or to respond with inchoate anger – to the social and economic transformations manifested in Flint. As Moore judges the situation, union leadership, which is shown offering concessions to the firm, is part of the problem. In an interview with the head of the UAW, Owen Bieber, Moore asks the same question he had just addressed to Governor Blanchard; namely, whether another sit-down strike might be an appropriate means of responding to the job reductions. No, responds Bieber (as had Blanchard), a "sit-down strike will not accomplish what it did in 1937." Bieber echoes management by opining that one must accept the reality that the plants will not remain open. His complicity is underscored by a brief interview with a worker who complains that labor is losing power because "too many guys in the union are friends with management." Moore's film clearly sympathizes with the latter sentiment, which no doubt led the UAW to join GM in endorsing the scathing Kael review.

The lack of organized resistance by workers is poignantly revealed by a failed demonstration intended to commemorate the 1937 strike which led to management's recognition of the UAW. Only four workers take part. The plaque marking the birthplace of the union, Moore's film suggests, is all that remains of a once vigorous organization. This depiction of (non)resistance raises a serious question; namely, does such

a political film not owe its viewers a measure of realistic praxis, a way of not only knowing but also of doing? Are we left to believe that the fired workers are merely victims powerless to resist the GM juggernaut?

In responding to these questions, Moore has replied that he took pains not to make simply one more "Dying Steeltown" documentary (Crowdus, 1990), i.e., his choices reflected a conscious effort to not only distance himself from the documentary form, but also to achieve a wider audience than that which might have accompanied a more praxis-centered representation of Flint. Moore thus attempts to distinguish his film from such works as *The Business of America*, *Controlling Interests*, and *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, all of which celebrate the efforts of the oppressed to overcome their situations. Such documentaries serve two noble purposes: exposing the roots of oppression and inspiring viewers to imitate the forces of resistance. While Moore is doubtless concerned with the first of these purposes, his film consciously avoids identity figures for the second.

We maintain that *Roger & Me* achieves its political goals precisely because of the absence of successful resistance in the film, thus leaving any politically sensitive viewer with an uneasy outrage over the events depicted. Including strong figures of resistance, with whom the audience could develop a mimetic identification, might have only undercut this sense of outrage by suggesting that the pluralist model encompassing the state, labor, and capital is alive and well in America. Such a seductive portrait would only replicate the ideology of the fordist compromise which is so jarringly critiqued by Moore. Given the politics of the contemporary period and the worldwide mobility of capital, it would be misleading to have the film offer hope that older strategies of resistance by themselves could provide grounds for optimism. *Roger & Me* thus becomes itself a form of resistance made more effective by the absence of resolved tensions and mimetic models of identification. In this sense the film serves in its totality as an impulse to praxis by provoking the viewer to respond to the violence it re-presents.<sup>6</sup>

### **Pets or Meat: Moore's Emblem**

All but the most abstract films project the essence of their message via a privileged scene or character which weaves together most of what has come before with what will unfold subsequently. By following this convention the director provides a site in which the disparate and sometimes excessive elements of the film coalesce. For us, Moore's rendering of the Flint woman reduced to selling rabbits as "pets" or as "meat" performs this function. It is through her that we encounter a violence that, on surface appearances, might otherwise only suggest how remarkably destitute social life in Flint has become. Yet we choose

to view Moore's inclusion of this woman's tragic and bizarre adjustment to hard times as emblematic of the entire structure of *Roger & Me*, and indeed, as a distillation of our previous arguments. For Moore is not simply pointing to the trauma inflicted on the residents of Flint through her: she is equally a vehicle for representing the decline of fordist capital-labor social relations; her managerial flexibility bespeaks the emerging post-fordist economy; the force of her on-camera butchering of a rabbit renders impossible any distanced viewing of the act committed; and finally, the encounter symbolizes the failure of GM workers to offer resistance to the company. It is in the "Pets or Meat" sequences that Moore is most artful, and in which the ironic structure he employs becomes evident.

To make such claims about the events portrayed, we must first place the rabbit-selling woman in the broader context of the film. She first appears roughly at its midpoint and is seen again twice near its end. The events leading up to the first scene follow yet another unsuccessful search for Roger. Moore then cuts between three scenes which reaffirm the ideology of the past: Reverend Robert Schuller's visit to Flint ("tough times don't last but tough people do"); Moore's visit to the Star Theatre culminating in his earlier cited interview with Anita Bryant; and an extended and disarmingly honest exchange with a remarkably unaged Pat Boone, introduced by television advertisements from the 1950s in which GM's favorite spokesperson peddles ("it's the longest") Chevrolets.

The ideological stage now set, Moore then moves to scenes which contrast this bourgeois rhetoric to the realities faced by Flint's residents. In order, these are Janet the Amway lady, who makes a living color-coding flesh tones to seasons, and the manager of the local Taco Bell, from whom we learn that GM workers lack the stamina and speed to cope with the challenging world of fast food. Finally, we are once again witness to the ideology of the contemporary, with Tom Kay insisting that there is as much opportunity as ever in Flint.

It is within this context that the viewer encounters Rhonda Britton, a young woman supplementing her Social Security check by selling rabbits as pets or as meat. By immersing her introduction within the ideology of capital, and by setting her coping strategy within a series of others, Moore frames her on first appearances as simply another example of hard times in Flint which serves to contradict the individualistic rhetoric still espoused by capital.

Yet within this extended sequence we are witness to the brutal unveiling of capital's logic. For while she appears to be merely another victim of economic duress, her entrepreneurial spirit at the same time bespeaks the contradictory faces of capital. She thus becomes a multi-layered allegorical figure.

Britton keeps her bunnies, or rabbits, depending upon their use,

caged in close quarters. Like labor, her animals are classified according to the exigencies of the moment: "If you don't sell them as pets, you gotta get rid of them as meat." Capital-labor relations have been encapsulated in this single utterance, i.e., under one set of conditions labor is to be cuddled, while under a different logic, bunnies become meat. She elaborates this factory system by distinguishing between "fryers" and "stewers." Consumer tastes have mandated a restructuring towards the fryers, i.e., young rabbits, versus the older rabbits who become stewers. Britton directs Moore to a cage crowded with stewers, who manifest behavior which to her is puzzling, but for which she has found a timely resolution:

Them guys are all meat. But see, they start doing this to each other, peeing on each other and stuff like that when they get older and if you don't have ten separate cages for them then they start fighting and then the males will castrate the other males and they do, they chew their balls right off. Then you have a bloody mess. So that's why you gotta butcher them when they get a certain age or you have a heck of a mess.

Britton makes plain that she cannot afford the ten separate cages which would prevent this behavior. Given the option of either having a "bloody mess" or butchering them, the latter must seem entirely reasonable.

As part of the extended filmic structure, Moore relates the violence awaiting the rabbits condemned by economic exigencies to the human violence which is now part of everyday life in Flint. Moore first interviews a queue of unemployed men reduced to selling blood to the Flint Plasma Company. This is followed by a sequence of quick cuts depicting urban violence, including homicide reports with bodies covered in sheets, and the assessment, echoing Britton's, that "a big part of the problem is that there just aren't enough jail cells for all the criminals." Target practice and an interview at a gun shop sustain the atmosphere of potential violence. The montage continues through an interview with a former auto-worker turned prison-guard, replete with crowded conditions and inmates yelling obscenities. The thread of violence developed in these scenes is dramatically inserted via juxtaposition onto the bucolic playground of the earlier-cited female golfers. The course seems even more verdant and spacious when contrasted to the human and animal cages.

Moore later visits Britton a second time, during which she clubs and skins one of her animals.<sup>7</sup> Moore's camera frames rabbits in their cages, and, presaging an identical movement at the closing of the factory, pans

left to right. The formal repetition of the composition makes abundantly plain that the rabbits are the central metaphor for labor.<sup>8</sup>

It is, finally, upon reflection that the threefold force of the rabbit-labor equation is revealed: how Britton's treatment of her rabbits recalls the alternating postures of endearment and detachment practiced by GM chairman Curtice and his successor Roger Smith; how the animals react so passively, with the exception of their violence against one another resulting from the conditions of their existence; and how, during the butchering of the animal, we witness her furtive surveys for the health inspector, who, like the state in *Roger & Me*, never intervenes to put an end to the violence.

## Conclusion

Film theory and criticism is a domain of investigation relatively unexplored by geographers. This is doubtless the by-product of the discipline's historical emphasis on the material conditions of social life, wherein representation is contrasted with, and subsidiary to, material life. But if we are to take film seriously within the general domain of geographic investigation, and within the ambit of radical geography in particular, then two key issues need to be addressed.

First, geographers must strive to overcome the rigid distinction between the categories "real life" and "representation." To do so, we believe, requires a recognition that the representation of social life (in, e.g., film, television, political discourse, cartography, and the media) and social life as "lived" are dialectically interwoven. The conditions of material life are shaped *through* their representation as certainly as representations are shaped by material life.

On the one hand, what is regarded as the "real world" has almost always been made possible by some previous form of re-presentation. For example, the war in Iraq most certainly depended on the stage being set by various forms of representation (e.g., *Rambo III*, video games, the flag as patriotic symbol, the commemoration of previous wars in the form of monuments and holidays, and other instruments of cultural mobilization). And the war's perceived success has doubtless remapped the terrain of what in the future will constitute legitimate cause for military intervention as well as the forms of representation such mobilization will require. On the other hand, it is clear that representations are not objective mirrors of the social world but are instead *always already socially determined*, thus making pertinent the questions of who shall determine the conditions of what is and is not represented, how that which is represented will be rendered, and its contexts of reception.



In sum, the power of representations to intervene in the ongoing reformation of material life should not be underestimated. If we are to take this claim seriously, then those examples of geographic research which are amplified by certain forms of literary and film theory, including deconstruction, must be seen as vital elements in the theoretical frameworks required to understand geographies in the electronic age.

A second issue at stake is the conceptualization of the intersection between the cultural and economic spheres of social life. Marxism already provides a rich history of commentary on these domains, from the Frankfurt school critique of a culture industry thoroughly permeated by capitalism, through the more distanced, relative autonomy argument of Althusser, to the interventionist, anti-realist aesthetic employed in Brecht's plays (1970). The imperative which arises from the work of Brecht in particular is to discard an all too functionalist understanding of the cultural sphere and to seek new forms of representation which are both democratic (i.e., popular) and revolutionary.

For us, *Roger & Me* has more in common with the theoretical stance informing the interventionist plays of Brecht than with the dreary, anti-utopian, prognosis for popular culture exemplified by the works of Adorno and Horkheimer. Perhaps it is not without some coincidence that Moore employs many formal devices familiar from Brecht's dramatic theory, including: a character providing running commentary as the story unfolds, the use of montage and popular music, and techniques of defamiliarization including the absence of mimetic figures of identification. Brecht's use of popular media was intended to simultaneously entertain and instruct: to foster recognition of the objective laws of capital and to promote new ways of thinking in opposition to capitalism that can be extended once the audience leaves the theatre.

If the potential power of both representation and culture are taken seriously, then geographers must, finally, consider film itself as a potential mode of praxis. As should be clear from our paper, we regard Moore's film not only as an important form of representation (of an objective state of affairs), but also one which, like the plays of Brecht, attempts to activate the transformative potential of the medium.

## Notes

1. We have chosen to develop the theme of "flexibility" while at the same time recognizing that scholars are in disagreement over it (cf. Harvey, 1989; Piore and Sable, 1984; Pollert, 1988; Sayer and Walker, 1992). We do so because Moore himself explicitly illustrates three forms of flexibility vis-à-vis GM: the spatial (movement of operations to Mexico), the sectoral (the shift of capital to Hughes Aircraft), and the labor process (investment in robotics). Nonetheless, we register our agreement with Dick Walker who reminds us that the only flexibility GM ever understood is hiring and firing.

2. The same slogan is now used to galvanize worker allegiance in Toyota's largest US manufacturing plant, located in Georgetown, Kentucky. That Japanese-style management encounters so little resistance is perhaps not so remarkable given the fertile ideological ground on which it fell.
3. "Opportunity" that Kay himself can experience: Moore offers at the film's end that Kay has been fired. But in the opinion of the corporation's News Relations Director: "he [Kay] never worked for GM, so GM cannot fire him" (personal communication).
4. *Roger & Me* is not only a useful pedagogical supplement to readings on economic restructuring, it also illustrates well the role of the state in local economic development (e.g., Cox and Mair, 1988).
5. Of course any number of narratives can be fashioned out of the social fabric which constitutes any given place. Moore in fact demonstrates this by including scenes from a state-sponsored film which valorizes Flint as a tourist mecca.
6. For example, Moore effectively juxtaposes Roger Smith's Christmas message extolling "the individual dignity and worth of each human being" against a family being thrown out onto the rainy streets of Flint, Christmas tree and all. Equally disturbing is a scene of Deputy Ross knocking on the door while the GM chorus on the soundtrack sings lines from Santa's warning: "you better watch out!" The scene now seems hauntingly prescient with GM's ill-timed, Christmas 1991 announcement that it was to eliminate an additional 75,000 workers.
7. The killing of animals on screen to de-anesthetize an audience grown numb by violence directed against humans has a well established pedigree in literature and film. In our theatre at least, Moore's inclusion of this scene had its desired effect, as the butchering provoked the loudest audience reaction, far exceeding the response to the violence inflicted upon humans in the film.
8. The comparison we develop has been underscored – subsequent to the writing of this essay – by Moore himself in a follow-up documentary which aired on PBS's "Point of View" in the fall of 1992. In any case, rabbits have been metaphorically joined with labor in other films. Witness *The Dollmaker*, in which the following discussion takes place between a union man on strike and his concerned wife:
 

Him: We just gotta hang on  
 Her: That's union  
 Him: Union's just folks looking on for themselves, like Tom says, people ain't rabbits. Rabbits never make a sound till you kill 'em. Then its just one little squeak. You want me to be a rabbit?

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