

Seeking a Smoking Gun in U.S. Violence

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GIVING IN TO HIS OWN URGE TO SIMPLIFY."

A.O. Scott

The following film review, "Seeking a Smoking Gun in U.S. Violence", appeared in *The New York Times*, October 11, 2002. The author, A. O. Scott (1966-), joined *The New York Times* as a film critic in January 2000.

PRE-READING

In pairs

- 1 Do you read film reviews? Why/why not?
- 2 In your opinion, what is the purpose of a film review?
- 3 Below is a list of adjectives lifted from the text. Match the English and Danish words. Look up the words you do not know.
 - infuriating – slippery – tendentious – outright – disquieting – grim – glib – genuine – attentive – lousy
 - omsorgsfuld – forudindtaget – elendig – decideret – oprigtig – letkøbt – til at blive rasende over – glat – grusom – bekymrende
- 4 Below is a list of nouns lifted from the text. Match the English and Danish words. Look up the words you do not know.
 - commodity – demagoguery – rabble-rouser – foe – ferocity – distortion – misdeed – mayhem – grandstanding – self-righteousness
 - selvretfærdighed – ugerning – urostifter – fjende – spil for galleriet – folkeforførelse – glubskhed – vare – forvrængning – lemlæstelse

Seeking a Smoking Gun in U.S. Violence

by A.O. SCOTT

October 11, 2002

Michael Moore's new documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, rapturously greeted at the Cannes Film Festival in May, opens today in New York City and Los Angeles in an atmosphere of intense political polarization. Not that Mr. Moore, a cheerful rabble-rouser and author of the best seller *Stupid White Men*, would have it any other way. But in times of political anxiety and global insecurity – most times, in other words – arguments have a tendency to turn into shouting matches.

The most disappointing – and the most likely – response to Mr. Moore's disturbing, infuriating and often very funny film would be uncritical support from his ideological friends and summary dismissal from his foes. The slippery logic, tendentious grandstanding and outright demagoguery on display in *Bowling for Columbine* should be enough to give pause to its most ardent partisans, while its disquieting insights into the culture of violence in America should occasion sober reflection from those who would prefer to stop their ears.

I hope the movie is widely seen and debated with appropriate ferocity and thoughtfulness. Does that sound evasive? I'm sorry if it does, but at the moment, political certainty seems to me to be a cheap and abundant commodity, of much less value than honest ambivalence.

Mr. Moore, in the good-natured, confrontational style familiar from *Roger and Me* and *TV Nation*, his sadly short-lived series on Fox, tracks his subject far and wide: a little too far and a little too wide perhaps. His starting point is the horrific massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. Like everyone else, he wonders how such a thing could have happened, and what it says about contemporary American society.

These questions quickly lead to larger ones: Why do Americans shoot one another so much more often than the citizens of other developed countries? Why do our lives seem to be governed by fear? The recent string of killings around Washington provides a grim reminder that these issues are always timely.

These are hardly simple questions, and Mr. Moore vacillates between acknowledging their complexity and giving in to his own urge to simplify. He dismisses a number of possible answers out of hand. Is violent popular culture to blame? No, because in a country like Japan, with a tiny fraction of our gun deaths, people consume super-brutal movies, video games and comic books with even more voracity than we do. Poverty? No, since Canada and many European nations have much higher unemployment rates and much lower homicide rates. Is it

rapturously henrykt
'rabble-rouser' folkefor-
fører; urostifter
anxiety uro
likely sandsynlig
disturbing foruroligende
infuriating til at blive
rasende over
summary kortfattet
dismissal affærdigelse
foe fjende
slippery glat
tendentious forudindtaget
grandstanding spil for
galleriet
outright (her:) decideret
demagoguery folkefor-
førelse
on display (her:) lagt for
dagen
give pause få til at
betænke sig
ardent brændende
'partisan' forkæmper
disquieting bekymrende
insight indblik
occasion give anled-
ning til
sober alvorlig
ferocity glubskhed
evasive undvigende
abundant rigelig
commodity vare; råvare
horrific rædselsvækkende
contemporary samtidig;
moderne
recent string of killings
nylig række af mord
(referer til en snigskytte,
som i 2002 dræbte ti i
Washington D.C.)
provide forsyne
grim grusom
reminder påmindelse
issue problem; spørgsmål
timely (her:) aktuel
vacillate vakle
acknowledge anerkende
urge trang
dismiss affærdige
out of hand uden videre
tiny lillebitte
fraction brøkdæl
consume forbruge
voracity grådighed
homicide drab

our history of warfare and brutality? Compared with imperial Britain and Nazi Germany, he suggests, we're downright pacific.

But each of these assertions rides roughshod over some obvious doubts and qualifications. Unemployment, in countries with more extensive welfare states than ours, is not necessarily the same as poverty, and the wholesale brutality of states and empires engaged in wars of conquest is not the same as the retail mayhem of armed individuals.

But though he seems to be hunting for a specific historical cause for events like Columbine, Mr. Moore, when it serves his purposes, is happy to generalize in the absence of empirical evidence and to make much of connections that seem spurious on close examination. Several times he notes that the Columbine shootings occurred on the same day as the heaviest United States bombing of the Kosovo war. The more you think about this coincidence, the less it seems to mean.

He visits a Lockheed Martin plant near Columbine that manufactures missiles and pesters a company flack about the links between the factory's products and the shootings. "I guess I don't see that connection," the man says, standing in front of the company's wares. Mr. Moore and the camera clearly take him for a fool: another stupid white man doing his job. But you don't have to be a big fan of nuclear weapons to think that he might have a point.

This exchange is followed by a montage, accompanied by Louis Armstrong singing "What a Wonderful World," of American foreign policy misdeeds from the 1950's to the present. Their relevance is, again, arguable, but by now it should be clear that Mr. Moore is less interested in argument than in provocation. The last image is of the airplanes smashing into the World Trade Center, accompanied by this text: "Sept. 11, 2001: Osama bin Laden uses his expert C.I.A. training to murder 3,000 people."

The idiocy of this statement is hardly worth engaging; it is exactly the kind of glib distortion of history that can be taken as a warrant to dismiss everything Mr. Moore has to say. And this is a shame, since much of the movie is worth engaging, and manifests genuine curiosity and a wicked satirical sense along with finger-pointing self-righteousness. While Mr. Moore, as an interviewer, has a tendency to shame his subjects or make them look ridiculous, he can also be a sympathetic, attentive listener. And to his credit, he includes several moments in which he himself is clearly distressed or taken by surprise by what his interlocutors have to say.

The camera collects quite a few odd, touching and unsettling moments. A home-security consultant, full of matter-of-fact sales talk about deadbolts and fortified safe rooms, breaks down at the mention of Co-

'warfare krigsførelse
'downright decideret
'pacific fredelig
'assertion påstand
'ride roughshod over til-
sidesætte; tromle hen over
'qualification (her:) be-
grænsning
'extensive omfattende
'wholesale brutality bru-
talitet i en gros format (i
stor skala)
'conquest erobring
'be engaged in være
involveret i
'retail 'mayhem voldeligt
kaotiske forhold i detail-
format (i mindre skala)
'serve the 'purpose passe
til formålet
'absence fravær
'empirical erfaringsbaseret
'evidence bevis
'spurious uægte; falsk
'coincidence sammentræf
plant fabrik
'manufacture fremstille
'pester plage
flack presseagent
'misdeed ugerning
exchange meningsud-
veksling; samtale
montage en sammen-
hængende filmsekvens
bestående af en række
hurtige klip
'foreign policy udenrigs-
politik
'arguable tvivlsom
engage indlade sig på
glib letkøbt
'distortion forvrængning
'warrant berettigelse
'dismiss affærdige
'manifest tilkendegive
'genuine oprigtig
'wicked (her:) uartig; fræk
'self-righteousness selv-
godhed; selvretfærdighed
shame (her:) udstille på
en negativ måde
'attentive opmærksom
'credit fordel
'distressed ulykkelig
interlocutor samtalepart-
ner
'unsettling foruroligende
'deadbolt svær, ek-
strasikker slå
'fortify forstærke

lumbine. A visit to James Nichols, whose brother, Terry, helped Timothy McVeigh plan the Oklahoma City bombing, reveals a scared, angry man who lives surrounded by guns on a farm where he grows, of all things, organic soybeans to be made into tofu. And a prosecutor in Michigan, Mr. Moore's home state, explains that guns are a much bigger problem in the white suburbs there than in mostly black urban areas.

"I didn't think that's what you were going to say," Mr. Moore says. "I thought you were going to say it was black kids in the inner city." When he goes against the grain of his own prejudices – and keeps in check his desire to be the center of attention – *Bowling for Columbine* is riveting and scary, and its vision of a society racked by fear, riven by inequality and armed to the teeth is neither comforting nor easily wished away.

Mr. Moore's less admirable traits cannot be ignored, even – and especially – if you find merit in some of his views. The film seems to reach a natural conclusion when Mr. Moore, accompanied by two boys wounded at Columbine, visits Kmart's corporate headquarters to demand that the company stop selling ammunition. (The high school killers bought their bullets in one of its stores.) But Mr. Moore, unable to forgo another chance to prove his moral superiority, ends the film with a visit to Charlton Heston's house.

You can be repelled by Mr. Heston's actions as president of the National Rifle Association – he is shown addressing pro-gun rallies that took place in the wake of the school shootings in both Littleton and Flint, Mich. – and still find Mr. Moore's tactics distasteful. His tendency to scapegoat may satisfy his need for drama, but it makes for lousy politics.

organic økologisk
'prosecutor advokat
'suburb forstad
'urban area byområde
go against the grain of
one's own 'prejudice
(her:) gå imod ens egne
fordomme
keep in check holde i skak
'riveting fængslende
rack hærge
'riven splittet
trait karaktertræk
merit (berettiget) værdi
'corporate erhvervs-
headquarters hoved-
kvarter
forgo give afkald på
superiority overlegenhed
repel frastøde
address tale til
rally stormøde
in the wake of i kølvandet
på
dis'tasteful modbydelig
scapegoat gøre til syn-
debuk

WHILE-READING

In pairs

- 1 Look at the first paragraph of the text. How do people communicate when their arguments "turn into shouting matches"?
- 2 "The slippery logic, tendentious grandstanding and outright demagoguery on display in *Bowling for Columbine* should be enough to give pause to its most ardent partisans, while its disquieting insights into the culture of violence in America should occasion sober reflection from those who would prefer to stop their ears."
 - a. Translate the passage.
 - b. Using your own words, take turns to explain the passage, using the sentence: "On the one hand the critic says that ..., and on the other hand, he ..."