

# Roger, Michael and Me

anon.

1990

a review of “Roger and Me,” a film produced and directed by Michael Moore.

“It was like a prison.” So says Deputy Fred, who evicts families that can no longer pay the rent. He is speaking of the auto assembly line, and this is the only direct reference in the entire film “Roger and Me” to the brutal nature of factory “life.” Michael Moore, founder (and loser?) of the *Flint Voice*, sacked editor of *Mother Jones*, has now transferred his lukewarm critique of capitalist relations to the silver screen as director and narrator.

The movie, for those who haven’t heard, is a humorous but barbed look at Flint, Michigan, a General Motors company town, and how the city has been affected by thousands of layoffs in the 1980s. Lots of copy in corporate newspapers and magazines has been written on the plot, so I won’t focus on that here. What inspired this review was material not in the movie, and its implied leftist politics of mass technics as “neutral,” made inhuman not by their very definition, but only by the evil class of men who now have their hands on the controls.

The film certainly was funny, and even managed to imply some criticism of work by showing the foolish or repressive aspects of jobs that unemployed autoworkers were forced to accept after leaving the factory. It also portrayed well the total profit orientation of large corporations like GM at the expense of even cosmetic “responsibility” to workers. But its treatment as a “radical” work by the mainstream only shows the media’s complete inability to see beyond the parameters of the empire of capital.

Rather than being amused by the film’s humor, I left the theater more annoyed by Moore’s insinuation that all would be well if only Flint’s hapless ex-workers still had their jobs. To look at GM’s insensitivity to the human side of its corporate policies as a scandal or flaw in an otherwise sound system is characteristic of leftists and some anarchists who believe that the industrial megamachine could somehow be humane if it were administered by workers self-management instead of boardroom hierarchies.

## “Monstrous and Unprincipled”

Many viewers, from old style leftists to liberal film reviewers, saw Moore’s documentary as a moving statement for increased “corporate responsibility” to the worker. This implies that there is a moral side to capital, and that it should honorably live up to its commitment to those it employs.

By its very nature, capital cannot be somehow modified or forced to meet the needs of the human beings it now dominates. To believe otherwise ignores what French theorist Jean Baudrillard calls “the primal (mise en) scène of capital: its instantaneous cruelty, its incomprehensible ferocity, its fundamental immorality—this is what is scandalous, unaccountable for in that system of moral and economic equivalence which remains the axiom of leftist thought, from Enlightenment theory to communism. Capital doesn’t give a damn about the idea of the contract which is imputed to it—it is a monstrous unprincipled undertaking, nothing more.”

Moore’s politics also seem to reside firmly in what Fredy Perlman referred to as “Marx’s blind spot,” the notion of technology as progressive and liberating rather than hellish and destructive, to the individual and the planet.

Which brings me to the next glaring omission of Moore's celluloid polemic: the scourge on the biosphere that the production and widespread use of cars has become. Global warming is one of the most obvious symptoms of the damage the industrial era has had on the planet.

While operating, cars burn fuel and oxygen and emit carbon dioxide, contributing to the greenhouse effect. New emission technology may be able to reduce pollutants such as carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons as much as 96 percent, but has no effect at all on the amount of carbon dioxide emitted. And global warming is only one of the many life-threatening spinoffs the auto industry contributes to.

As Lynne Clive wrote in the Auto Plague issue of the *Fifth Estate* ["Aberration: The Automobile," FE #325, Spring, 1987], "The automobile is the embodiment of a culture of waste...(it) lays waste to the landscape with its unending network of roads and freeways. It lays waste to the environment, creating acid rains that critically threaten the ecosystem, polluting the city air and thus perilously increasing the incidence of respiratory diseases. In its production, each automobile creates 50 barrels of toxic waste."

She adds, "The automobile is a murderous weapon, responsible for 40,000 to 50,000 deaths and one and-a-half to two million disabling injuries yearly in the US alone. Between 1913 and 1985, 2,530,119 people were killed in the US in traffic accidents." Accompanying this litany of horror is the toll of those killed or maimed each year assembling these metal coffins.

## **Auto Holocaust**

The simplistic assumption that good-paying factory jobs or industrial workers' utopias could solve Flint's human tragedy, politics aside, is absurd. The automobile is about death of the environment, of human beings, and of many other species we share the planet with as we run them down and destroy their habitat. To choose not to deal with this holocaust in the age of (supposedly) increasing ecological awareness is unforgivable.

Not all of the politics of "Roger and Me" are without merit; it did depict the capability of human relationships to quickly change in a world of alienated existence. The irony of old buddies from the factories being both the jailed and the jailers in Flint's new prison could not be missed. The line between the cops and the crooks in a world based on power and greed is thin indeed.

It was also interesting to watch Moore verbally joust with security people at such bastions of privilege as the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, the Detroit Athletic Club, and the General Motors Building. Private Property was repeatedly invoked as the final and absolute justification for ejecting Moore and his camera crew from the premises. Scenes like these laid bare the brutal and unapproachable nature of the rulers of society and kept the movie from being an entire political washout.

So, go have a laugh at the expense of the stuffed shirts and those down on their luck, but be forewarned: as a critique of a world gone mad, this film is a real snooze.

# fifth Estate

anon.  
Roger, Michael and Me  
1990

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/334-summer-1990/roger-michael-and-me>  
Fifth Estate #334, Summer, 1990

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**