



Roger and Me: Roger Smith,
Chairman of General Motors

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Documentary and the Power

Nonfiction films rarely reach beyond a small, devoted congregation, but in recent years two works in particular have realized a mass audience—Barbara Kopple's Academy Award-winning *American Dream* (1991) and Michael Moore's widely celebrated and controversial film, *Roger and Me* (1989). That they have gained this wide audience speaks first of all to the fact that both films deal with the fate of the worker at the hands of the modern corporation, a subject that has been the focus of public concern for more than a decade, inflected most recently by the predicaments of postindustrialism: Given the new order of global capitalism, what power can labor unions claim against management? and what responsibility has management toward workers and their communities? Yet despite these similarities in subject matter—both films also happen to deal with plant closings in the beleaguered Midwest—the two could hardly be more different, stylistically and rhetorically.

Kopple works within the relatively traditional documentary forms that Bill Nichols calls expository and observational; *American Dream* conforms to our customary documentary expectations as viewers that we are comfortably in the hands of an all-seeing, all-sympathizing film-maker, expectations that have been part of the documentary mode since its inception

in the late nineteenth century. Exercising the authority of observation (an authority that is visible in ethnography, sociology, and psychiatric observation as well), the documentary film-maker establishes an ethical norm that is implicit in the narrative and that we are asked to identify with: we are "for" the victims of oppression. But the ethics of this mode, and of Kopple's film in particular, are not quite this simple.

Stylistically altogether different from Kopple's film, Moore's *Roger and Me* eschews the tradition of observational documentary and opts instead for a more complex rhetoric, a hybridization of (again in Nichols' terms) the interactive and the reflexive modes.¹ Moore does not invent this mode—it has its precedents in several other projects dating at least from Kit Carson and Jim McBride's quasi-documentary, *David Holzman's Diary* (1968)—but he carries the form well beyond its predecessors to the level of significant social commentary. What is especially in-

Film

of Interrogation



American Dream & Roger and Me

interesting about *American Dream* and *Roger and Me* is their concern, in quite different ways, with power, not only the power—or powerlessness—of the worker but the power of the film-maker. For in describing the predicament of the worker, Kopple and Moore also portray, at times inadvertently, at other times explicitly, the situation of the film-maker, and implicitly they invite our speculation on the authority and power of the documentary media.

Kopple's *American Dream* deals with the 1985 strike of the meatpackers union (Local P-9) at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota, a strike that results from the workers' outrage at the accumulated cuts in Hormel's incentive programs, benefits, and hourly wages—from \$10.69 an hour to \$8.25. Eventually, Hormel offers to freeze wages at \$10 per hour for three years (with new hires at \$8), but the union rejects the offer by 93%, fueled in part by their knowledge that the company has reaped over \$29 million in prof-

its in 1984, the year the cuts begin. While this seems like a relatively clear and morally solid position for the P-9 workers to occupy—they are claiming their right to a just wage against the seeming greed of the corporation—things get more and more complicated as Kopple's film unfolds.

Four principal figures emerge as the strike progresses, each with his own constituency and goals: the soft-spoken union president, Jim Guyette, who is determined to win at any cost; a union consultant hired by Guyette—Ray Rogers—who brings unrelenting optimism to the struggle; Lewie Anderson, the parent union's chief negotiator, who works against the local in wanting to rationalize wages across the whole union in order to maintain the industry's consistency and competitiveness (Hormel is already at the top end of the scale); and John Morrison, a leading dissident worker who criticizes the local union's leadership and sides with the national. Kopple traces the trajectory of

the strike, from its optimistic beginnings to its depressing conclusion: Hormel shifts production to other plants, and their premier product, Spam—produced during this crisis by Hormel management—keeps rolling out of the factory. With armed escorts, scab workers enter the plants, including some of the disaffected union members who have reached the limit of their own endurance. Ultimately, the parent union cuts all benefits to the strikers (previously \$40 a week), strips Guyette of his position, and negotiates a contract that fixes wages at \$10.25, but only for those who cross the line. With no guarantee of job restoration to the strikers, only 20% of the workers are finally called back, and in the 25th week of the strike—400 replacements having been hired—no jobs remain.

What gives *American Dream* its power is the gradual unfolding of this defeat and the even-handedness with which Kopple serves as witness to what amounts to a tragic spectacle (as William Faulkner once defined it), in which the major union protagonists, all trying to do good in different ways, all fail. Union leader Guyette finds his confidence in labor's united power to be misplaced; the consultant likewise can't mobilize support to vanquish the intransigent managers and he rides off into the setting sun like a failed Lone Ranger. Kopple's postscript tells us that the national negotiator (Lewie Anderson) is fired from his negotiating job, but he goes on (as if to resolve the dilemma he had himself habitually faced) to lead a reform movement against union concessions. Hormel is the real winner: following the strike's conclusion, Hormel leases half its plant to another company, a shadow company, that pays its workers \$6 an hour. Nothing can stop the Spam.

Kopple's *American Dream* comprises many elements that are familiar in the tradition of the strike narrative—whether fiction or nonfiction. There is the small union, pitting its force against the giant corporation and the problem of keeping the ranks together; there is the ambiguous role of the outside organizer (personified by Rogers), and the question of whether he does more good than ill. There is the moral dilemma of the dissident, who might turn scab; and the problem of feeding a family during a prolonged strike. There is the use of local law enforcement officers—not to mention the National Guard—as tools of capi-

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tal. More problematically, there is the distinction between what is legal and what is moral. Guyette claims the morality of rebellion when he invokes the history of the American revolution (not itself "legal," as he points out) and the history of unionism. Against that position, sacred to the American left, Kopple posits the seeming pragmatism (cloaking self-interest) of the American right, as voiced by a Hormel secretary who is kept from her job for one day because of the striker's blockade and declares, with angry simplicity: "I don't want to discuss moralities; is what the company is doing legal?" And in the end, there is the problem of what constitutes defeat, what victory. Do moral

victories transcend matters of economic survival? Or is Anderson right when he asks, "What dignity is there when you don't have a job?"

All of this takes place within the framing irony of the nature of work in the Hormel plant: the opening shots of the film establish the brutal regime of meat slaughtering, and these images of violence recur at intervals, so that we may wonder whether Kopple has at times an even broader point to make about the dignity or indignity of this work in the first place. We are made to empathize with workers who are simply seeking an honest pay for an honest day's work, but that day's work happens to involve stunning, decapitating, dismembering, and disemboweling all these defenseless animals.

Despite its linkage to the main line of strike narratives, the overall tone of *American Dream* is markedly different from that tradition and different too from Kopple's own earlier *Harlan County* (which also won an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary, in 1976). And that difference sadly measures the distance labor has traveled in the last 15 years. The classic ending to the strike narrative—dating at least to the 1930s—represents the particular conflict as part of a longer march, an ongoing struggle that the worker is destined, even predestined, to win. Such was the structure of *Harlan County*, in which the 1974 coal-miners' strike is placed within a historical chronicle that gives it an inevitable logic in an unabashedly progressive narrative: the miners, members of the United Mine Workers Union, stage a strike at Brookside (Kentucky) in which the moral courage of the miners—and their wives, who seem crucial to the energy and direction of the strike—is unwavering as they confront the

legal violence of the corporation's gun thugs. As one old woman in *Harlan County*—a veteran of the 1930s—puts it: "If I get shot, they can't shoot the union out of me." In *Harlan County*, the workers have a unity among themselves that, despite minor rivalries, seems unshakable and will, we feel, gradually gain its victories over the greed and callous selfishness of the corporation.

There is no such "happy" ending in *American Dream*: the union is shattered, the corporation—with its higher obligations to shareholders—moves forward like a juggernaut, seeking the cheapest labor market, wherever that may be. Yet Kopple, the teller, seems not to have fully recognized the point of the tale itself. Certainly her remarks about the film have framed it in the conventional terms of the lost battle within a longer, ultimately winning war: "Maybe you don't win every battle but each one changes you and makes you smarter," Kopple replied to an interviewer's question about the purpose of the concluding information on life after the strike. It was "meant to be moving, to be reflective about past generations and struggles, and to convey hope for the future."² Such hope is hard to find in the film itself, however. The local union seems shattered, at least as a union, the victim of a corporation that, with "the law" on its side, would stop at nothing to win its point; the major union protagonists in the struggle scatter. Precisely the unity of the coalminers is what's missing at Hormel's P-9.

³ Instead, what we have in *American Dream* is unionism in the trickle-down Age of Reagan, when the corporation's obligations are to shareholders and their profits, regardless of the consequences to local economies and local communities. Under the set of incentives available to the contemporary corporation, that company profits most which most ruthlessly seeks the cheapest labor market, in whatever country. Against such odds, the Hormel workers can, at best, swallow hard and accept pay cuts that allow them to keep their jobs—all this in the face of extravagant corporate profits and executive salaries. At worst—and it was the worst for the great majority of the Hormel strikers—they can tough it out and eventually move out, to wherever. No wonder the sad but powerful drama of *American Dream* lies in the internecine war within the union ranks as they differently come to grips with this no-win situation. This is the knife-edge

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reality of the labor struggle in the 1980s, and it accounts for the power and impact the film has had as a spectacle of contemporary labor's plight.

Yet one aspect of *American Dream* that has gone virtually unnoticed is in some ways the film's most important point, though it is a point that Kopple, understandably, is loath to admit. In telling her story, Kopple has, one ultimately realizes, as little access to the corporate management as does the union. The powerlessness of the film-maker is analogous to the powerlessness of the union. When an interviewer, after the film's release, asked Kopple whether she had had the same access to management as she'd had to labor, the

film-maker responded defensively, as if the objectivity of her picture were at stake: "We have an interview with Chuck Nyberg, Hormel's Executive Vice-President, and Richard Knowlton, the CEO. We also shot management press conferences and management interviews, but they always said the same thing." Of course they always said the same thing: they stonewalled Kopple's camera as they stonewalled the press and the union. But far from thinking she has been limited here, Kopple boasts about her ability to get inside the factory: "They knew who I was, but I wasn't blocked. In fact, I was one of the few people who got in the plant to film. I couldn't believe it." And she adds, not seeing the full implications, "But there weren't a lot of labor/management negotiations because the company wouldn't talk to them. They wouldn't even be in the same room with them, so they had arbitrators going back and forth."³ Precisely. In the Reagan-Bush era, communication between management and worker takes place ideally through an intermediary. And when, on rare occasions, they are forced into face-to-face talk, management has the right to say things to the worker that make a mockery of the "negotiating" table. Kopple records one such moment, when a corporate negotiator answers a member of a union negotiating team who has complained a little too long about certain issues: "If you want to come back, you keep your goddam mouth shut."

Kopple's camera is thus witness to what the film-maker herself can hardly admit: that management controls the discourse and can exclude or limit her presence from the decision-making process as much as it can the worker's. In the face of this cinematic deficit, Kopple falls back tirelessly on interviews with

the more accessible workers, mercilessly probing *their* feelings, scoring most triumphantly when she can capture an otherwise tough, proud worker broken down to tears by the spectacle of his own powerlessness—which is driven home by Kopple's interrogation. To a worker who is about to cross the picket line and go against his union, she asks, solicitously (and gratuitously), "Is that hard for you?" To a scab, out of work for six years, and about to report for work, she asks, "Is it hard to cross the picket line?" At times like these, her function resembles management itself, with its power to manipulate the worker's responses.

Of course Kopple wants to expose the emotional traumas of the workers so that we might more fully empathize with them, but she will do so at the expense of other values, such as the privacy of the subject. In talking about a sequence that had to be cut out of the final version because of its length, Kopple unwittingly reveals the film-maker's ruthless delight in the medium's power to capture the authenticity of intimate emotion. She tells of sequences shot in Worthington, Minnesota (the site of an Armour plant), where a worker is shown feeling confident he can move to another job in another plant if need be, when suddenly his telephone rings. "A minute or two later he came out, looking very strange, and said, 'Cut.' *But we kept rolling as he sat down* and told his wife that he'd just been told they were selling all the Armour plants and that 'We won't be going anywhere,'" Kopple confesses [emphasis added]. "Both he and his wife burst into tears. He looked at her and said, 'What am I going to do? Meatpacking is all I know.' I shot *incredible* stuff in Worthington. . . ."⁴

Where management presents a shell too hard, too sophisticated, to penetrate, Kopple turns to the union, where she can work wonders, given her friendly status: "I had trouble sometimes with the international because they'd say, 'Union meetings are sacred. You can't be in there.' But I'm very persistent, so I'd give long speeches in front of all these packing-house guys as to why they should let me film their meetings. Some of them never got comfortable with it, and others sort of enjoyed it, or whatever."⁵ On the question of whether or not her presence affected her subjects' behavior, adding "another dynamic to the events," Kopple straddles the issue, invoking in the end the

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mythology of documentary invisibility: "I guess it always does, but I think that for some of these meetings we were really insignificant and that they just forgot about us."⁶ Such conclusions are comforting to the documentary film-maker (or photographer, or sociological interviewer), but they fail to take account of the real intervention that the outsider's presence entails, however well intentioned she or he may be. As Heisenberg might have said, the results of such "objective" acts are indeterminate.

There is no question that Kopple has revealed in *American Dream* the condition of labor-management rela-

tions in this country in a way that we have not seen so clearly before. But for all its virtues, it is important to recognize that Kopple's documentary mode is, in rhetorical terms, squarely in the mainstream of the tradition, a function that has, from its beginnings in the work of photographer Jacob Riis, offered us the implicit spectacle of a sympathetic observer, empowered by the camera technologies of observation, picturing the powerless for the information (and often entertainment) of the more powerful. Kopple extends that tradition without essentially questioning it.

It is precisely the questioning of that tradition that Michael Moore accomplishes in his brilliantly conceived *Roger and Me*. Moore's film, his first, came out in the fall of 1989 and was met with both critical acclaim and—rare for a documentary—popular success. It seemed, in fact, a sure bet for the Academy Award, until an interview in *Film Comment* with Harlan Jacobson started its derailment by questioning Moore on what appeared to be certain factual misrepresentations.⁷ Pauline Kael's subsequent *New Yorker* review raised similar questions and attacked more particularly the film's putative assumption of superiority toward its subjects, and the movie has been slightly, though I would argue unfairly, tainted ever since.⁸ It's impossible now to discuss *Roger and Me* without taking into account some of these objections, but Moore's critics have, I think, asked the wrong questions of the film, failing to assess accurately its purpose. We *should* worry about whether Moore has violated the ethics of documentary—a question I want to come back to—but we must also observe the degree

to which Moore successfully interrogates the whole premise of traditional documentary form that Kopple, incidentally, accepts.

The ostensible subject of *Roger and Me* is the plant closings of the 1980s by General Motors and their effect on the company town of Flint, Michigan. Like Kopple, Moore is sympathetic to the workers' predicament and to the whole plight of the city: throughout the film, recurring like a leitmotif, he shows us countless evictions being carried out by the local deputy sheriff—the door forced open, the victim's unavailing protests, household goods piled on the street curb, the search for a van or car. He shows us boarded-up stores on Main Street; unoccupied houses, vacant and dilapidated; a rat population in Flint that outnumbers the human population by 50,000. He interviews a former GM employee, temporarily deranged by the situation, shooting baskets outside a local mental health institution.

And to some extent Moore's story is the same as Kopple's: the worker is caught between a corporate management with nothing but profits on its mind and a national union leadership all too understanding of management's needs. At the final closing of the Flint truck assembly line, only four UAW members show up to demonstrate, as opposed to the thousands promised by the union earlier. One of Moore's workers puts the new situation of labor succinctly: "Why is the union getting weak? We're losing power. . . . Too many guys are friends with management." When Moore asks Owen Bieber (UAW President) whether a sit-down strike would do any good today in Flint—Flint was the site of the historic 44-day sit-down strike in 1936 out of which the UAW was born in 1937—he replies that the sit-down is not relevant today. "We have to accept reality that the plants are not going to remain open," he says.

What makes *Roger and Me* unusual—and what has left it open to criticism and misunderstanding—is its mix of motives, its hybridization of forms: it is part historical narrative, focusing on the fate of Flint, Michigan, following the GM plant closings, and dealing with the workers' plight (which invites our interest in the factual history of this "action"); but it is also part autobiography, beginning with childhood footage and first-person narration by the film-maker. And it is Michael Moore himself who remains the central fig-

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ure throughout the film, in the persona of the reporter in search of his story, the interviewer in search of his subject. Jacobson questions the factual inaccuracies in the film, and he is of course right to do so. Plant closings that actually took place over a decade or more seem to take place in a more condensed period of time, about two years. Still, none of these misrepresentations of chronology, and there are many others, makes any real difference to the central point of the film; no one disputes the fact of the plant closings and their effects. Moore has sacrificed historical accuracy in order to achieve the unity of satiric fiction. The exposition in *Roger and Me* is really its least important as-

pect: we are most struck by the film-maker's presence as interviewer and as self-conscious maker of the film. These are the parts of the film that Pauline Kael objects to, especially what she takes to be Moore's targetting of the working class for his satire from a position of presumed moral superiority, all the time seeming to be sympathetic to them. This is a criticism that one might think twice about, since we naturally feel that if a work is making moral judgments, it must be better than what it judges. Kael is offended at the ridiculing tone of the movie, its depiction, for example, of people working in various elite establishments who are forced (by virtue of those jobs) to expel Moore from the premises as he searches for Roger Smith; they are made to seem flunkies, she says. But it's hard to see the point of her criticisms: if they are flunkies, they are simply doing their job. Meanwhile, the GM workers in the film are consistently treated without a trace of condescension: their comments are pithy, their anger is controlled. "What would you say to Roger Smith," Moore asks several GM workers at one point. "Roger Smith?" is the reply. "I'd tell him to retire." "He should be feeling guilty," says another. "I'm sick and tired of these damn fat cats."

Those whom Moore does ridicule (and there are indeed many) are simply given enough rope to hang themselves with. Unlike Kael, I don't feel sorry for Miss Michigan (and Miss America), 1988, when she says on camera, when asked how it feels to drive through Flint when so many workers have been fired from the auto plants—"I feel like a big supporter. . . ." What is all too obviously (and incongruously) on her mind is the upcoming beauty contest: "Pray for my victory in Atlantic City in two weeks." And I don't

feel sorry for the woman on social security who cuddles one of her rabbits (she sells them for "Pets or Meat") and coos at it with demonic good humor: "What's gonna happen to him? He's gonna be eaten. He's gonna be the supper on our supper table." Moments later, the rabbit is clubbed and skinned.

Throughout, Moore views skeptically those possessing power, both the unfamous and the famous. Flint's famous son, Bob Eubanks ("The Newlywed Game"), is shown at a town fair doing a local version of the big show and, offstage but not off-camera, offers these jokes to Moore: "Why don't Jewish women get AIDS? Because they marry assholes, they don't screw 'em."

Several ladies of the leisure class playing golf at the Flint country club offer Moore's deadpan camera the force of their bromidic wisdom when they say, "We have such a good welfare program here . . . they [the poor, the unemployed] just don't want to work." Again and again, Moore's deadpan camera observes the absurdities of Flint's upper-crust society, as in the "Great Gatsby Party"—for which the host hires several unemployed persons to pose as human statues. The new Gatsby's guests offer us further platitudes from the entrepreneur's toast book: "Get up in the morning and go do something. . . . Start yourself, get your own motor going!" How can one incriminate a film-maker who exposes the extraordinary obtuseness of a society that holds a grand party to celebrate the opening of a new jail in Flint, including jailhouse pajamas, dancing to "Jailhouse Rock," and lockup for the night in a brand-new cell: "We're having a fantastic time here." Moore captures the culture of a new aristocracy whose pastorals beggar the imagination of conventional courtiers playing at shepherd and shepherdess. In short, one wonders why Kael should have found Moore—whose family has worked for General Motors or other automobile industries for generations—superior or hostile to the working class. His subject is power—its arrogance and stupidity—and his examples make the film as much an indictment of American society in general as a study of Flint's particular problems.

It is the admixture of Moore himself as a kind of comic persona in the film that has created the special virtues of *Roger and Me* and also its special problems. Seeing the traditional subject of the film (a plant closing and its effect on the community), the viewer ex-

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pects "truth"; but much of what Moore delivers is not the "straight" truth of documentary but the oblique truth of satire.⁹ And are not documentary and satire opposite modes, representing contrary motivations? We expect "truth" from documentary; we don't expect it in quite the same literal way from satire. "Documentary satire" is almost, then, an oxymoron, unless we are willing to admit it as a strikingly original hybrid—which is what I would argue is the case with *Roger and Me*. Once we view the film as "documentary satire," Kael's problems with it seem peevish.

What makes *Roger and Me* work is the unabashedly autobiographical nature of the film, its whimsical self-indulgence and seemingly absurd structure—the quest for an interview with Roger Smith, the chief executive of General Motors. At the center of *Roger and Me*, glowing with a kind of negative aura and repellent charisma, is Roger Smith, chairman of General Motors, whose refusal to be interviewed by Moore for his documentary makes him the defining "presence" of the film, all the more tantalizing for being absent virtually throughout. As Moore tries literally to find his subject, he keeps approaching the goal only to be thrown unceremoniously off the field by Smith's various guards and gatekeepers. Moore's tracking effort is carefully documented on film: in the General Motors main headquarters, given the runaround by public relations staff, Moore fails to get into the elevators and off the ground floor; at the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club he is shown the door; he is ushered out by an officious manager at the Detroit Athletic Club. He can't even get to talk with the company's "spokesperson" on the last day of the Flint plant. Pointing his camera at her (inside the building) from his position outside, Moore records her line: "It's a very sad time," she says, simulating feeling. "A very private personal time. . . ." And when Moore presses her to speak (she is, after all, GM's "spokesperson"), she says, "You don't represent anybody. You're a private interest and I will not speak to you." "We're citizens of the community," Moore protests, to no avail. (The key word, "community," seems almost an anachronism here.) The spokesperson signals to her police force to escort Moore, once more, from the private property of a publicly owned corporation. Moore does get an open mike during a GM stockholders' meeting, posing as a shareholder; but when Smith recognizes his man—

evidently he has not been unaware of Moore's persistent efforts—he quickly closes the meeting before the dazed film-maker can utter a word. (Is he really dazed? It's hard to tell.) Moore's camera picks up the chit-chat immediately afterwards: "I think he didn't know what the hell to do," Smith and his associate murmur to one another conspiratorially.

Moore does succeed, finally, in achieving a face-to-face confrontation with Roger Smith when he corners the executive, following the latter's unctuously avuncular Christmas speech at a General Motors party. It is the climax we think we've been waiting for, and it is, appropriately, an anticlimax, a reiteration of the film's point about the powerful and the powerless. "Will you come to Flint and see the evictions that are going on as a result of GM's plant closings," Moore asks, like Parzival who has at last found the Holy Grail. "I'm sure GM didn't evict them. I don't know anything about it..." the Grail replies, and shuffles off disdainfully.

With this game of cat and mouse, Moore is making, implicitly, a powerful point about documentary form. Too easily, for a hundred years, creators of documentary (in various media) have made the powerless their subject. Arriving on the scene with still camera, movie camera, or tape recorder (that is, armed with the accoutrements of technologically advanced civilization), the documentarian has essentially not allowed his subject to choose whether or not to comply with his efforts. Often the efforts are presumed by the creator to be for the benefit of the subject, and sometimes the point is driven home to the subject in the form of money payment. Exposing the subject's "plight," the creator of the documentary feels virtuous and we, the viewer, likewise feel the glow of virtue, even if we do nothing, and say only that our "attitude" has changed. By pointing his camera at the unequal power and authority of those making the decisions, Moore turns the tables on the traditional documentary form: he himself, the man with the camera, becomes the "powerless" subject (and serves as an analogue to the powerless worker as well).¹⁰ Showing us a Roger Smith who doesn't "have to" be subjected to Moore's camera, who is savvy enough to avoid it or powerful enough to wall himself off with guards and "spokespersons," Moore is making a devastating point about democracy and industrial policy: the powerful do not

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have to speak to "us," they owe us nothing. Kopple is much more traditional in this respect, directing her inquiries to the victims only, asking the strikers, "How do you feel?" Moore is essentially not interested in how the worker "feels," or how "hard" it is to undergo this process; when he shows us "victimized" workers, he is not working to solicit our empathy; it is assumed. Instead, Moore acts as a satirist and critic, exposing the moral failures of the powerful by placing them before the camera's deadpan gaze, accompanied by Moore's own disarmingly ingenuous interlocutory style.

The closest Moore comes to Smith, in a way, is through his lobbyist, Tom Kay, who seems quite willing to talk with the filmmaker, although what he has to say may seem slightly biased: "I'm sure Roger Smith has as much social conscience as anyone in this country." (We learn in a satisfyingly ironic postscript that Kay ultimately loses his own job.) But actually Kay also supplies a point that the film does not attempt to refute—"GM has no obligation to Flint"—and it's a telling one, threatening in some ways Moore's whole premise: Why this heavy burden of guilt imposed on GM? In a free-market economy, where no incentives exist for industry to remain in a given locale, where in fact the incentives go the other way—to relocate in the cheapest labor market—we can see the point. (The greater good of the international consumer must, so the argument goes, outweigh the temporary losses of the individual worker and the community—or even the country.) So what if Flint now has the highest crime rate on the continent? GM is trying to compete profitably in a world market; that is its purpose, not to supply jobs to Flint workers. And it doesn't serve Flint if GM goes out of business altogether. If what is happening in Flint is symptomatic of what is happening all over America, the fault lies with forces that are much larger, even, than General Motors, which functions within an economic system it did not create. Moore's neglect of the macroeconomic issue in his film may be a more serious problem finally than the worries about chronology, although to include it would have blunted his criticism of General Motors.

And yet, implicit in *Roger and Me* is an even larger social economic point: that the same high-handed evasiveness on the part of Smith and the GM management generally is *the whole problem* in the

first place. American corporate management has never listened to the man or woman on the assembly line, has not wanted to acknowledge that they even have a human presence. Following the logic of Taylorism as defined by American industry ("a great art form," someone calls it at the Flint Gatsby party), the worker is a cipher, most valued when he most approaches an automaton. From such attitudes, quality control circles (and quality cars) do not come. And it has taken the example of the Japanese system, with its greater attention to what the worker on the line can contribute to the whole system, to teach American industry—slowly—something. Moreover, GM did in fact help create the larger forces, by lobbying for laws that promote its own corporate self-interest. And if we accept the legitimacy of GM, we accept as legitimate the destruction of our national economy in the name of "profit"; we accept the destruction of our communities in the name of creating private wealth.

Finally, where Moore goes far beyond Kopple is in creating an image of American life in the late twentieth century, in which the shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy is fumbled miserably, with an awkwardness and absurdity that is both funny and pathetic: Flint tries desperately to survive the demise of its industrial base by recreating itself as a tourist attraction, that is, by turning the production of consumer goods into a story about the production of consumer goods. But it doesn't work. Consumerism and artifice, the creation of an economy of the "simulacrum," as Baudrillard would put it, collapses in on itself. The rabbit is eaten for supper. The last car rolls off the assembly line. "I cannot come to Flint," says the corporate Pecksniff.

Kopple shows us that there are no easy victories, possibly no victories at all, for labor to celebrate at the end of the twentieth century. Moore shows us why: the corporate Father has turned out his sons and shut the door on their imploring voices. Bearing witness in their quite different ways, Kopple and Moore help us a little, at least, to understand such things or to clarify what we won't accept. Kopple's camera reveals the nature of powerlessness and gives it a voice, but it conceals the awful silence of the powerful. And that silence, absurd in its pomposity, infuriating in its Kafkaesque reticence, is exactly what Moore shows us. We have no power against it, except ridicule and irony.¹¹

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Notes

Thanks to my colleague Jay Ruby, who shared some of his thoughts about the films with me at an early stage of my work.

1. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 32–33.
2. Gary Crowdus and Richard Porton, "American Dream: An Interview with Barbara Kopple," *Cineaste* 18, no. 4 (1991), p. 38.
3. Crowdus and Porton, p. 38.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
7. Harlan Jacobson, "Michael and Me" [an interview with Michael Moore], *Film Comment* 25, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1989), pp. 16–26.
8. Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema: Melodrama/Car-toon/Mess," *The New Yorker*, January 8, 1990, p. 91.
9. The autobiographical form has been used before in a documentary film, and also with great comic effect. See, for example, Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985), a film that begins as a documentary about Sherman and the South and soon develops into a quest for the film-maker's soulmate. Another antecedent of Moore is Mike Rubbo's *Waiting for Fidel*, which portrays the film-maker's failed pursuit of his subject (after having been promised an interview).
10. I do not mean to argue that Moore is literally powerless. He is the film-maker, creating a product with a clear point of view, guiding our judgment through the manipulation of his materials. Moore's power is a relative one: relative to Smith, in the situations depicted on film, it is nil; relative to Smith, in the movie theater, it is triumphant.
11. Unfortunately, the short sequel to *Roger and Me*, created in the wake of the film's success, is an embarrassing piece of self-congratulation on Moore's part, suggesting that Moore's compulsive self-revelation has not only a luminous side but a self-destructive component as well.

