

REFLECTIONS ON 'BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE' AND THE CULTURE OF FEAR

By Sue Jackson

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Ten-pin bowling fans will be disappointed in this film, but as an exposé of the American love affair with guns it scores a number of strikes. 'Bowling for Columbine' as well as being great entertainment is an important film. It is both hilarious and sad, and ultimately it left me in shock, with a lot of questions I believe it is crucial for us, as world citizens and therapists, to consider.

'Bowling for Columbine' was the first documentary film in 46 years to be accepted for the Cannes Film Festival, and the Cannes jury unanimously awarded it the 55th Anniversary Prize. The film was directed and written by the American, Michael Moore, who is also the interviewer and presenter.

Moore's point of entry is the 1999 massacre of a group of students at Columbine High School, in Colorado, by two of their peers. The quirky title of the film relates to the fact that the killers went bowling with their class on the morning of the shooting. The shocked question: 'Why did it happen?' leads Moore on a field trip around America and Canada, during which he tries to untangle the elements that might have contributed to the tragedy. There is no sense that he knows all the answers at the outset and intends to convert us to his point of view. While he is open about his own values, the investigation seems to gather its own momentum and the connections unearthed are compelling.

It is characteristic of Moore's cheekiness that the film opens in North Country Bank in Northern Michigan where, as an enticement to would-be customers, each newly opened

certificate of deposit account entitles its owner to a gun. The shock of hearing a perfectly ordinary looking teller discuss the respective merits of their 500 guns with the customer, namely Moore, is profound. Moore wryly observes, ' don't you think it is a little dangerous to be handing out guns in a bank?' before leaving with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

Michael Moore presents as a somewhat unkempt, at times bemused figure, who is also astute and persistent. As somebody who spends much of her time talking with people, I was impressed by his capacity to elicit honest, self-disclosing and at times even incriminating material from the people to whom he spoke. One memorable conversation was with a teenager who had been interviewed by the police post-Columbine. This young man admitted that he had made napalm with the aid of 'The Anarchist's Cookbook', but was disappointed to be placed at number 2 on the police suspect list. ' It would have been good to be number 1 at something in this town!'

'Bowling for Columbine' has elements of a personal odyssey in that Moore locates himself firmly in the landscape by emphasising that his home state, Michigan, has much in common with those areas in the States where shooting atrocities have been committed. Also, incongruously and with no explanation, Moore identifies himself as a life-long member of the National Rifle Association (NRA) - a connection he uses to advantage in engineering a confrontational interview with the president of the NRA, Charlton Heston.

A great example of Moore's doggedness is evident when he encourages two of the Columbine survivors to protest with him at the local K-mart. One of these young men is now paraplegic, the other has undergone numerous operations to remove shards of debris from his body. Their plea to have bullets for a particularly ubiquitous urban gun removed from sale results in them being handed from one staff member to another and finally ignored. Next day, with the press in tow, and by dint of sheer bloody-minded

determination they force an agreement that those bullets will be removed from sale across the nation. It was a thrilling example of the power of persistence by a small group of savvy activists and of the fact that large corporations sometimes have to listen and change their policies.

Of course, gun ownership in America has always been widespread and has been rising steadily since September 11. There is easy access to guns and bullets, which are readily available through outlets like K- mart. The atmosphere of threat and armaments preoccupation is conveyed vividly throughout the film. Particularly effective is the interview of the PR manager of the huge Lockheed missile factory. Lockheed has five facilities around the Denver area and they are the #1 private employer in the school district that contains Columbine High School. This man stands throughout the entire conversation with Moore in front of a massive missile. Yet in his view the adult preoccupation with weapons would have had no influence on the teen killers at Columbine.

Via a deft use of animations and statistics Moore teases out what is different about America, where more than 11,000 people were shot and killed last year by their fellow citizens. By comparison, the UK, Australia, Canada and Japan all had fewer than 100 people killed under these circumstances. By visiting and comparing America with its nearest neighbour, Canada, Moore attempts to address some of the commonly held beliefs about why such differences exist. On gun ownership, there are an incredible 7 million guns for the 10 million households in Canada. Canada has a comparable ethnic mix to its southern neighbour, and at the time of filming, unemployment rates in Canada were higher than in the States. Yet for all this, Canadians leave their doors unlocked, in the cities as well as the countryside. Why?

Differences Moore identifies between the two countries included the fact that Canadian leaders typically speak a different language from their American counterparts. Canadians talk in terms of respect and negotiation. Canadian health care is more inclusive and publicly funded; public housing is far superior to the American equivalent; and news coverage and the media in general have a different emphasis. The open-doored Canadians appeared almost blasé about any potential threat from within or without their community, where this seemed a major preoccupation for many of the Americans interviewed.

Moore also explores the origins and impact of some of the frightening urban myths that tend to proliferate in the States. His investigation of issues such as razor blades in Halloween treats revealed that only three American children had ever been injured in this way, all by family members. Similarly, media reports on the threat of swarms of 'Africanised' (!) killer bees terrified many Americans, yet the bees never materialised.

Moore suggests that the fundamental difference between the two neighbours is the place of fear in their respective national consciousness.

This currency of fear, of marauding black men in particular, is what Moore concludes distinguishes America from other countries. The actuality of threat does not fit with the national perception. For example, violent crime is now on the decrease. This fear-filled national consciousness is both reflected in and fuelled by the media. As one American reporter replied, in response to the question: 'If you had to decide between reporting on a near drowning of a child or a man with a gun, what would you choose?' – 'We follow the gun.'

The reality is that frightened people are big consumers of all things perceived as self protective, and are also likely to be supportive of military spending. A frightened populace is good for big business. Moore shows George W Bush issuing a 'blanket' warning to U.S.

citizens, saying that there is nothing specific to report, but that nevertheless the nation needs to be on alert. 'Bowling for Columbine' is full of examples of how this national stance of perceived threat has led to international intrusions on the part of America in the affairs of other countries. The proposed war on Iraq is just the most recent example.

Reflecting on this notion of fear, but moving away from the film for a moment, I am reminded of another fear-saturated area, namely women's health, about which Germaine Greer is a prominent spokesperson. Greer is particularly uncomfortable with the medicalisation of women's health in general and of our gynaecological health in particular. Speaking to a packed audience at the Melbourne Town Hall in September last, she made the point that in an environment where menopause is perceived as an illness, women become vulnerable to overprescription of drugs such as HRT, some of whose negative consequences have only recently been coming to light.

Greer points out that Western women at this point in history are healthier than ever before. Yet we live our lives frightened of what might go wrong with our bodies. This can result in hypervigilance and stress, with many women having little confidence in their wellness. Obviously, frightened people are much more susceptible to taking medication for cure or prevention. Once again, the mega corporations, in this case the pharmaceutical companies, are the winners.

The global power and influence of mega corporations is profound. In the popular writer, John Le Carre's, latest book 'The Constant Gardener', the evil foe is no longer foreign governments and their agents, but the multinationals, and specifically the pharmaceutical industry. The plot centres around one such company using Africa as a laboratory and Africans as guinea pigs. In his dedication at the end of the book, Le Carre says that the

book, though fictional, does not exaggerate the ruthlessness of multinationals. His research showed that the situation was much worse than he had represented.

Some of the largest and most influential of these massive organisations are media 'empires'. As suggested earlier, their influence is pervasive. The inspiring Australian futurist, Richard Neville, makes the following point in 'Amerika Psycho':

'The rise of the megacorp, global marketing and the pathological hoarding of wealth are major forces shaping the future. Where can we debate their impact? Media forums are controlled by institutions that have the most to gain by accelerating the process. This is turning our culture into a closed-loop of compliance with the corporate worldview.'

To appreciate that groups in society and even whole nations can be manipulated via fear we have only to consider the role played by the media in Australia's past and recent migration history. We have gone from the threat of the 'yellow peril' to 'children overboard' and the 'axis of evil', in the space of one life time. The equation of refugees with terrorists, with dire consequences for many vulnerable people, is fuelled by fear. To what degree was the media complicit in crying 'stranger danger'?

The general release and overwhelming public response to such a radical film as 'Bowling for Columbine' is, I believe, an excellent omen. This provocative and offbeat investigation of the American psyche and its implications for American foreign policy is especially timely in view of the threat of war on Iraq. The more transparent the motivation behind such a belligerent stance becomes the more ordinary people will be moved to protest.

This film challenges us to grapple with some revolutionary ideas that will inevitably have an impact on the stance we take within our own communities. It intrigues me, for example, that 'fearless' Canada has produced a disproportionate number of prominent activists, on economic globalisation, global corporatism, environmental degradation and child labour. I am thinking in particular of Maude Barlow, Naomi Klein (No Logo and Fences and Windows) and Craig Kielburger (Free the Children). Frightened people are in contrast more internally and family-focused. People in survival mode are more tractable and far less likely to make waves.

As therapists, it seems important that we reflect on the effect that this fear-filled consciousness is having on us and the people who consult with us. We cannot underestimate the impact that ideas originating in America are having on the world in general and on Australia in particular. Obviously appropriate levels of fear are necessary for survival, but often people present for therapy because fear is dominating their lives. If we are in the same state ourselves it is unlikely that we will be able to have helpful conversations with them.

Therefore, I would suggest that we need to be attentive to the role fear is playing in our own lives, to reflect on what fear is useful and what is counterproductive. If we do make a beginning by at least putting fear on the therapeutic agenda, legitimising its importance in peoples' lives, asking questions about its origins, and to what extent it is constructive or destructive, this could well be beneficial.

As I write these words the light from the red sun outside my window is shining across the computer. And as Canberra burns, I can only hope that John Howard takes time out from his fiddling to reflect on his government's environmental policies. Perhaps the fear and despair of a nation experiencing its longest dry spell since records began will lead him to

change his position of opposition to the Kyoto Protocol on global warming? This would leave the United States unsupported in opposition. But how much America cares about the rest of the planet remains to be seen. If ultimately it cares too little, that is really something to fear.

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