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Documentaphobia and Mixed Modes

Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*

Matthew Bernstein

There was a startling vehemence to the journalistic critics' denunciation of *Roger & Me* (1989), Michael Moore's insightful and bitingly funny expose of corporate greed in the 1980s. Pauline Kael accused Moore of "gonzo demagoguery," whereby "members of the audience can laugh at ordinary working people and still feel they're taking a politically correct position" (91, 92). Harlan Jacobson termed the film's rearranged chronology a cinematic Gulf of Tonkin resolution (Moore, interview with Jacobson 23).

The controversy demonstrated how difficult certain journalists find conceptualizing the documentary film. The *New York Times* queried whether the film was a documentary or a satire or both (Bernstein C20). Michael Moore, himself a journalist, defended *Roger & Me* by appealing to our sophisticated understanding of how knowledge is produced in the contemporary media: "All art, listen, every piece of journalism manipulates sequence and things." Moore proceeded to defend his film on generic grounds. *Roger & Me* is not a documentary, he asserted to Jacobson, but "a movie," "a documentary told with a narrative style." He wanted to avoid "a three hour movie," which presumably a more accurate documentary would become (interview with Jacobson 22, 23).¹ In other interviews, Moore has cited only Kevin and Pierce Rafferty and Jayne Loader's 1982 *The Atomic Cafe* as an inspiration for his work (Collins C20).

Unlike the journalistic discourse, academic discussion has acknow-

ledged that defining the documentary is difficult, whether documentary is understood in terms of its formal features, its assumptions about the construction of knowledge, its approach to narration, its assertions of authority, the expectations it evokes in the audience—or all of the above.

That documentary is understood as all of the above is the contention of Bill Nichols's seminal 1983 essay "The Voice of Documentary," which he more recently revised in his *Representing Reality* as "Documentary Modes of Representation." I propose to examine *Roger & Me* more closely as a documentary and to do so using Nichols's typology of documentary modes, which he defines as "basic ways of organizing texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions" (*Reality* 32).² Nichols's categories of expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive modes affirm what Moore and the journalists seem to have overlooked: there are many different kinds of documentary. I will argue that, in fact, one of the most interesting questions Moore's film raises involves the juxtaposition of conventions of the expository and interactive documentaries. First it is useful to review briefly Nichols's typology.

Nichols's Typology of Documentary Modes

In expository documentaries, Nichols notes, "Images serve as illustrations or counterpoint of the verbal argument." The visuals are "at the service" of the commentary, even if the latter is ironic and satirical, as in the case of Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread* (1931) (*Reality* 34). This approach is also exemplified by the voice-of-God narration of *The March of Time* newsreels, the poetic cadences of the voice-over commentary in Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937), and even the associative editing of Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister's *Listen to Britain* (1942). Expository documentaries embody an epistemological assumption that knowledge about the world is readily accessible to the filmmaker. Such films thus give an impression of objectivity and of well-substantiated argument. Given the strident certainty of expository documentaries, ethical considerations (such as collaboration with participants in the film) become negligible. Subjects interviewed "give their testimony within a frame they cannot control and may not understand" (Nichols, *Reality* 37).

Nichols further distinguishes the expository mode from the "Observational Mode" of direct cinema typified by the Drew Associates' *Primary* (1960), the Maysles Brothers' *Salesman* (1969), and even D. A. Pennebaker's *The War Room* (1993). Lacking the accentuated presence of the filmmaker through (the expository mode's) voice-over narration, observational documentaries are frequently marked by long takes and by synchronous sound for "the exhaustive depiction of the everyday," as well as processes or crises. Sharing the expository mode's assumption of untroubled access to knowledge and

understanding (Nichols, *Reality* 42–44), and deploying a style that aspires to immediacy and transparency, the observational films focus "on the activity of individuals within specific social formations such as the family, the local community, or a single institution or aspect of one" (Nichols, *Reality* 40).

The third documentary mode, "interactive," highlights "the processes of social exchange and representation" in the historical world (Nichols, *Reality* 56). (In the "Voice of Documentary" essay, Nichols had described this as "a return" to the direct address of expository filmmaking via the interview.) Most obviously, the interactive documentary acknowledges the filmmaker's presence in conducting interviews and gathering information. The filmmaker can be present on-screen as is Jean Rouch in his 1961 *Chronicle of a Summer*; in a voice-over; or as an intelligence overtly organizing the images, as in Julia Reichart and Jim Klein's *Union Maids* (1975) or Frederick Wiseman's films. Editing patterns do not efficiently present cause and effect relations among phenomena (as in expository films), but typically entail crosscutting among the different and often contradictory evidence offered by different subjects (Nichols, *Reality* 45).

Conflicting testimony and the on-camera appearance of the filmmaker lead the interactive film "to an emphasis on the act of gathering information or building knowledge, the process of social and historical interpretation" (Nichols, *Reality* 49). Consequently, the authority of the film to speak about the world is subdued. Nichols writes: "The mode introduces a sense of partialness, of *situated* presence and *local* knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other" (*Reality* 44).

Finally, Nichols distinguishes a fourth mode of documentary, the "reflexive," typified by films such as Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1958) or Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1987), which, unlike the other modes, questions the very ability of filmmakers to know—and cinema to represent—any historical reality fairly and adequately (*Reality* 57). Such documentaries employ various modal conventions but disrupt them as a means of conveying their epistemological skepticism. In *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris's constant reenactment of the crime "reminds us of how every documentary constructs the evidentiary reference points it requires," as does his crosscutting among different "witnesses" to the crime who contradict each other (Nichols, *Reality* 58).

As Nichols emphasizes, there are many variations within each mode. Moreover, the four modes are historically and textually intertwined. While he outlines a historical dialectic (for example, the expository mode was a reaction against the fiction film, the observational film arose from new portable technologies and a rejection of the expository mode, and so forth), he also notes that "these modes have been potentially available from early in the cinema's history," so that the progression among preferred modes has not occurred in a linear fashion (*Reality* 33).

Documentary history is not Nichols's subject as such, so that detailing the historical relations among modes remains a task for future scholarship. It would be fruitful to explore films that exemplified transitions between—or modifications within—modes, as examples of competing documentary practices and rhetoric. In fact, Jeanne Hall's perceptive analysis of *Primary*—which shows how Robert Drew and his team frequently used sound-image relations in an expository mode instead of the observational manner that the rhetoric of their cinema vérité movement championed—is an exemplary study of a transitional text that attempts to negotiate between different modes (cf. Hall).³

Yet if we bracket questions concerning the historical development of documentary, Nichols further notes that individual films feature a mixing and modification of modes (*Reality* 33). This is possible because the modes are, as noted above, “basic ways of organizing texts” (*Reality* 32) derived from “common ingredients,” such as their textual features, their epistemologies, and their ethical assumptions. Nichols uses the term “mode” to make less rigid distinctions than other scholars might employ. For Nichols, the modes “partly serve as a heuristic model, drawing out more cleanly defined alternatives than we find in practice” (*Reality* 65).⁴

If the different modes are to be meaningful terms of analysis, however, one must at least acknowledge that certain modes are logically incompatible on epistemological grounds. A documentary cannot be said to present a consistently logical argument if it employs practices that embody both skepticism (as in the reflexive mode) and confidence (expository or observational mode) about its capacity to understand and represent the “real world.”⁵

If epistemological categories are absolute, the other attributes of documentary modes are more easily intertwined. Most notably, different textual features of different documentaries can align those films with the same mode. For instance, the way Frederick Wiseman and Emile de Antonio frequently cut among the statements of different subjects provides an interactive dimension comparable to that which filmmakers such as Ross McElwee or Claude Lanzmann accomplish through probing, impertinent on-camera interviews.

Alternately, the same textual features, such as interviews, can have different valences in different films. For example, interviews in the interactive mode can, as Nichols puts it, “work reflexively to make us aware of the contingencies of the moment, the shaping force of the representational project itself, and the modification of action and behavior that it can produce” (*Reality* 73).

Interviews “generally serve as evidence for an argument presented as the product of the interaction of filmmaker and subject” (*Reality* 48) and hence hold greater authority in the argument of the film. In expository films, by contrast, interviews buttress the film's thesis, providing important sources, but ones of secondary authority. Distinguishing among the different modes

operative in a single film becomes a matter of detecting nuances in how various elements of the film are deployed and structured.

Documentary Modes and Fiction Film Genres

Why should we even bother to speak of Nichols's categories when discussing particular films? Because for all their characteristics as “tendencies” in filmmaking, these modes resemble fiction film genres. Documentary filmmakers acknowledge these modes (albeit with different nomenclature) as existing traditions. In fact, Nichols notes, “Attaching a particular text to a traditional mode of representation and to the discursive authority of that tradition may well strengthen its claims, lending to these claims the weight of previously established legitimacy” (*Reality* 34). In this light, for example, Michael Moore's claims of his and his crew's technical incompetence in making *Roger & Me*—Jesse Jackson had to tell Moore's sound crew that their recorder was not turned on—are highly significant, insofar as they enhance his eschewal of documentary affiliations.

The documentary modes further resemble fiction film genres in that viewers recognize them. Having pegged a documentary in terms of a certain mode's traditions, viewers maintain certain expectations of the film. Viewers of an expository film, recognizing the tradition's textual conventions and its epistemological assumptions, expect “a commonsensical world will unfold in terms of the establishment of a logical, cause and effect linkage of sequences and events” (Nichols, *Reality* 37). Viewers of observational films are encouraged to expect a virtual fiction film (Nichols, *Reality* 42–44). Interactive film spectators are challenged to infer the film's argument from the juxtaposition of admittedly limited perspectives. They are also more highly aware of the construction of the film and its argument (Nichols, *Reality* 48, 56). Reflexive films cue the spectator to “expect the unexpected, functioning not with a surreal intent to shock and surprise so much as to return the film systematically to questions of its own status and that of documentary in general” (Nichols, *Reality* 62). That viewers have these sets of expectations of different modes is one reason why critics can remain skeptical of Moore's rejection of the documentary label.

The Expository Mode in *Roger & Me*

In *Roger & Me*, Michael Moore works with and plays on these modes and the expectations they invite. *Roger & Me* establishes itself in its opening moments—in what theorists of narration call the primacy effect (cf. Bordwell 37)—as an interactive documentary, one which relies heavily on subject interviews and the filmmaker's openly acknowledged and limited understanding.

But after the film's prologue, Moore settles into the expository mode of documentary, whereby his apparently objective narration asserts its absolute authority.

There is little argument that *Roger & Me* functions primarily in the expository mode. Moore has a thesis about why General Motors closed its manufacturing plants in and around Flint, Michigan, and he has a clear argument about its effects on the town. The film is rhetorically organized to support this thesis.

Roger & Me's expository ethos—whereby images illustrate commentary—is in constant evidence in the film: there is the sequence in which “Wouldn't It Be Nice” plays ironically over shots of abandoned homes and storefronts. There are Moore's introductions to various sequences such as his visits to the yacht club, the athletic club, or GM's Detroit headquarters. Like the most effective of such documentaries, Moore's commentary permits no ambiguity in terms of the audience's interpretation of the people, places, and events they see.

Similarly, Moore's editing strategies are a textbook case of what Nichols calls “rhetorical continuity” in the expository documentary. The images constantly corroborate his verbal statements—about everything from his move from the *Michigan Voice* to *Mother Jones* to the plant closings—with headlines and footage from the national and local news media. In this way, Moore offers “an economy of analysis,” making his points concisely, “partly by eliminating reference to the process by which knowledge is produced, organized, and regulated” (Nichols, *Reality* 35), or reference to the fact that his corroboration comes from media corporations which themselves operate for profit.

Nowhere is Moore's allegiance to the epistemology and strategy of the expository mode more evident than when he lays out his interpretation of GM's corporate strategies. In roughly twenty-eight seconds, Moore explains to the accompaniment of a dazzlingly quick montage how GM closed its American plants, wrested concessions from the unions to open Mexican plants with seventy-cents-an-hour labor wages, and used the savings to fund corporate takeovers (the latter illustrated by an airborne missile firing). In de Antonio's films, Nichols once noted, “Not everyone can be believed. Not everything is true” (Nichols, “Voice” 25). The twenty-eight-second analysis of GM's motives encapsulates one of the major points of *Roger & Me*: only Michael Moore and those who share his views can be believed.

“Rhetorical continuity” is not only used to confirm Moore's arguments but to sabotage the opposing viewpoints through extensive crosscutting. Following the pattern codified in D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), Moore time and again cuts from some upper-class setting, like the Great Gatsby party or the crowning of Miss Michigan as Miss America 1988, to Deputy Sheriff Fred Ross evicting someone. But Ross's workday is not the

only term of comparison, and the juxtapositions gleefully contradict everything GM corporate officials have to say.

Early in the film, Moore cuts from Roger Smith's statements about GM's efforts to further its employees' job security to the day on which the last GM truck was assembled, and then to the experiences of the workers about to be laid off. After PR man Tom Kay's statement that GM does “what it has to do to stay competitive,” Moore immediately shows us his friend who left the assembly line in a panic and turned on “Wouldn't It Be Nice?” on his car radio. Later in the film, when Anita Bryant and Pat Boone suggest that the unemployed should help themselves, Moore immediately shows us Janet, the feminist color analyzer; after Tom Kay asserts “there are all kinds of opportunities” for GM's newly fired employees, Moore shows us lint rollers, the infamous “pets or meat” woman, and the increasing violent crime rate in Flint.

During Flint's 1980s parade in honor (!) of the city's sit-down strikers, Moore asks political leaders (such as Michigan's governor) and a rank-and-file unemployed autoworker about the prospects of a sit-down strike in the 1980s; Moore crosscuts their answers. After UAW leader Owen Beeber dismisses strikes as ineffective and hopelessly idealistic, Moore cuts to a scantily clad baton twirler on a float—suggesting that Beeber's views are a diversionary tactic and that the rank-and-file member's earlier observation is correct: union leaders are too cozy with management.

After the next shot of a young baton twirler in the parade (after Beeber speaks of Flint's future “growth”), Moore then cuts to the same rank-and-file member, who says, “Some people know what time it is; some people don't.” From here, Moore quickly gives us Miss Michigan's disastrously and spontaneously selfish on-camera comments as a perfect illustration of the aphorism. He then cuts from her crowning as Miss America to another eviction scene.

The crosscutting pattern reaches its rhetorical climax of course when Moore cuts back and forth between Roger Smith's Christmas party speech and Ross's eviction of one furious tenant before Christmas, using Smith's voice-over to accompany the scenes of eviction. If Moore's explanation of Smith's corporate policies in twenty-eight seconds is the film's strongest instance of the expository method (particularly with voice-over authority), this Christmas sequence is the high point of Moore's editing strategies. It is so effectively built up that even Moore does not feel the need to provide further commentary beyond the voice-over of Smith's hollow-sounding speech about holiday cheer and good will.

Although Moore has cited *The Atomic Cafe* as the documentary he most admires, the crosscutting in *Roger & Me* follows precisely the logic of Connie Fields's 1980 *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*: institutional dogma, as expressed in newsreels in Fields's film is opposed to withering personal testimony from female homefront workers that undercuts the bombast and exposes



Roger & Me: Moore cuts to the spontaneously selfish Miss Michigan.

the duplicity of official representations of women's work during and after World War II. As in Fields's film, Moore's crosscutting becomes a stunning indictment of corporate malfeasance, constantly demonstrating the social and corporate elite's naive or thoughtless conceptions of working class social realities. The crucial difference from *Roger & Me* is that Fields's thesis arises from the materials she films and juxtaposes, not from the dicta of authoritative voice-over narration.

These textual features of the expository mode—authoritative voice-over and rhetorical continuity—are precisely what provoked audiences and critics like Harlan Jacobson into anger over Moore's creative chronologies. Moore provides a "logical, cause and effect linkage of sequences and events" (Nichols, *Reality* 37). Though Jacobson's outrage was strongly termed, it was a reasonable response to the chronological cues in Moore's voice-over narration. Some of these cues are trivial. For example, Moore tells us of the three-month gap between Janet's first and second color analyses. Less precise is the language in the segue from the sequence at the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, when Moore tells us he has to "hurry back" to the county fair where diving donkeys and Bob Eubanks hold sway.

But Moore's use of voice-over narration offers temporal cues that are more significant. After the "Wouldn't It Be Nice" sequence, Moore introduces Ronald Reagan's visit to Flint with "just when things were beginning to look

bleak." After the failed espionage session at the Waldorf Astoria, Moore has to head "back" to GM headquarters for another try at the fourteenth floor. The Hyatt Regency opening and tourism boost come "just when it appeared that all hope was lost." "With thirty thousand jobs now eliminated, the city decided to turn to that one event that had always made us so happy: the big parade." In other words, Moore relied on chronological cues, vaguely but explicitly, in presenting many major events. It is no wonder that some viewers felt betrayed by the revelation of the actual sequence of dates.⁶

The Interactive Mode of the Prologue

One strategy for defending Moore's creative chronology would rest on the grounds that Moore makes his point of view—and the very fact that he is presenting *his* own point of view—clear from the outset of the film. Indeed, *Roger & Me*'s prologue (and its title for that matter) clearly operates on the model of the limited knowledge and constrained perspective of the interactive mode of documentary. In other words, the opening (as well as its title) cues the spectator to expect a film that centers on Moore's perceptions and understanding of what has happened to Flint; that is, that it will be tentative, exploratory, and diffuse in organizing its materials. Thus its subsequent shift into the expository mode signals a change in the film's assertions about its own authoritative knowledge.

In the prologue, Moore generally situates himself as a smalltown, working-class individual, subjected to all the media spectacles with which General Motors and Flint, Michigan, alternately disguise and proclaim their allegiance to American capitalism. The segment evokes what Nichols calls "a sense of constraint and over-determination" in the town's history and its residents' identity ("Voice" 23). Moore's narration ironically contrasts his childhood naivete with his adult political sophistication. It also resembles the testimony of the subjects in any interactive film: Moore's narration acknowledges his limited perspective as a town resident. As the most complex sequence of the entire film, the exposition is worth considering in some detail.

Moore skillfully interweaves his personal and family background with that of his home town and General Motors. He begins by noting in a confessional tone that "I was kind of a strange child" over shots of him making faces and gesticulating in a Popeye birthday costume. After more home movie footage of him swinging, walking in front of a baton-twirling sister, and (appropriately) bumping into the family Chevrolet sedan, Moore zooms into a close-up shot from his second birthday party which he graphically matches with a close-up on a dancer-singer from the Pat Boone show. He recounts how in his childlike innocence—precisely the response elicited by the Boone show and all of GM's visual spectacles—Moore thought that Boone, Dinah Shore, and his father were the only three employees at General Motors.



Roger & Me: Moore, "the strange child," mugs for the camera.

These images segue into Flint's parades to salute General Motors' fiftieth birthday. This includes hilarious footage from an industrial short film of marching spark-plugs, Zorro, Miss America, the dancing Elks Junior Drill Team and the statue-like Mr. and Mrs. America, a middle-class family with two children on a float—all accompanied by orchestral Muzak meant to suggest industrial energy, thrills, and pride. Even Moore's voice-over humorously suggests the conquest of personal consciousness by municipal propaganda, as Moore intones the phrase repeated by the newsreel that "it's a great day all right" in Flint, Michigan. The GM publicity footage end credits appear, signaling the conclusion of the prologue's first phase.

During the second phase (in which marching Flint citizens are replaced by automotive parts on assembly lines), Moore articulates GM workers' relationship to the corporation while hilariously describing the development of his social consciousness. Again interweaving home movies and photographs, scenes from generic fiction films, and GM's promotional films, he recounts his family's history of employment at GM—his father's thirty-three years there, his mother's work for AC spark plugs, and most notably, his Uncle LaVerne's participation in the 1937, forty-four-day sit-down strike that spawned the United Auto Workers' Union. Another General Motors promotional film speaks with dispassionate pride about the company's employees, "even those who at times cause problems."

Cutting to a home movie shot of a parent placing a crown on his head, Moore then expresses his desire to leave town, like Casey Kasem, Grand Funk Railroad, and the wives of Zuban Mehta and Don Knotts. His work at the *Michigan Voice* and *Mother Jones*, corroborated by news media reports, and his return to Michigan from San Francisco, hilariously parodied with a generic scene of a soldier returning home from World War II, complete his account of his personal history. The film suggests that the Flint layoffs began within days of his return home.

The prologue is then a quintessential instance of interactive documentary, because the mix of recollections, home movies, Hollywood footage, and industrial films provide that "sense of partialness" we associate with films like *Union Maids*. Moore's sifting of material from his, Flint's, and GM's family histories is based in his particular experiences rather than in the authoritative narration of the GM documentaries. We are strongly aware here, as we cannot be in expository or observational films, of how Moore has constructed the film, because of the intercutting of different kinds of footage and Moore's self-deprecating ironic narration.

It is worth noting, in passing, that this apparently free-associational collage functions like the newsreel in *Citizen Kane* (1941): it is a quick preview of the film to come, providing a quick survey of how corporate capitalism still attempts to mystify its citizens visually and verbally, demonstrating the close intertwining of the political economy of Flint and the personal lives of its residents, and indicating the film's rhetorical organization of diverse materials. Specifically, the prologue presents events and motifs that get repeated constantly in the rest of the film. The parade with Miss America, Zorro, and the dancing Elks Club members is literally repeated with the 1980s parade that includes virtually the same elements (Zorro is replaced by Ronald McDonald; Miss America is now Miss Michigan, who is crowned Miss America after Flint's parade anyway). The old footage's marching spark plugs are echoed in the city's various spectacular schemes to lift itself up with tourism, the Auto World, and the Water Pavilion; and the narrators' blather about proud employees becomes the befuddled rationalizations of GM publicity man Tom Kay and other GM officials' statements to the press.

More importantly, the opening minutes demonstrate the intertwining of capitalism and the category of the personal. This is of course the crucial relationship that GM spokespeople and city officials are at pains to deny, particularly after GM's competitive policies devastate Moore's home town. The materials out of which Moore constructs the interrelationship between personal and public spheres in the prologue—intercutting his home movies with GM's slickly produced industrial films and some newsreels—also establish Moore's adherence to the editing strategies of *Rosie the Riveter*, which set up a rhetorical contest between the statements of officialdom and the testimony of various "Rosies." The superior "truth" of Moore's home movies

resides in their status as personal documents as opposed to city and corporate publicity.

More significant than the prologue's formal coherence in relation to the rest of the film is the fact that *Roger & Me* appears to sustain elements of the interactive mode, primarily through its narrative framework of a quest to meet Roger Smith and through Moore's on-camera presence. Both the quest format and Moore's appearances place "emphasis on the act of gathering information or building knowledge, the process of social and historical interpretation, and the effect of the encounter between people and filmmakers" (Nichols, *Reality* 49). Moore eschews the safety of remaining behind the camera to engage with security guards and other residents of Flint.

The Quest Framework

Moore's personal audacity is admirable when he deploys it against the powerful and the privileged. He shows the debilitating effects of rampant corporate greed in the 1980s in part by demonstrating through interviews, which seem spontaneous, the callousness of the haves toward the have-nots. Whether Moore is on-camera at GM headquarters or off camera with the wealthy women on the golf course, he is a provocateur. Many of the provocations in *Roger & Me* are delightful to watch, from the various attempts to meet Roger Smith at GM, the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, and the Athletic Club, to the numerous confrontations with company flunkies like the woman who prevents Moore from shooting a plant closing by stating hypocritically that it is a "very private, personal time" for the GM "family." Moore here appears to be operating on the same principle of brash provocation as Ross McElwee when the latter enters his girlfriends' homes with his camera running in *Sherman's March* (1985), or as Jean Rouch when he asks the unsuspecting Landry about Marcelline's tattooed concentration camp numbers in *Chronicle of a Summer*. Marcelline's tattooed concentration camp numbers in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1987), the subject refuses to appear—is in Gary Crowdu's words, "an apt metaphor for corporate indifference to the public interest" (28). But as many critics pointed out, Moore's handling of less imposing interview subjects backfires. Moore's temerity at the yacht club becomes a form of verbal cruelty when he persists in questioning Miss Michigan or Flint matrons on the golf course. And as Richard Schickel observed, Moore's persona as a shuffling Candide rings absolutely false: "Far from being a hick, Moore is an experienced professional journalist who knows perfectly well that getting in to see the chairman of anything without an appointment is virtually impossible" (77).

Neither Moore nor we can know how the completely unprepared Miss America will respond to questions about plant closings or how the GM secur-

ity guards will respond *precisely* to Moore's bravado. But the spontaneity of his encounters, which is rendered often in the observational aesthetic of "uncontrolled" reality in front of the camera, is undercut by our recognition that in fact Moore has orchestrated all but the fine details of this prolific event. (Judging from *Pets or Meat*, Moore's short 1993 sequel to *Roger & Me*, Moore is irrevocably attached to the grand, apparently spontaneous yet implausible gesture. Where *Roger & Me* was organized around Moore's quest to meet Smith, *Pets or Meat* begins and ends with Moore considering whether or not to write Roger Smith a handout check for \$100,000. I do believe, however, that on the evidence of his *TV Nation*, Moore's talents are best suited to the television magazine format. Here, his incisive twenty-minute demonstrations of the inanities of American life and of the malfeasance of corporate capitalism do not have to withstand the scrutiny—or fabricate the large-scale narrative structure—that a ninety-minute feature film entails.)

At the crux of this difficulty with Moore's mixed modes is the multivalent functions of the interview we have noted in the expository and interactive modes. Ross McElwee may anticipate the response of various women to his omnipresent camera, but he is not out to prove anything in particular about the women he meets. Jean Rouch can guess that Landry doesn't recognize the numbers on Marcelline's arm, but he does not ask the question to support any argument about race relations. In *Roger & Me*, however, every encounter serves to illustrate Moore's preconceived thesis about the people on-camera and their milieu. There is no possibility of contradicting or nuancing his position. Moore's use of interviews, combined with his voice-over, is clearly consistent with the expository mode, in which authority rests with the film and not its subjects. In short, after the prologue, Moore settles in, with all the self-righteousness of a formulaic 1930s Warner Bros. social problem film, on one villain and his unwitting underlings.

Documentaphobia: Symptoms and Diagnosis

Moore's use of a quest framework and the crosscutting and voice-over devices derive from his pathological fear of boring an audience with what he calls "a three hour movie." He suffers from what we might term "documentaphobia." A "three hour movie" is a documentary in the expository mode, the much-maligned "illustrated lecture." "The reason people don't watch documentaries," Moore told Harlan Jacobson, "is they are so bogged down with 'Now in 1980 . . . then in '82 five thousand were called back . . . in '84 ten thousand were laid off. . . . If you want to tell the Flint story, there's the Flint story'" (interview with Jacobson 23).

Documentaphobia further led Moore to personalize Flint's story, showing that the wrong people have power. (For an incisive discussion of Moore's

reductive version of events, see Bensman.) "Then why didn't I deal with the Japanese?" he asked Jacobson. "Why didn't I deal with the oil embargo? Why didn't I deal with all the other factors that aren't in the movie?" (interview with Jacobson 22). Because it would involve abstract complexities that would not have entertained the audience. Significantly, the brief passage explaining GMF's strategies is the closest Moore comes to suggesting how impersonal forces (labor unions, trade and labor relations with foreign countries, the lack of government regulation, and ruthless corporate competitiveness) shaped GMF's policies. This presumably is an unintentional homage to the "three hour" movie.

The illustrated lecture is, ironically, what Moore has produced. What obscures this fact is not only the interactive mode of the prologue (and its remnants in the rest of the film), but the comic tone of *Roger & Me*. The self-mocking tenor of the prologue sets up the double-edged comedy in the rest of the film: Moore may have been a "kind of a strange child," as he calls himself in the beginning, but he is nothing compared to the strange adults whom he subsequently introduces in deadpan. In fact, some critics see Moore as an ironic hero.⁷ Paul Arthur is one of the most persuasive: "it is precisely Moore's confection of an ineffectual, uncertain, journalistic self that lends an Everyman quality to his social analysis" (128). Arthur further notes that after Moore has documented his own disappointments as a journalist in San Francisco, Moore's "new job as filmmaker is consistently identified with the conditions of the (often eccentric) unemployed workers; and it is predicated on their mutual failure to make the system work. Like the ex-worker who breeds rabbits to sell as either meat or pets, the filmmaker demonstrates expository skill by seeming to readjust the shape of his movie as he goes along" (Arthur 130).

The parallels Arthur suggests between Moore and Flint's unemployed are persuasive. As I have argued above, however, the improvisational nature of the film is superficial and Moore's everyman status is an improbable posture. Arthur notes this in passing by using the term "confection" to describe Moore's persona, but emphasizes Moore's impostures to security guards and the like at the expense of Moore's pretenses in front of the audience. He claims that Moore "is at pains to demonstrate his good faith in meeting his announced goal" (129), but Moore's quest to meet Smith is what results precisely in a sense of Moore's bad faith.⁸

Conclusion

In summary, Nichols's notion of documentary modes helps us to articulate some of the troubling aspects of *Roger & Me*. Michael Moore, in his attempt to escape documentary film entirely, fudges his affiliations with the expository mode. We have heard complaints like Moore's about expository documentary

before, of course: they were the bread and butter of the direct cinema movement's rhetoric in the early 1960s.

Does Moore's position, filmmaking, and rhetoric signal yet another significant shift in documentary filmmaking? Paul Arthur suggests that *Roger & Me* is part of a new ethos—derived from poststructuralist thought and post-modernist form—which flouts "negative mastery" as a form of validity (*Sherman's March; Lightning over Braddock*, 1988; and *Driving Me Crazy*, 1990, are among his other examples). In all these works, the filmmakers engage in hybridization of "materials, techniques and modes of address" in an interactive mode. But their pastiche approach expresses a skepticism of "certain types of artistic mastery," and results from their self-presentation as ironic, uncontrolling antiheroes (Arthur 127), for these filmmakers gradually abandon their original projects and struggle, comically, with technical malfunctions and catastrophic setbacks. In contrast to the authoritative appeals to government agencies in 1930s government-sponsored films like *The River*, or to the power of personal perception apotheosized in direct cinema, the recent documentaries suggest that "failure to adequately represent the person, event or social situation stated as the film's explicit task functions as an inverted guarantee of authenticity" (Arthur 127).

While I subscribe to Arthur's characterization of this distinctive trend (though, as he carefully notes, it is not a movement), I do not believe Moore's film is part of it. Arthur notes that "the impossible project" scheme of these films (in Moore's case, meeting Roger Smith) "disguises mechanisms of internal validation" of the film's representation of events (128). I would argue that Moore's "mechanisms of internal validation" are those devices associated with expository filmmaking (voice-over narration, crosscutting, and so on), and that they finally overwhelm Moore's localized failures (his technical difficulties and his inability to meet Smith) in the film. For despite the emphasis Moore places in his witty and complex exposition on his status as what Nichols calls "a participant witness and an active fabricator of meaning" ("Voice" 18), Moore's mastery remains intact. He is too univocal in his position, too reductive in his promotion of personal agency, and himself too conventional in his deployment of individual and media testimony to accomplish *either* a more complex film of negative mastery like *Sherman's March* or a more challenging political film like Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's sober and complex *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988), which addresses the same working-class autoworker milieu as *Roger & Me*, to show how economics and politics engender the not-so-benign racist indifference of Vincent Chin's killers and their circle.

From a historical standpoint, Moore's choice of documentary modes to mix is perturbing. The interactive mode of documentary was revived in the late 1970s and early 1980s in films like *Union Maids* and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, films that celebrated political resistance and activism as

America negotiated the shift from the "me" generation's lingering aspirations for a meaningful life to the complacent Reagan era. In the prologue to *Roger & Me*, Moore similarly recounts his relatives' participation in Detroit labor activism with evident pride. Yet after everyone asked in the film dismisses the possibility of the solidarity that would make for another successful strike, the film provides no alternative point of view between the obliviousness or hot air of the members of the upper class on the one hand and the irrelevant Flint residents' struggle to survive on the other. Like *The Atomic Cafe*'s nihilistic cynicism in the face of Cold War officialdom (Glass 59), *Roger & Me* offers no hope.

Some critics have defended Moore's film on the grounds that the considerations like those I have raised above about *Roger & Me* should not outweigh Moore's achievement in demonstrating vividly and humorously corporate America's indifference to the welfare of the communities in which it operates (cf. Orvell). Obviously I cannot agree. In fact, I would argue that one of the film's distinctive achievements resides in the fact that its most complex effects derive less from Moore's careful crafting of the film into a coherent whole or from his humorous attempts to overcome his "failed" mission, than from Moore's unwitting alienation of even those viewers who applaud his film's politics.

Notes

1. Moore's sentiments about documentary terminology have been echoed in Miramax's suggestion that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences rename the "Best Documentary" award category as the "Best Nonfiction" category. Miramax apparently agrees with Moore that the term documentary has negative connotations, and blames these connotations for the Academy's failure to nominate some of its more successful and unusual theatrical documentaries such as *Truth or Dare* (1991) and *The Thin Blue Line* (1987). See Michael Renov, "Towards a Poetics of Documentary," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.
2. There are of course alternative schemas for organizing the variety of documentary film practice: Erik Barnouw's vaguely descriptive categories such as "Prophet," "Explorer," "Reporter," "Painter" in *Documentary: A History of the Non Fiction Film*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's rigorous "categorical," "rhetorical," "abstract," and "associational" types of "Narrative Formal Systems" in *Film Art*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 128–65; or Michael Renov's more recent and functionalist poetic typology: "to record/reveal/preserve," "to persuade/promote," "to analyze/interrogate," "to express" (cf. Renov 12–36). While each of these models offers important insights, and many of them overlap (Bordwell and Thompson's "categorical form" is for example compatible with Renov's "to record/reveal/preserve" and "to analyze/interrogate"), Nichols's schema remains the most nuanced and most

comprehensive available to documentary critics and historians. For a thoughtful critique of Nichols's work, see Carl Plantinga, "Blurry Boundaries, Troubling Typologies, and the Urnly Fiction film," *Semiotica* 98, nos. 3–4 (1994): 387–96.

3. In his critique of Nichols's documentary modes, Carl Plantinga argues, among other things, that the difficulties we encounter in characterizing prevailing documentary practices in any period of documentary history undercut Nichols's chronology of modes; and that Nichols's chronology/typology has a teleology that leads him to value reflexive documentary above all other modes on relatively arbitrary grounds. While I agree that elevating the reflexive documentary above all others is a product of our poststructuralist moment, I do not find that this completely invalidates Nichols's model. Since Nichols argues that all four modes have been available to documentarists throughout the form's history, I see Plantinga's insights as a reminder that Nichols's scheme should be employed with care (cf. Plantinga 1994).
4. Similarly, Renov notes that his typology of documentary impulses is also designed for conceptual clarity and subject to "friction, overlaps—even mutual determination" (21).
5. In Nichols's scheme, reflexivity—political, formal, and stylistic—can inform the expository and interactive modes. For example, *Listen to Britain* is an example of poetic exposition that emphasizes "the rhythmic and expressive elegance of [its] own form in order to celebrate the beauty of the quotidian and those values that unobtrusively sustain day-to-day endeavor" (*Reality* 35). Yet the film's poetic components also constitute a variant of stylistic reflexivity, "loosening the linkage to a historical referent in favor of more internally generated foci such as color, tonality, composition, depth of focus, rhythm, or the personalized sensibilities and perceptions of the author" (*Reality* 70).

The Jennings-McAllister film is typical of those films Nichols describes in which "rhetoric yields to poetic or evocative exposition, stressing the formal organization of the message rather than its persuasive effects; in other films representational strategies may give way to more reflexive ones, also calling greater attention to the message and the nature of argumentation than to a specific argument" (*Reality* 166n).

In short, the poetic features of *Listen to Britain* belong to two different modes, even though the expository film is informed by a confident epistemology that the reflexive film, in one of its varieties, answers with skepticism. One can reconcile these classifications by stressing the fact that *stylistic reflexivity* is not as stridently skeptical as other reflexive documentary forms. Alternately one could emphasize the sensibility of the filmmaker as a unifying factor that expresses the film's definite perspective on British wartime culture in an indirect manner. See Jim Leach's essay on *Listen to Britain* in this volume.

6. In a letter to *Premiere* magazine, Moore asked, "And where are the chronology stories from all the chronology nuts about this year's Academy Award-winning documentary feature, *Common Threads: Stories from the Aids Quilt*? Did the people with AIDS in the movie die in the order in which they appear? Of course they didn't. But that discussion won't take place in *Premiere* or *The New Yorker* because it would be obscene. The point is, *those people died* and AIDS is a serious issue neglected by Washington" (Moore). Moore attributes the different standard for *Roger & Me* to the fact that his film deals with corporate America.

7. Carl Plantinga has mounted a similarly provocative analysis of *Roger & Me* as an inversion of the romantic/mythic quest narrative with "bankrupt donors, hopelessly incompetent helpers, and 'wise old men' who offer the worst sort of advice" (like the long-winded account of when the blood bank is open), as well as tricksters (Pat Boone, Ronald Reagan, Robert Schuller) who are supposed to heal the city and don't. Drawing on Hayden White's concept of tropes of discourse, Plantinga rightly sees the prevailing trope of the film as irony. Cf. Plantinga, "Roger and History and Irony and Me," *Michigan Academician* 24 (1992): 511-20.

8. Moore's bad faith is apparent as well in his treatment of his subjects. As Kael puts it, "Moore is the only one the movie takes straight (Almost everybody else is a fun-house case.)" (91). By default, we side with the man beside and behind the camera, and at the editing bench, whose most compelling virtues are his political consciousness and his sense of humor. It is refreshing to see Moore treat the Flint residents with humor rather than with the paralyzing sentimentalism that Brian Winston locates in the Grierson movement's depiction of victims. But Moore takes the exploitative potential of the documentary film (as articulated by Calvin Pryluck) and puts it to a time-honored end: comedy's reactionary predilection for humor at the expense of the marginalized.

Miles Orwell has mounted a rousing defense of *Roger & Me*, pointing out that not all the laid off workers in *Roger & Me* are ridiculed; some are shown with dignity and righteous anger at Smith and GM (for example, the lady who could use a "few choice words" about Smith after one of the plant closings). Making use in passing of Nichols's typology, he contrasts *Roger & Me* with Barbara Kopple's *American Dream* (1991), which in traditional documentary fashion elicits our sympathy for the unemployed strikers.

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