



SYNOPSIS

"Roger and Me" is the story of Flint, Michigan, an industrial town facing decline when 35,000 of the town's 150,000 residents lose their jobs. On a larger scale the film presents an allegorical view of corporate America, and a damning critique of a system which allows any corporation (in this case General Motors) to turn its back on its workforce for the sake of profit.

Michael Moore, the director, sets out on a hopeless quest to bring GM's chief executive Roger B. Smith to Flint, to force Smith to confront the human cost of his 'inhuman' corporate decisions. Along the way we are introduced to the citizens of Flint, ranging from TV evangelists to prison guards to golfing blue-rinse OAPs. These interviews with the famous and not-so-famous combine with popular music and with contemporary and vintage footage to produce an offbeat, humorous and affecting film.

DISTRIBUTION

"Roger and Me" neither looks nor feels like a major Hollywood movie. The camera work is shaky, the print (on 16 mm and 'blown up' to 35mm) looks grainy and cheap. The documentary style denies us so much that is expected of films on general release. There are no stars, no glamorous locations, no carefully constructed action sequences. There is no scripted dialogue and precious little plot. Michael Moore had no previous experience as a director, and finished the film not through the banks or the Hollywood studios but through a weekly bingo game in Michigan.

And the subject matter? Instead of an epic tale of love and war, or a science fiction extravaganza, a nostalgic weepie or a tough detective thriller, we are given an account of redundancies and evictions. The hero not only fails to pump the bad guy full of lead, he only meets him for a minute or two.

It reads like a recipe for a flop, the sort of film that if lucky is shown at obscure film festivals and if not, shows once on television and then dies. And yet it was bought for distribution by Warner Bros., a giant in popular entertainment, and has been put on general release in the USA and abroad.

Warner Bros. distributed the film as a major feature. It was without doubt a courageous move. As the success of that summer's blockbusters showed ("Batman", "Indiana Jones" etc) the cinema

going public is notorious for its refusal to take risks. The distributors traditionally encourage this and play things safe.

So have Warner Bros. made the right decision adopting "Roger and Me"? Remember that Warner Bros. (like General Motors in the film) are in the business of making money. They are a profit-making corporation and do not distribute films out of charity to small scale directors like Michael Moore. They weigh up cost against potential income and judge accordingly. And for a film to do well at the box office (the 'take') there needs to be an audience to pay to see this film.

Task 1:

Imagine you work for Warner Bros. and have been approached by Michael Moore. You've seen the documentary and know its potential. You now have to sell the idea to back it to the Warner Bros. executives, and you know their reaction might be negative. So what would you say? Remember, financial interests will rank as highly with the executives as artistic concerns. For a start, do you suppose a film like this would cost much to buy (in comparison with sponsoring a big budget movie)? Consider whether a potential audience exists, and in what sort of cinemas in which towns you would recommend it be shown? Write your answer as if it were an internal Warner Bros. memo.

Task 2:

The film has been given the go-ahead, and you now have the job of publicising it. Is there a ready-made audience, as with more conventional movies, or will you have to persuade people that this is a film they want to see? If the latter, how would you go about it? First, try listing all the magazines and newspapers you feel would be worth targeting. Then pick two from your list and write a description of the film (no more than 50 words) for each publication. How does the audience you are writing for affect your description?

FLINT, MICHIGAN

No one appears in "Roger and Me" without purpose. All the characters interviewed are there because they add something to Michael Moore's vision of Flint, either as symptoms of the system that allowed the town to collapse or as victims who underline how immoral that collapse was.

List five characters in the film and fill in the chart below. Try to choose not just the most obvious (like the eviction officer) but the more ambiguous. Donny Osmond, for instance, or the man at the Flint Plasma Centre: why do they appear in the movie?

CHARACTER	WHAT IS THEIR OPINION OF FLINT, MICHIGAN?	WHY DOES MICHAEL MOORE INCLUDE THEM IN THE FILM?(WHAT HAVE THEY TO ADD?)

How similar are the five characters you picked? One of the strengths of "Roger and Me" is that Moore highlights characters who are all quite different in their opinions and manner. But if anything their absurdities and uniqueness make them seem all the more believable and human.

If you were making a film on your neighbourhood, who would you choose to interview? Of all the people you meet in your daily life, from family to friends to teachers to casual acquaintances (shopkeepers and so on), which four or five individuals seem best suited to provide distinctive viewpoints?

"Roger and Me" is more sophisticated than many films. Think of all the blockbusters you have seen in which characters are reduced to cardboard cut-outs (Indiana Jones is good, The Joker in "Batman" is bad, and so on). But in "Roger and Me" the moral issues are blurred. Roger B. Smith is a villain, or so Michael Moore wants us to believe; but what of the woman who skins rabbits before our eyes? Is she any better than Smith? How do you think Moore expects us to feel?

Think also of:

- the eviction officer
- the four golfing OAPs
- the guests at the 'Great Gatsby' party
- Bob Bewick, host of "The Newlyweds" game show (and teller of Jewish jokes)
- Pat Boone
- Miss Michigan (later Miss America)
- 'Captain Da' (the man we see in a news clip dressed as a caped crusader being arrested at gunpoint by the state police)

How do you respond to these characters? Are you responding in the way Michael Moore intends us to respond? How conditioned are we in our responses by the way Moore presents the characters?

What about Roger B Smith? How well do you feel you know him by the end of the film?

- Does he have a fair trial or has he been 'stitched up' by the documentary?
- If you were on a jury judging Smith for ruining the lives of 35,000 GM workers, would you condemn him with a clear conscience or would you feel the need for more evidence?
- After all, though Moore makes out he tried to provide Smith with an opportunity to defend his actions, in fact it could be said that Moore behaved in a very amateurish way. It is possible to interview the head of General Motors, but not by wandering into the GM headquarters uninvited expecting to reach the 14th floor. Moore deliberately ignores the official channels because, by encouraging sympathy with his 'man-on-the-street' approach, it seems as if Smith is being aloof and playing hard to get. Is this fair to Smith? Or has Moore made Smith into a villain merely because creating a villain strengthens the film?

Not everyone in Flint loses out when the factory closes. The prison guards, the women forwarding mail and the eviction officer all gain work because of it, as do a few individuals who start businesses as a response to unemployment (for instance the woman who tests Moore for his natural 'colour season'). Why does Moore include these 'success' stories in the film?

Try to list all the differing attitudes to Flint proposed throughout the film, many of which are far from negative. Remember the townspeople's response to "Money Magazine", which branded Flint the worst place to live in the States. They didn't agree. Why not?

Task: You've been given the seemingly impossible task of promoting the Flint tourist trade. What would you do? Try to devise a slogan to encourage tourists to visit. Remember, the advertising trade is not renowned for scrupulous honesty, so feel free to bend the truth a little (without actually lying). The slogans will appear on posters for which you also have responsibility. What images of Flint would you choose for the posters?

DOCUMENTARY TECHNIQUE

What is a documentary?

Just as there are differences between one fictional film and another (between a science fiction drama and a western, for instance), there are of course differences between documentaries. But common ground exists. In groups, try to find similarities between any documentaries you have seen, on film and TV, and think whether you would consider these similarities typical of the genre as a whole. Think not just of subject matter but of tone and style, of budget and effects, of the role of the commentator and so on. Think of who made it and why, and of what they hoped to achieve. Try to reduce all this information into one clear sentence, a potential dictionary definition of the documentary. Then compare your definition with those produced by other groups.

How well does "Roger and Me" fit your definition?

What similarities exist between "Roger and Me" and a conventional feature film? Does it share, for instance, the classic narrative structure in which characters are introduced with conflicting ideas, resulting in some form of climax and resolution?

It is widely believed that documentaries present a more truthful picture of the world than fictional narratives. Documentaries are said to show 'life as it is lived', they are 'objective', and the makers of documentaries are less in control of their material than the producers of stories created especially for the screen. But in reality the makers of documentaries have total control. They choose what to film and what not to film. They ask questions that guarantee the answers they require, they write commentary so that pictures 'read' as they want us to read them, they edit out anything that does not fit in with their vision. If a documentary film maker set out to prove that white is black, s/he could merely adjust the exposure on the camera: the audience sees what it is meant to see, and truth adapts accordingly.

This is particularly true of a film like "Roger and Me", which has a highly personal axe to grind and makes no attempt to be politically impartial. We are always aware of Michael Moore's presence, not only in his role in front of the camera, but in his commentary and (most effectively) in his role as editor, twisting the material into shape far more powerfully than he ever could when actually filming.

For instance, the documentary ends with Pat Boone singing "Happy Birthday" to the 150-year-old State of Michigan. As he sings "...and 150 more..." we see a tower block collapsing in slow motion. Pat Boone's banality is deliberately contrasted with the grim reality of present day Michigan, with obvious dramatic effect. The power comes from the juxtaposition of images (the careful placing of contrasting images), which is artificial and has been contrived in the edit.

This technique of juxtaposition is used again and again in "Roger and Me". Try to list as many examples of this as possible. Think of occasions when:

- 1: contrasting sequences follow one another
- 2: contrasting sequences are intercut together
- 3: music contrasts with image
- 4: the images shown undermine what an interviewee is saying
- 5: images highlight the deliberate ironies in the commentary.

Why is the montage technique so powerful? How important is it that a juxtaposition be presented subtly, so that we spot the contrasts for ourselves, seemingly without having had them pointed out? Are there occasions in "Roger and Me" when the contrasts are so obvious, so blatant, that they seem a little heavy handed? Does this add to or detract from your enjoyment of the film?

(Of course not all the contrasts in the film are created by Michael Moore's documentary technique. Contrasts between rich and poor, between powerful and powerless, exist

independently of the film and the editing process. For instance, the contrast between the guests and the 'human' statues' at the Great Gatsby party.)

The easiest way for a film maker to colour the truth is in editing interviews. Imagine an interviewee takes three minutes to answer a question; to stop the film dragging, the film maker may want to reduce the answer to thirty seconds. But the control over which two and a half minutes goes is in the film maker's hands, not the interviewee's. In the process, words can be taken out of context, be coloured by association, even be deliberately distorted to say the opposite of what they once meant. And if the film maker is skillful enough, by sealing the two halves of the sentence with footage taken from elsewhere (a cutaway'), the audience may never know that words have been cut.

Task:

An exercise in adapting the truth. Interview a friend on any subject close to their heart, recording the interview on a tape recorder or video camera. It makes little difference whether the subject matter is political, social or personal, as long as they provide you with reasonably lengthy answers and definite opinions. Transcribe the interview on paper so you can see clearly what has been said. Then start to edit it, lifting a phrase from here and a phrase from there, to reassemble the words so that they say something quite different. Write yourself new questions so as to change the emphasis of the replies even further. If your school or college has sound editing facilities, try the exercise on tape as well as on paper.

IMAGES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Michael Moore on making "Roger and Me":

"I didn't want to make another 'Dying Steeltown' documentary with all the clichés about how horrible it is to be unemployed. I think everyone knows it's rough to be without money, so I decided that this film would not have a single shot of an unemployment line. I wanted the images you don't see on the six o'clock news."

So what images do you see on the six o'clock news? Think of the ambulance strike, the dock strike, the miners' strike. Think how the news reduced each one to a series of clichés. The miners' strike coverage by both BBC and ITN was criticised for this; the dispute lasted so long that in its latter months journalists tended to write according to a formula. They showed tried and tested images (pit heads, police in riot gear etc) which the audience had come to understand.

During the nurses strike, one nurse complained to the BBC that they were using her photograph on graphics sequences even though she was not a member of a striking union. She had become no longer an individual, merely an image for the media to manipulate.

Task:

Try storyboarding the events in Flint as if making a three minute news item. What images would you choose to underline the story? Who would you interview (invent fictional characters) and what would you expect them to say? Remember, as a journalist you control your interviewees: you choose them because they will say such-and-such; if they surprise

you and say the opposite, you drop the interview. So you have total control over what is seen and heard.

Storyboard sheets with ten boxes are provided with this pack. Draw more if necessary. The space on the right hand side is for the interviewee's words, your words during pieces-to-camera, and for commentary over whatever images you present. Remember to time the story; make sure you have provided enough images to fill three minutes.

DOCUMENTARY TRADITION

From the earliest days of celluloid the power of the camera as a source of education as well as entertainment was apparent. Film could provide both a record and an interpretation of events: an obviously tempting medium for any social commentator. The first classic British documentary dates from 1929, Grierson's "Drifters", combining Soviet style montage with the emergence on the screen of the 'British working man'.

Since then documentary has moved with the times, acquiring a propagandist role in the 1940s, developing gritty social realism in the '60s and '70s, and to some extent even mirroring the gloss of the 1980s (for instance arts documentary programmes such as "Arena" and "The South Bank Show").

These developments worked in parallel with developments in narrative feature films. Each borrowed and benefited from the other. In the 1960s the documentary influenced a whole cinema movement, 'cinema verite', which aimed to mimic the realism of documentary by keeping shots wide, avoiding cutting as much as possible, and letting conversations run their course. Such techniques are still frequently used by many cinema directors (for instance Woody Allen in his later films). And Oliver Stone's "Born on the Fourth of July" mirrors the pacey style of the news documentary, with dramatic use of hand held cameras, rapid and sometimes uncomfortable zooms in and out, and so on.

Equally, documentaries learnt from the movies; although this isn't true of "Roger and Me", many documentaries over the past ten years have mimicked Hollywood's high production values, using dramatic low or wide angle shots, staged lighting and so on. "The Thin Blue Line", a documentary which made general release and became something of a cult film in the USA two years ago, blended the boundaries between the documentary and the feature film to such an extent that it was hard to tell fact from fiction within it. The same goes for the drama-documentaries now common on British TV.

But despite the interdependence of features and documentaries, in truth documentary has always been something of a poor relation to narrative films. Why? Because its purpose has ultimately been as much to inform as to entertain. "Roger and Me" is an exception. Michael Moore put it as follows:

"I go to a lot of films, and I don't like sitting there in the dark getting bored I wanted "Roger and Me" to play more like "Pee-wee's Big Adventure" than "Hotel Terminus". We had fun making and editing the movie, and we knew that people would like it because we liked it."

Ultimately, though, documentaries are often simply unviable economically; their audiences are rarely large enough to cover production costs. So documentaries rely on regulated networks which can afford to spread profits from money spinners over less commercial programmes (not a system that would be possible if corporations were only interested in profit; if General Motors were in the film business they certainly would not be making documentaries).

Documentary still thrives in Britain where the networks (BBC and ITV) still have to perform a public service. But the Broadcasting Bill will change all that; the ITV franchises will be sold at auction and the BBC will lose its fixed income (from the TV licence fee) within the next few years. Increased competition will almost certainly threaten documentary film making and boost cheaper and more popular programmes.

Task 1:

Use copies of the "TVTimes" and "Radio Times" to analyse the breakdown of British TV. How much material is broadcast that you would classify as 'documentary'? How does this compare with the hours spent on dramas, or light entertainment, or schools' programmes, children's, and so on? Then conduct a survey within your school or college to find out who watches what, broken down similarly into 'types' of programme. From your experience, would you say documentary plays too large or too small a role in the schedules? If possible find a copy of the television industry's trade magazines (the most common is "Broadcast") which contain national viewing statistics week by week. How do your results compare to the national findings, and where do documentaries rate nationally?

Task 2:

Record and watch any TV documentary on a political subject matter ("Panorama", "World in Action", "This Week" for instance). Try to detect any political bias. Who speaks, in what order, for how long, and so on? How sympathetically are the interviewees presented? How are images juxtaposed with words? How much commentary is there, and does the commentary ever contradict what an interviewee has said (in other words, are we being given the programme's opinion or are we left to decide the merits of each interviewee for ourselves)? Watch also for subtle signs; are the interviewees lit in an unflattering way, for instance? Are the interviewees hesitant (often a fault of the interview situation, but interpreted as a sign of untrustworthiness: for instance with 'foot-in-the-door' interviews in the early hours of the morning, when even the most innocent interviewee would have a hard time appearing relaxed). If you do detect bias, has this been presented honestly or does the documentary pretend to be impartial?

POLITICS

"Roger and Me" is a socialist documentary. We are left with an unambiguous sense of right and wrong, in which capitalism comes out the loser.

To sum up Michael Moore's position:

1: People are more important than profits.

2: Corporations like General Motors, who benefit from the profits, are inclined to ignore people.

3: Therefore, in a just society, either the people should control the corporations, or the government should control the corporations on behalf of the people.

For Michael Moore, the tragedy in Flint could ultimately be blamed on the Reagan administration's failure to control General Motors' policy. Hence the scene in which Reagan visits the citizens of Flint in a pizzeria, and advises them to emigrate to Texas, a situation which, though funny, Moore regards with obvious bitterness.

But there are two sides to every coin. Although we see General Motors as the villain of the piece, they could have found equally convincing arguments to counter Moore's socialist position, and to defend a market-based form of capitalism.

For instance, whilst Flint suffers, America as a whole benefits if General Motors increases its profits. The more money entering a country, the stronger the economy (employment can rise and taxation fall). And should corporations really be blamed for chasing profits? Isn't the desire for profit, and the freedom to achieve profit, just a natural instinct in a free society? After all, in Eastern Europe economies were state controlled and look what's happening there. . .

The arguments on both sides are seemingly rational and equally entrenched. So who is right?

Task:

Stage a debate. Divide into groups of capitalists and socialists, and then subdivide the groups for even more colour. For instance, amongst the capitalists we should find the following:

- Republican politicians
- General Motors executives
- Flint businessmen flourishing on GM's decline
- Evangelists with faith in 'self-motivation'
- citizens disliking central government control
- workers who, despite redundancy, believe in a free market.

Amongst the socialists we have:

- redundant workers
- concerned activists like Michael Moore
- Democrat politicians.

The more characters the better, depending on the size of the group. First decide on the characters, then choose at random who plays what part. The aim is not to say what you necessarily believe, but to argue convincingly the position you represent.

The debate could spring from the question: Was what happened in Flint a tragedy that should have been avoided, or was it a natural, if unfortunate, consequence of a justifiable system?

Michael Moore believes that the film "Roger and Me" has appeared too late to save his hometown in Michigan. But he goes on: ". . . it's not too late for the rest of the country. And

if the rest of the country can learn a lesson from Flint, it's best to learn it quick, because what's happening in Flint is coming to your hometown".

What about Britain? Will we share Flint's experience, or have we already done so?

ASSIGNMENTS

1: Does a 'socialist' documentary have the right to make fun of ordinary working class people?

2: Consider the role of humour in "Roger and Me"?

A: Does it make a grim subject popular at the expense of the redundant car workers?

B: Does it add to or detract from the power of the story?

3: Could a fictional narrative set in Flint have served Moore's purpose just as well? (Imagine a traditional Hollywood version of a story of unemployment: Burt Lancaster as Roger B. Smith? Mickey Rourke as a laid-off worker?)

4: If Moore had been successful in bringing Roger B. Smith to Flint, would this have strengthened or weakened the film? Why?

5: Throughout the documentary we are faced with characters who advocate self motivation as a cure for other people's problems ('tomorrow is another day...'). Do you feel this sort of home-grown philosophising offers a practical solution to Flint's problems? Explain your answer with reference to characters in the film.

6: A good documentary should observe and not judge. Do you agree?

7: Research the rise and fall of the American Union movement. Why, when the General Motors' Fisher Number 1 Plant was closed (the site of the 44 day sit-down strike in 1937), could the union muster only 4 retired workers to stage a protest? Is this typical of the power of American Unions? What is the situation in Britain?

8: Research the role of the documentary in America, both on TV and film. Are they more a rarity on the US networks than on British TV? How frequently do documentaries reach general release?