

Capitalism, A Love Story: Workers Of The World, Unite!

By Ed Rampell

Michael Moore is the foremost documentarian of our times. He is to 21st century America what the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, the director of the Kino Pravda (Film Truth) series, was to the Russian Revolution: the man with the movie camera, who sees and chronicles social rights and wrongs, interpreting reality through a roving, relentless, restless, rabble-rousing camera lens, determined to tell all to the folks out there in movie-land.

The release of a new Moore doc is a major media event. Indeed, shortly before his latest work was released, the Oscar and Cannes winner appeared on Jay Leno's revamped NBC-TV program and on Sept. 23 (the day it opened in L.A. and New York) was a guest on Larry King's CNN gabfest, and scheduled to visit Bill Maher's "Real Time"; HBO show at the end of the week. What other nonfiction cineaste has such ballyhoo heft and can say that?

The good news is that Capitalism, A Love Story is another Michael Moore instant classic, and in his considerable, 20-year-long oeuvre — which spurred revitalization of the documentary as an art form, as well as an entertainment medium -- is second in quality and power only to his 2004 masterpiece, Fahrenheit 9/11.

Premiering almost exactly a year after the financial meltdown, Capitalism, A Love Story has all of the usual suspects and ingredients of that film formula which makes Moore's movie magic. It has the tongue and cheeky characteristic that has spread to TV parodies of news exemplified by the Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert brand of topical comedy. Capitalism opens with security camera footage of real bank robberies — what better metaphor for bank bailouts and other debacles? (As well as a playful rumination on the nature of cinema verite by a practitioner of the documentary art form.) Then there are clips from other films — one on ancient Rome, another from an instructional piece on free enterprise, and hilarious "what would Jesus do" bits.

Capitalism features some insider exposes and incisive investigative reporting — another hallmark of Moore's filmmaking technique -- which in Sicko exposed healthcare insurance scams, and in Fahrenheit revealed the battlefield costs of the so-called "cakewalk" in Iraq. The quintessential ingredient in Moore's motion picture recipe has been his own proletarian persona, which works because like many movie fat men, he's funny, and unlike most U.S. leftists, he is literally a son of the industrial proletariat. There's lots about his boyhood at Flint, Michigan, where both his father and uncle worked on GM assembly lines, mass producing cars in some bygone autopia, once upon a time before America was de-industrialized, downsized, outsourced and union busted.

Of course, there are the usual Moore merry prankster stunts — 20 years after Roger and Me, GM throws the prodigal proletarian son out of their HQ yet again. But correct me if I'm wrong: Moore's current Wall Street shenanigans seem like replays of the escapades on his 1990s' TV Nation and The Awful Truth television series, when he and Crackers, the corporate crime fighting chicken, confronted white collar criminals. While droll, Capitalism's tomfoolery never rises to Sicko's audacious, inventive level of Moore trying to bring a boatload of ailing Ground Zero survivors to the one place under U.S. jurisdiction that guarantees universal medical care: Guantanamo Bay, where suspected terrorists are imprisoned. (He transports them to Castro's Cuba instead, where socialism provides free healthcare to all.) Nor does Moore's return to the scene of the crime in the Financial District in Capitalism match the sheer panache of his dispatching actors clad as Salem witch-hunters to the home of Pres. Bill Clinton's grand inquisitor, Kenneth Starr (now ensconced, god help us, at Pepperdine!) during the multi-million dollar probe of the Monica Lewd-insky scandal and impeachment imbroglio.

Capitalism, A Love Story has its share of talking head notables — social critic Wally Shawn (of My Dinner With Andre fame), Catholic clergymen who denounce the capitalist system for its sinfulness, etc. But, more importantly and at the core of Moore's movie method, is his putting the so-called "forgotten man" (and woman) front and center, giving them a prominent platform to tell their heartbreaking, gut wrenching stories of an America where uncontrolled greed has run amok, laying waste to the common people. (Moore defines capitalism as "legalized greed.") Just as Roger and Me presented out-of-work autoworkers, including down on their luck Flint residents reduced to catching, skinning, eating and selling rabbits to survive in the wake of the economic cataclysm that destroyed their once thriving city. Here, in Capitalism, are Americans being evicted, including a family farmer close to snapping. As one victim of the capitalist system says onscreen: "There's gotta be a rebellion between the people who it all and people who have nothing."

This compassion is the heart and soul of Moore's movies, and indeed, of the man who dared denounce Pres. Bush as the Iraq War started on live TV during his Oscar acceptance speech for 2002's Bowling at Columbine. In Capitalism Moore raises serious points about the free market, pondering why a so-called democracy allows so many dictatorial practices in the workplace. (Jean-Luc Godard once asked why one boss has more power than 100 workers.) Moore also rails against America's disparity in wealth, wondering what's democratic — and Christian — about 1% of the population owning as much as the "bottom"; 95% of the people.

Moore calls for an end to capitalism, but stops short of advocating revolution. He does not claim to have an economic blueprint to save us from unbridled greed and economic collapse, but he, more than any other popular artist and entertainer is asking the questions that need to be asked. Moore is a bellwether — his Fahrenheit preceded public disenchantment with Bush's ill-fated war, while in Sicko he anticipated the healthcare debate we're now having. Who knows where, a few years after his brilliant, must see Capitalism, the public debate will be at. Meanwhile, it's interesting and amusing to note that the name of Godard's next movie is Socialisme. Ed Rampell
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Film historian and critic Ed Rampell was named after CBS broadcaster Edward R. Murrow because of his TV exposes of Sen. Joe McCarthy. Rampell majored in Cinema at Manhattan's Hunter College. After graduating, Rampell lived in Tahiti, Samoa, Hawaii, and Micronesia, where he reported on the nuclear free and independent Pacific movement for "20/20," Reuters, AP, Radio Australia, NewsWeek, etc. He went on to co-write "The Finger" column for New Times L.A. and has written for many other publications, including Variety, Mother Jones, The Nation, Islands, L.A. Times, L.A. Daily News, Written By, The Progressive, The Guardian, The Financial Times, AlterNet, etc.

Rampell appears in the 2005 Australian documentary "Hula Girls, Imagining Paradise." He co-authored two books on Pacific Island politics, as well as two film histories: "Made In Paradise, Hollywood's Films of Hawaii and the South Seas" and "Pearl Harbor in the Movies." Rampell is the sole author of "Progressive Hollywood, A People's Film History of the United States." He is a co-founder of the James Agee Cinema Circle: [politicalfilmcritics.blogspot.com].