

I Can't Take Any (Michael) Moore

About two months ago, I ran into some friends in line at the movie theater. They were going to see *Fahrenheit 9-11*. I was going to see *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, a film with no socially redeeming qualities, but one that I enjoyed enough to see twice. Referring to *Fahrenheit*, one of them said, "You've probably already seen it."

I hadn't. I still haven't. I have no plans to see it. It might seem odd that a card-carrying left-wing-pinko-liberal-anarcho-commie-feminazi like me hasn't seen Michael Moore's newest film. I won't go because I think Michael Moore's work is overrated, and I am irked that he had been made into the Left's American Folk Hero.

You don't watch a Michael Moore film for in depth analysis, and you don't learn much either. Moore makes lefty edutainment. Now I suppose that is an important niche that needs to be filled, but it doesn't change the fact that his work is often not much more than a running gag about Average Joe Blow American pulling the rug of myths and lies from under the corrupt powers that be.

Moore is not a documentary filmmaker; he is documentary mythmaker. He stands in a long line of writers and filmmakers who enshrine the "common man" as America's hero. You watch his movies to confirm your opinion that people at the top are bastards and empowering the common people is the answer. It is a myth that seems essential in a democracy, at least the part about the common people.

We watch "Average Joe" Moore in his role as the merry prankster souring the milk and upsetting the apples carts of corporations and politicians. But I've gotten tired of watching scenes of Moore harassing workers at the aforementioned corporations. We are supposed to feel pity for the auto plant workers who have been laid off but not for the security guards, secretaries and PR people who are struggling just as much in an unfair work world; folks for whom getting canned could be just as tragic.

Lefties leave Moore's films feeling validated, which is an important function of political rhetoric. There are times when we need our opinions and values affirmed; to feel like we are in a crowd of like-minded folks. But rhetoric and opinion are not the same thing as the truth. As one *Time* Magazine columnist pointed out, many people felt validated by Mel Gibson's oh-so-factual *The Passion of Christ*.

Moore has been charged more than once with overlooking pesky details like fact checking. The great thing about writing an opinion piece is that I don't have to spend time substantiating my claims. And if we all accepted that Moore's body of work is essentially one long, very subjective opinion piece on America, then I might not mind the hype so much.

But many lefties assume that everything Moore presents is the Truth and should not be challenged. He and his work has been placed on a pedestal. This makes my hackles rise: I was raised to knock "heroes" off pedestals. When asked in my mid-twenties by a over

eager do-gooder manager at Cal-PIRG, who had the less than enviable task of leading a troop of exploited workers to gather signatures for various “social justice” petitions, to name a lefty culture hero I wanted to enshrine on a stamp, I sarcastically replied, “a tree.”

We could ascribe my difficulties with Moore to my iconoclastic upbringing. I don't like hero worship; I was taught to question and challenge all authorities including the ones on “my side.” I heartily encourage all to think critically about what making Moore into a “hero” means. I think we often confuse the charismatic and powerful leaders of the Left with the Left itself. In some ways I am radically democratic. We need charismatic people, perhaps we even need “leaders”, but it makes me sad to see us forget whose power created the “hero” in the first place. We forget they should be working for us, and that their work is not more important than the work we do.

I got to see hero worship close up last fall when Noam Chomsky came to Gainesville to help celebrate the Civic Media Center's tenth anniversary. We hosted “mingles” before and after the big speech. People circled around Chomsky, pressing in, like devotees at a shrine wanting to touch the holy object. They hope to be blessed with a gem of wisdom falling from his lips. They waited to make a comment praying for Noam's seal of approval. They wanted to be validated by the great man.

I found it appalling. Noam Chomsky isn't a saint. He is rigorous thinker, a boring public speaker and a man who tries to live his values. But his writings are not a revelation of divine wisdom. They are ideas to be pondered, debated and criticized, as I'm sure he would agree. Similarly, Michael Moore's films are cultural products to be discussed and debated; that is his gift to us. But too often I see people slavishly affirming Moore's greatness and responding with hostile attacks when people dare to critique his work.

After *Bowling for Columbine*, two people wrote an open letter to Moore challenging him on his coverage of violence in communities of color, the lack of representation of people of color in the film and his overlooking how racism plays into white Americans fears of violence. They also nailed him on not discussing violence against women at all. They ended their letter suggesting that he participate in a workshop on dismantling white oppression and donate money to filmmakers of color. Their tone was angry and direct and employed a style that Moore himself often uses when confronting people in power, though they were too sad and angry to be merry pranksters. They never attacked his person, and in fact foregrounded their discontent with the movie with their admiration of his “wit and insight” and his “hard-hitting investigation and (his) creative film-making style.”

When this letter made the email rounds in Gainesville, people went ape shit. “How dare these people **attack** Michael Moore?” “How dare they suggest that Moore's work is flawed?” “It must be a conspiracy of the CIA to bring down the Left.” The same things people always say when people of color accuse a white person or women accuse a man of not being conscious of her or his privilege. One person I talked with about the controversy implied that the criticism was a *distraction* from the importance of Moore's work.

In pointing out the imperfections of Moore's work, they were not being divisive, despite what some may say. Our "heroes" should not be above criticism. They should not be above us. By criticizing the hero worship of Moore, I am giving witness that he is not our voice but one of our voices. If we agree that no one person holds the whole truth, constructive criticism is not a distraction; it is vital. By not privileging his perspective as more correct or useful to the Left than my own, I am affirming democratic ideals.

We should place his work in its proper context, which is as a culture product that should not be passively consumed but actively engaged with. We have every right to say his work is boring or shortsighted or flawed or too much like propaganda without being told that we are "undermining the Left." Moore is not the Left.

Moore came to Gainesville last week. People were excited to see the man who has broken records and made big bucks criticizing the powers that be. On the night of the event I ran into a friend who asked if I was on my way to see Moore. I said that I wasn't. And I didn't. He's got enough cheerleaders.