

Working-Class Hero: Michael Moore's Authorial Voice and Persona¹

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(with Vinicius Navarro)

DOCUMENTARIES ARE AUTHORED. THEY ALSO GENERALLY SPEAK WITH authority. And sometimes authorities give testimony on screen. Authority thus forms one of the complicated ways that documentaries represent nonfictional reality. In fact, it is because documentaries speak to us with authority that we trust what they have to say. This can become even more complicated when authority is part of the subject matter of the documentary, the topic being explored.

This article looks at Michael Moore's persona—the aggrieved, aggressive maverick, the know-it-all who knows nothing—to explore the idea of authorial voice and persona in nonfiction filmmaking. Michael Moore, the everyman, the ordinary guy in the gravy-stained tee shirt whose job it is to look after our interests, seems to be the authority that is no better than we are, but who has more guts. Smart, but appearing to be unschooled, his belligerent air of thwarted entitlement and his anti-intellectualism point to a contradictory set of values and viewpoints, paternalistic authority on the one hand and rugged delinquency on the other, that are sometimes hard to splice together.

Here, Moore's persona in the 1989 film, *Roger and Me*, will be used as the main text, in order to analyze these contradictions and how they function as nonfictional representation, and they will be compared with those of Tony Buba's persona in *Lightning Over Braddock: A Rust Bowl Fantasy*, a film released the year before *Roger and Me*. Both documentaries deal with a similar subject matter: the unemployment caused by plant closings in the filmmakers' hometowns, and the unresponsiveness of the large corporations to the lives of the workers. (In Moore's case, it

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2010
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is the auto industry in Flint, MI; in Buba's, it is the steel industry in Braddock, PA.) And both are personality-driven documentaries in which the filmmaker (who is the producer, director, and writer of the work, and in the case of Buba, also the editor) appears as a character in the film—a character equipped with authoritative vision, hearing, and speech.² Each filmmaker fashions a persona that turns on its nonprofessional, working class allegiances, the social class of his parents. Moore's father worked at General Motors' AC Sparkplug factory; Buba's in one of Braddock's steel mills. And both films express an anxiety about professionalism itself, as well as authority, autonomy, and power, as if authority, privileges, and accredited knowledge were often seen to be worthless (or unwarranted) when brought face-to-face with the culture of their fathers (Ross 1989). On the surface there are quite a few similarities in the two films. Yet their authorial voices are quite different.

Truth and reality seem to meet in the photographic media. The referents in other systems of representation are contingent on signs. "The photographic referent, however, is necessarily real," as Susan Scheibler puts it "The authenticity of the photographic image lends to it an ontological authority" (Barthes 1981: 141). This iconic aspect of the photographic image, coupled with the indexical (the camera and microphone's ability to capture things as they happen) implies, as Bill Nichols points out, that we would have witnessed it if we had been there, too. We would have seen it for ourselves ("The Voice of Documentary" 261).

In both these films, the on-the-spot observations, the presence not only of the filmmaker, but the crew and recording apparatus, and the quick move from the autobiographical past to the present tense in the voiceovers and the investigations, seem to render visible what is happening. The fact that they were there, the indexical aspects of the photographic media, appears to certify our documentary's authenticity and authority at the same time. The on-camera presence of the filmmaker suggests that the film is actually about the gathering of information. Even though much of what we see is manifestly staged, it also seems to emphasize a local and situated knowledge, available through the filmmaker's contact with other people in the documentary.

Underlying this encounter with the world of lived experience, however, is a more complex—and in some cases more subtle—source of authority: the filmmaker's screen act, the self that is performed for

the camera. To a large extent, it is this constructed, “enacted,” self that secures the bond with the referential world and lends a particular voice to the documentary. In the case of Michael Moore’s persona, we have this strange combination of the appearance of authoritative certainty, a confidence in the ability to know and understand, and skepticism about the ability of others to know and understand. Moore’s persona speaks to his ambivalence about, or distrust of, the role of authority and intellectual skills in people’s lives.

Michael Moore has few probing on-camera interviews. Rather than introduce new information or produce suitable evidence, the interviews serve to illustrate Moore’s audacity and superiority and make us aware of the contingencies of the moment. The film, very honestly, lets us know that it centers on Moore’s perspective and his view of the scene as a superior form of “truth.” But this “truth” is partial, in both senses of the word partial (no stories are ever lifted from life intact, and no one can know something separate from his or her way of thinking). So these contingencies include the filmmaker/investigator’s limited understanding. In Chris Sharrett and Bill Luhr’s words, he is “a simple guy looking for answers to a few simple questions” (254). Yet the film withholds the process through which Moore’s own understanding has been produced (there are no theory-testing conjectures, no alternative hypotheses, just one developing narrative), and it gleefully sabotages the testimony of others. His interviews are frequently impertinent (he hurls ridicule at politicians, and gets under the skin of celebrities) and hold very little authority in the film’s argument, other than to reinforce or buttress, not the film’s thesis, but the author’s persona.

Moore’s persona, in a way, functions as the voice-of-god commentary functioned in days of old. Despite its limited understanding, it gives the appearance of lordly omniscience and frequently seems to be extremely informational and, therefore, believable. In *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), in a nearly nine-minute sequence toward the end of the film, Moore visits actor Charlton Heston, then head of the National Rifle Association, in his Beverly Hills home. While the interview itself adds little to the ideas already articulated in the film, it contains one of the documentary’s most powerful moments. Holding the photograph of a six-year-old girl who had been shot by a classmate a year earlier, Moore asks the chief of the NRA to take a look at the picture. Heston refuses, leaving it up to the viewer to respond to the filmmaker’s appeal. The movie star’s refusal and filmmaker’s lack of success functions to forge an alliance between Moore’s

persona and the “average citizen,” who is both privileged in the film and, in theory at least, a member of the audience.

An ongoing contrivance in *Roger and Me* is Moore running up against a retinue of security guards and public relations personnel in an attempt to meet with Roger Smith, CEO of General Motors at that time. As Richard Schickel has pointed out, Moore-the-journalist certainly knows that getting in to see movers and shakers without an appointment is virtually impossible (77). But Moore’s persona needs the encounters to fortify its own identity and illustrate his own authority. Interviewing Tom Kay, a spokesman and lobbyist for General Motors, who seems to be trying to dispel difficult questions with vacuous optimism whenever we meet him, Moore, suffering through Kay’s glib assertion that there are still opportunities in Flint, hurls another useless question at him, “Do you mean that?” All Kay can answer is, “Yes, I do.” It is not so much that Moore’s films are carefully argued, as that they share with the viewer the energy of his delinquency. Moore’s documentaries rely on his screen persona to convince us of the veracity of his claims. The interviews are sources, not only of authority, but, like fiction films, of character. (Moore himself declared his first feature-length film, *Roger and Me*, to be “a movie,” not a documentary [in Jacobson]. His rejection of the documentary label seems to be tied to his rejection of, and disrespect for, the dry authority of documentaries.) Yet his persona feeds off the glow of the authority it condemns.

Moore has a self-mocking tenor to his persona—setting up a double-edged humor. He may be eccentric and weird, but never as eccentric or weird as the others he encounters. He gets a lot of laughs out of nursing his distrust of people in authority and with power, “stupid white men.” He refers to the CEO of General Motors by his first name, “Roger.” In his later book, *Stupid White Men*, he calls George W. Bush, our “Idiot-in-Chief” (89) and brags about his own lack of education and manners (279). But there are important limits to how much disrespect of professionals we can take—and here is where different facets of Moore’s persona come into play as a way of managing that distrust.³ He is not only scruffy, tough, slouchy, and a bit of a scoundrel, he carries with him an expected candor. And today, we know him as hip and successful, a celebrity himself. At a time when professional journalism had already begun to come under question and when the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, and between the worker and the celebrity

were under the illusion of dissolution, Michael Moore's persona in his first film coupled the seemingly irreconcilable: anti-intellectualism and disrespect for authority with an innate wisdom and the moral fiber to act on it. If the established institutions are totally inadequate and unable to help, we have before us a populist rescuer.

Education may earn someone respect, but at the same time, as Andrew Ross, Richard Sennett, and others have pointed out, the authority and privileges that come with this respect are also deeply resented by those who feel that education leads to a perk-ridden white-collar life style and effete work, work that is not as "real" as the work of their fathers.

Moore reclaims for the working class—at a time when the recession, layoffs, and the dispiriting truths of daily life must have made the future seem tenuous, full of hopeless, pathetic, unrealizable dreams, disappointment, and irresolution—what Andrew Ross describes as a "theme park" or consensus view of America (6). This is the popular in action: America in love with what Ross calls "cultural classlessness" (9).

Moore speaks in the first person plural. Take for example his e-mail missive endorsing John Kerry, "Look at us—what a bunch of crybabies. . . . Yes, OF COURSE any of us would have run a better, smarter, kick-ass campaign" ("Put Away Your Hankies" 2004).⁴ He uses a language, the vernacular, that, like his baseball and trucker caps, is both blithe and assertive of the God-given rights of the working class. Here the working class bears the mark of common sense (Ross 8). But this language of common sense bears the mark of "cultural classlessness," a fast and loose logic that reinforces the "folklore of capitalism." According to Ross, nothing is more crucial to the maintenance of the idea of the sovereignty of "we the people" in America; nothing is more crucial to the maintenance of ideological stability (Ross 9).

When meeting a recently laid off GM employee with over forty years on the line, Moore asks him, "Were you in the [1936] sit-down strike?" *Roger and Me* is feverishly romantic, a passionate celebration of Flint in the days of prosperity and strong, progressive unions, steeped in nostalgia and regret for a culture that is crumbling.

If Michael Moore is a picaresque hero, Tony Buba is a postmodern one. His persona is just as ironic as Moore's, and just as working class, but less belligerent and more complex. The main difference, however, is that Buba's persona in *Lightning Over Braddock* is skeptical about the ability to know and represent a historical reality in a way that Moore's

would never admit. Whereas *Roger and Me* still has faith in a single sense of authority and verisimilitude, Buba's film interrogates, empties—or throws off center—both.⁵

When watching *Lightning Over Braddock*, you continually weigh what is autobiography and what is invention. It is not that the film lies, or is not straightforward, but that we have to watch and listen differently. What is clearly artifice will not allow us to accept the persona of Tony Buba, the character—or his point of view—on faith. Unlike Michael Moore's autobiographical prelude, complete with home movies, which establishes him as "one of us," Buba's personal associations with the troubles of his hometown include fantasies of power and self-realization (along with his ambivalence about them), complicating his persona in ways that engage our critical faculties. In lieu of a reassuring performance, what we have is an act that fails to create a fully coherent or unambiguous subject. Buba's persona calls for a different kind of relationship with the audience than Moore's. Like other reflexive documentaries, *Lightning Over Braddock* uses the filmmaker's voiceover and screen appearance as a way of interrogating both the filmmaker's status and the role of documentary cinema in general.

Whereas Michael Moore relies on humor and irony to make fun of authority, never questioning his own, Tony Buba's more distanced and sardonic approach takes apart and examines the issue of authority and the relation of authority to the viewing audience. Actively engaging with paradox, Tony Buba looks at the adequacy of documentary's (and by extension any representational system's) potential to capture lived reality.

In a two-minute sequence in *Lightning Over Braddock*, Tony Buba begins with an interview with accordionist and singer, Steve Pellegrino, the subject of a 1981 short, *Mill Hunk Herald*, and ends with a voiceover narration discussing how he had refused to pay US\$15,000 (three times the average per capita income of a Braddock resident) for the rights to Mick Jagger's "Jumpin' Jack Flash," one of the songs Steve sings in the sequence. The sequence continues silent as Buba's voiceover narration instructs the viewers to try to fill in by singing the song themselves, reminding them, "It's a Gas!"

By presenting himself in the persona of a worker, rather than adventurer, by revealing the filmmaking process, Buba foregrounds the constructed and contingent nature of his documentary and undermines any notion of infallibility or absolute truth.

Buba's "truth" bears the burden of contesting standard knowledge and vertical understanding, and it does so by questioning the known within the film, an aesthetics of ambiguity, very unlike Moore's certainty. It also questions whether the sociohistorical world itself is unified or self-consistent. Buba's persona and his authorial voice, reflect upon or question, as well, the ability of film to represent—and sometimes the filmmaker to know—that sociohistorical world with any sense of objectivity. Highly reflexive, *Lightning Over Braddock* consciously inscribes an interrogation of the documentary form itself, especially the idea of an overarching authority. In this sense, it is antiromantic.

In a sequence filmed just like the union demonstration that precedes it, Buba inserts a patently staged public relations-type yuppie who berates a local camera operator whose father had worked in the steel mills for forty years for her lack of objectivity, "your subjectivity may be poetic and well-intentioned, but it's probably provincial." Buba's humor, like Moore's, engages the viewer. But Buba's also offers an opportunity to mull over the nature and suppositions of documentary representation. And in this case, class as well. Whereas Moore asks his "average citizen" to look down on the unfeeling powerful, Buba asks his viewer if he or she does not hold some of the same prejudices and presumptions as they do.

Both Moore's and Buba's personae become derailed from their epic projects. But here, too, their differences seem to stand out. Moore's persona revels in his thwarted project, his failure, as part of his "ordinariness." Being an ordinary guy means he cannot get in to see Roger Smith. He is outside the corporate power structure. Buba's persona instead uses his failure to fracture secure notions of a humanist subject.⁶ It is as if he is convinced that traditional documentary methods cannot reveal the truth of events, but only, as Linda Williams says of many new documentaries, "the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths" (65). By combining footage of an actual rally to save a blast furnace from closing down with fantastic footage of Buba stalked by one of Braddock's many down-and-out citizens, "Sweet Sal" Caru, a small-time hoodlum (whose current claim to fame seems to be having been featured in a couple of Buba's previous Braddock shorts), *Lightning Over Braddock* merges fact and fantasia, or perhaps more accurately, plays fact and fantasia off each other.

Sweet Sal's unappeasable avidity and fantasies of stardom ("I can go on *Jump Street* just like that") and Buba's own aching questions about

securing his financial future by selling out to Hollywood, provoke the clearly tongue-in-cheek sequences of a Hollywood-style action picture and a steel mill movie musical. Joblessness, Buba says in a voiceover, brings “a lot of poverty, a lot of anger, and a lot of daydreaming.”

Sal’s fantasies about being a Hollywood movie star, a hard-bodied action hero, is both a comment on the consequences media attention can have on the subjects of documentaries (what happens when you turn someone into a movie star?) and a lampoon that ridicules mainstream film by imitating many of its attributes and distorting them.

Buba’s persona mentions several times that he has made his mark chronicling the demise of Braddock’s steel industry, and notes with irony, “as Braddock . . . declined, my fortunes increased. Dying mill towns are a hot media subject. My exposure on TV was directly proportional to the number of layoffs.” But now that he has some attention, he too dreams the American dream. “I believe that if you do any kind of media work, you automatically buy into the American dream—because you feel your work is so good that you are going to be accepted and on your own terms.”

The biographical elements (mentioning his past films, his lack of a pension fund, his Guggenheim fellowship and stature as Pennsylvania’s Media Artist of the Year, etc.), the testimony of the steelworkers, the clearly made-up dialogue (at one point a priest reads from a card of typed lines), and the enactments of a made-in-Braddock, Hollywood-style “ethnic detective story,” this heterogeneous mix upsets the stability of meaning and undercuts any sense of certainty.

Hayden White has elaborated the similarities between imaginary and factual narratives. It is common to think of the fiction writer fabricating his or her stories, and the historian—or documentary filmmaker—“finding” them in the socio-historic world. But this “obscures the extent to which ‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s [or documentarian’s] operations” (6–7). As though to illustrate this, Buba films a ludicrous sequence of “At the Flicks,” with Bill and Marge, and a clip of Gandhi’s assassination from *Gandhi Goes to Braddock*, starring none other than that “ex-street hustler turned Eastern mystic,” Sweet Sal.

It might seem as if the manifestly staged aspects of these documentaries have the potential to come into conflict with the referential quality of the films, documentary’s special relation to the real. Nichols writes that “resemblance” is one of the more powerful attractions of

documentary, a fundamental expectation that what occurs in front of the camera would have happened in the same manner if the camera and sound equipment had not been there (*Representing Reality* 27–28). But this can be thrown into question by reflexive documentaries, documentaries that interrogate the language of cinema and the filmic construction of reality. When Tony Buba supervises the camera work on one of his jobs on the monitor, or when the film moves from Jesse Jackson's speech at a rally to Buba working on the sequence on a flatbed editing table, we know that the aesthetic means we see before us are a matter of choice.

Buba wonders if his films are doing any good; he worries about offending potential funders at a party; and when Sweet Sal quits with the film only three-fourth finished, Buba (over black leader, a sure sign of diminished finances) admits that not only does he no longer have a lead, with several more sequences to film, but he is also out of grant money. Buba's revelation of the economic conditions of filmmaking, and the display of the working conditions, negotiate "authority" and contaminate "truth." Paul Arthur argues that both *Roger and Me* and *Lightning Over Braddock* are part of a new ethos—derived from post-structuralist thought and postmodernist form—which uses "negative mastery" as a form of authenticity. In other words, their "technical awkwardness" and "feigned inadequacy" becomes the sign of unvarnished truth; their combination of ineptness and sincerity makes them seem credible (128–32).⁷

Much of Buba's material is serious and dignified (outsourcing, unemployment, the effect of "stardom" on documentary subjects, the political effectiveness of nonfiction work), but the filmic language he uses to describe it is often jarringly incongruous and conjures up highly undignified associations. It is precisely in these undignified associations, the mischievous treatment of somber stories, that Tony Buba's persona emerges. The viewer thinks of the author, not simply of the tragedy being narrated. Moreover, he or she thinks of the way authorship and authority are enmeshed in nonfictional representation. In this, too, Buba's film and his screen presence depart from Moore's self-mocking but ultimately reassuring performances.

Michael Moore's persona is not "one of them"; he is neither an efficient nor particularly skilled professional. Yet he works hard to be "one of us." He wants us to believe that he knows what it is like to be out of work. After all, that unnamed San Francisco rag had sent him

home. He is an average guy; he is we. "Now *you* know what I'm talkin' about," the woman raising rabbits for pets or meat tells him. He exploits a tenuous personal relation with another person without a job, "It turns out that one of the guys Deputy Fred was evicting had gone to my high school." His persona becomes a sort of evidence: the evidence of experience.

Always certain of himself, Moore's authorial voice intervenes powerfully, sometimes pugnaciously, with moral and ethical judgments about the situation and conditions he is recounting. But even though he seems to have the requisite moral and ethical vision that permits identification with the experience of workers, and even though he hangs on to nonprofessional allegiances, his ambivalence about the authority and power of his new-found social standing obscures the process by which class is conceptualized and embraced. Although Moore set out to validate a sense of class, he ended up essentializing the concept, turning it into a heroic ideal, that which made America great; the corporation may have all the power but the workers, and Moore is the king of workers, have moral right as their weapon.⁸

Perhaps this is because the Moore persona is a character in a romantic comedy. I remember when I first saw *Roger and Me* at the Loews 84th Street movie house in New York City. As I was waiting to enter the theater, I was surprised to see those leaving cheerfully chatting with smiles on their faces. I remember thinking, "Something's wrong here. This is supposed to be a film about unemployment, and everyone seems so *happy*." Comedy, according to Northrop Frye, is a utopian form that contains a movement from an inferior society to a superior one. "At the beginning of the play," Frye writes, "the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers." At the end, a new, more desirable, society crystallizes around the hero (163). Frye's romantic couple is missing from the film, but not the obstacles to the hero's desire. The rhetoric of comedy (which Frye points out resembles the rhetoric of jurisprudence) moves toward a happy ending. Even if Moore could not provide his audience with an optimistic narrative closure, he could give them an upbeat ending by adding his own humor to the voiceover with the ongoing joke about lint rollers, the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice" playing over the end credits, and the insertion of the good news that Tom Kay was laid off and his office closed.

Tony Buba tells us that he left his factory job to go to college, got a teaching job, which made his family very proud, but he is still in his hometown: "I'm not exactly alienated from my family or my environment." He also assures us that his documentaries are not too profitable. But because *Lightning Over Braddock* contains a critical wariness that calls into question the stability of authority, it has the power to identify ideas and desires opposed to the "folklore of capitalism." If we were to continue with Frye's typology, Buba's persona would be a character in a darker universe, an ironic myth, "the attempt to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence" (223). In many ways, Buba's film is a prescient parody of the kind of romantic adventure that we see in *Roger and Me*. To paraphrase Don Quixote, no one in a romance ever asks who pays for the hero's soundtrack.

Notes

1. Some of the material in this article will appear in Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro's forthcoming book, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*, Rutgers University Press.
2. The on-camera presence of the filmmaker is not new. Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin appeared in *Chronicle of a Summer* in 1961 and certainly were not the first. More recently Ross McElwee has made a career of on-screen self-deprecation and ambivalence in an intrusive self-reflexive style that deserves an essay of its own. This article does not address the oft-heard complaints about the integrity of Moore's persona or the validity of his journalism. Although Moore himself sometimes does, it is important that we not confuse his persona with his person. There is a difference. McElwee, in an interview with Scott MacDonald, owned up, "I'm creating a persona for the film that is based upon who I am, but isn't exactly me" (MacDonald 1992). For more information on the reliability of Moore's facts in *Roger and Me*, see his interview with Harlan Jacobson (1989) and the review of the subsequent debate in John Corner (1996).
3. Ross makes this point about Bill Cosby's humor in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, 2.
4. Emphasis as such in original.
5. See Trinh T. Minh-hà (1993) and essays in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989).
6. See Lucy Fischer's discussion of *Sherman's March* in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*.
7. This work is significantly indebted to Arthur's essay.
8. Bob Sklar makes this point about Frank Capra's fictional characters in *Movie-Made America* (210).

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