Honest Look at Violence and Gun Control

By Conrad Erb
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Bowling for Columbine is Michael Moore’s latest contribution to the national debate on gun control. It is a documentary filled with thought-provoking questions and a shockingly honest look at the issues involved.

The film begins with Moore walking into a bank in northern Michigan. He then opens a certificate of deposit and the teller hands him a rifle as an advance payment on the interest for his deposit. The movie then winds and snakes its way through a satirical and sometimes sad commentary on school violence.

The film relies mostly on Moore’s interviews with characters such as militia group members, James Nichols, Marilyn Manson, and Charlton Hesston. Interpersed between these interviews is a mix of footages, cartoons, historical footage and commentary by Moore himself.

In its most condensed form, the film asks the question, why does the United States have such a violent culture? After exploring theories such as the violent history of our country, the saturation of guns in our culture, and the presence of ethnic minorities, Moore offers an interesting psycho-social critique of American society.

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Moore presents an intelligent argument for why the American life is both statistically and anecdotally more violent than life in other industrialized societies. Moore resists the temptation to blame the work of recent musical artists such as the shock rock beats of Marilyn Manson and the explicit lyrics of Eminem.

He also refuses to blame video games such as ‘ Doom ’ and ‘ Delta Force ’ as the source for the homicidal tendencies of the nation’s children. While Moore doesn’t offer a straightforward answer to the question of what caused the school shootings in Columbine, Colo., his analysis of the problem of violence broadens to an analysis of newsmedia.

Moore investigates how the commercial nature of newsmedia lead to demand-side news, where murders, killer bees and rare diseases are headlined in the 6 o’clock news. While journalism about pollution, corporate crime and poverty go largely unnoticed in the day-to-day news.

Moore’s analysis of violence rests heavily on a comparison between our snowy counterparts who live north of the 49th parallel and the United States. Although his use of comparative statistics make a striking contrast between Detroit, Windsor, and Ontario, his illustration of Canada as one big happy, no-terror-here society is a bit unrealistic.

Moore is to be commended for his boldness in writing a script that asks tough questions. In a movie that could have easily become a rant against school bullies, and a celebration of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Moore honestly confronts the elements of our culture which make U.S. society dangerous.

At the expense of lacking the obvious aesthetic polish that most producers would expect, the gritty nature of the film reflects the reality of violence. For all its attention-getting glamour, this documentary represents the concrete loss and devastation experienced by those involved.

The film also raises important philosophical questions that surround the issue of guns and societal violence.

Questions such as, “Where does personal accountability end and community accountability begin?” and “At what point does our society’s guaranteeing for the liberties of individuals threaten the rights of all people to be free from gun-wielding children?” provoke much thought.

Moore should be commended for a brave piece of filmmaking. His style is blue-jeans comfortable and his questions are intriguing as they are brilliant, yet naive as an eight-year-old. His willingness to ask simple questions results in some interesting footage and a rather remarkable “victory” along the way.

As it is lacking in the breasts-bombs-and-bad-guys formula that might accompany a movie about guns, some will be disappointed. Viewers who don’t want to check their brains at the door, however, are in for an intellectual treat whose flavor lingers on the brain.