READING FILM

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Satire, Sincerity, and the Space to Think: *Roger & Me* vs. *American Factory*

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The commercial documentary was born with *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film that captivated audiences as an entertaining way to consume truth even though it was filled with deception. Ever since, debates have raged over the proper nature and limits of editorial manipulation in documentary form. A comparison between the documentaries *Roger & Me* (1989) and *American Factory* (2019) provide an apt case study: separated by 30 years, both films focus on the crucial role factories play in the U.S. economy, and both ask viewers to consider what companies owe their employees. Their methods, however, are very distinct. While Michael Moore uses humor and participatory involvement to drive the point of *Roger & Me* across, Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar's *American Factory* relies on observational technique and multivocality, seemingly to let the story's subjects speak for themselves—and let viewers decide for themselves what to think about it. But while Michael Moore certainly stepped on a lot of toes with his satire, *American Factory*'s sincerity is much less innocent than it may seem.

Although it addresses the devastating economic fallout of General Motors factory closures in Flint, Michigan, *Roger & Me* is characterized by its satirical humor. One of the most memorable participants in the film is a woman who is raising and selling rabbits to make ends meet in the depressed Flint economy. The first interview with her is shot in winter, and Moore approaches her doorstep because he sees her sign: "Rabbits or Bunnies, Pets or Meat for Sale." Acting dumbfounded, Moore asks her to explain, and she brings him to her rabbit cages, pointing out which are pets and which are meat in a jarringly blunt fashion. The jarring then continues. She seems concerned to communicate that she is as humane as she can be, but then admits that

the reason they're in separate cages is that they otherwise fight gruesomely—which she belabors at some length. In a sequence filmed a few months later, Moore interviews her as she holds and pets a rabbit, explaining that she's been cited for unsanitary conditions but can't afford what it takes to comply. Shortly thereafter, Moore shows her clubbing and skinning that rabbit.

There are no expert testimonials framing these interviews, and no music or audio besides diegetic background noise and the sounds of the woman's dogs barking. Without these conventional guides for our rational or emotional reaction, viewers rely on Moore's responses to set the tone, and tend to take his perspective. Though many consider it unprofessional and coercive, Moore's participation in the film in fact adds to its validity. We relate to his wry and awkward reactions, such as when he leans toward the cages, smirking, or replies, "That's good," to the woman's assurance that she butchers the rabbits when they're young. We are dumbfounded along with him, and we take in the woman's predicament, but since Moore doesn't respond to the situation with either sympathy or umbrage, we aren't inclined to either. The effect of this is less coercion than a certain emotional freedom; while we generally will feel the same way Moore does, we consciously make the decision to adopt his perspective, for we know precisely that it is his perspective. Seeing him so much on screen encourages us to trust his view of the situation, but this is still our choice. Then, if his behavior makes us uncomfortable, we can distance ourselves from it while still letting him turn our critical eye toward the film's target, General Motors, holding their unexpected abandonment of Flint responsible for the confusion and desperation that could lead to such uncomfortable absurdities.

American Factory is a less negative film—telling the story of a former GM factory's re-opening instead of its closing—but there is much more manipulation in how it guides the audience's experience. This assertion admittedly seems to contradict the filmmakers' own stated aims. Responding to an interview question about *American Factory*'s relationship to *Roger & Me*, Julia Reichert distances their approach from Moore's, saying, "I love Michael Moore. He kind of busted open the documentary form. He was like the punk-rock kid who crashed the party and brought humor into what we do, and I really admire him. But that's just not our kind of work" (Rottenberg). Summarizing their differences, Reichert explains, "Every film you make gives you different challenges and different gifts. This had the cultural challenge, big time. But the gift was access and the trust we were able to build, and I think once you get that kind of gift you don't do a muckraking film. You honor the gift by listening

to everybody and being fair to everybody." In the same interview, Steven Bognar doubles down on this aim of neutrality, saying "We wanted to make a film that was depolarizing, that had nuance and complexity. … So we were hoping the film can resonate as a way to say: You know what? It's actually better if we talk to each other and don't just retreat to our corners and our slogans."

Reichert and Bognar's method for achieving this neutral multivocality is captured in an early three-minute segment that introduces the stories of three different people. The first claims a positive relationship to the new plant, talking about the salvation that being hired represented for him, while the other two cite their almost-halved pay compared to what they'd made in the former GM plant, detailing how the job is no longer enough to get by on their own. In this way, we are shown both sides of the equation—people who like new plant owner Fuyao and people who don't; people who see the job as a blessing to be grateful for, and people who still compare it to GM and think that it's not good enough. But as these three people speak in voice-over, the camera does a lot of work. In more observational documentary style, the subjects are shown from different angles, rarely making eye contact with the camera. We watch them in their "natural" environments, kissing their families goodbye for the day, cleaning glass, taking a smoke break, or decorating their spaces. This is a conventional way to communicate a sense of objectivity, but at the same time, subtle, melancholy music plays in the background, urging viewers to sympathize with their misfortunes. The music and cinematography make for a very serious tone, leaving room for few emotions outside of gratitude, empathy, and anger, and none can be sustained as the perspectives shift. Because the filmmakers never appear, we don't even know if they are from the Chinese side or the American—which doesn't mean they don't have a "side." Further, with their individual stories presented as a collection of perspectives, the subjects' experiences blend into a generally unactionable message: that despite the hardships that come with cultural conflict, and despite the company's downfalls and issues with safety and pay, thousands of workers were saved by China's decision to open a factory in the U.S. That conflict is only natural and can be worked through. The audience can settle for this answer because we think we are seeing the whole picture. It is very easy to overlook the camerawork and editing that shapes this story into its intentionally "depolarizing" message.

Roger & Me's merciless satire caused a lot of controversy upon its release. Viewers who sided with General Motors considered Moore's approach too ruthless, and they found the satire dishonest.

The backlash was so severe that, despite its success, the documentary was not nominated for the Academy Awards in 1990, as many felt the film blurred the fine line between journalism and entertainment. Even now, the mostly objective Wikipedia page on the film alludes to numerous critiques of Moore's methods, like out-of-context soundbites, the fake credentials he used to get access, and the anachronistic editing that helps deepen the impact of juxtapositions. But in critic Roger Ebert's view, pure factuality was never Moore's point: "He was taking the liberties that satirists and ironists have taken with material for generations, and he was making his point with sarcasm and deft timing." In "'The Performative Surprise': Parody, Documentary and Critique," author Kate Kenny analyzes whether parody and satire can help audiences re-imagine the institutions we work and live with. "Laughter enables us to 'relax' around power" by "tak[ing] away the 'fear and piety' we may have held in relation to a particular discourse; it makes an object familiar and, therefore, available for investigation" (224). Some filmmakers instead help their viewers "relax around power" by removing the need to think entirely. Unlike *Roger & Me*, *American Factory* leaves little room for audiences to form their own opinions, maintaining tight control over their reactions to what they are seeing. The audience isn't allowed to laugh, and in a similar fashion isn't allowed to criticize the film's message. Kenny states that "the privilege of critique comes from the compelling nature of laughter, from what is allowable through the medium of a good joke" (225). The critique that comes through laughter, however, is unpredictable and hard to control. There is no guarantee the audience will come out of it feeling the same way you do, and a filmmaker must be okay with that. Some are simply less willing to risk this. There is a fair amount of manipulation involved in making documentaries, humorous or otherwise; however, giving the audience the space to think is less dishonest than taking full control. ❦

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