Taking aim

by John Petrakis in the November 6, 2002 issue

While driving home after viewing *Bowling for Columbine,* I tuned into a radio discussion about the Washington, D.C., sniper. The exchange centered on whether the sniper was a "serial" or "spree" killer." Only in America, I thought, does the public knowledgeably categorize mass-murderers.

Bowling for Columbine is ostensibly about the huge amount of guns, gun owners and gun violence in the U.S., but it doesn't take long to realize that Michael Moore (whose 1989 film *Roger and Me* remains the highest-grossing documentary of all time) has set his sights higher. The film is less about guns than about the culture of paranoia and fear that makes Americans believe they need bigger and more powerful guns for greater and greater protection.

Moore's contention is backed up by figures. Japan watches just as much violence on TV as we do. England and Germany both have a bloody history of violent conquest. And even peace-loving (but hunting-crazy) Canada has more guns per capita than we do. So why is the annual murder rate in the U.S. larger than in all those countries combined? That is the question that hovers over the film.

As usual, the rotund Moore, who wears his trademark sad-sack outfit of baseball cap, baggy jeans and sneakers, juggles humor and drama to argue his case. More to the point, he mixes serious attempts at explanation and analysis with the occasional cornering of an unsuspecting interview victim. To his credit, he doesn't take cheap shots at rifle-toting yahoos, or trawl the backwoods for toothless gun nuts.

Some of his more serious questions revolve around the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, where 13 teachers and students were murdered by two disturbed classmates. Moore also focuses on a shooting in his hometown of Flint, Michigan, where a six-year-old black boy killed a six-year-old white girl with his uncle's handgun. The analysis of this second tragedy shows Moore at his investigative best. Instead of ranting about "violent children" or "inherent racism," he digs for the root of the problem. The boy's mother was a participant in a "welfare-to-work" program and was forced to take an 80-mile bus ride daily for a pair of

minimum-wage jobs. She still couldn't afford her rent, so her son needed to spend a lot of time at his uncle's house. It was there that the boy found the gun that he took to school.

The criticism of Moore over the years is that he is an artistic stalker, a search-and-destroy interviewer who makes his subjects look foolish, either by what they say or how they say it. This film has such moments, as when Moore confronts a pool-playing high school student who likes to make his own napalm, or talks to James Nichols (brother of Terry and an original suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing), who sleeps with a loaded .44 magnum under his pillow.

But for the most part the people he questions do seem part of the larger problem of gun violence: employees of a Michigan bank which gives away a free hunting rifle when you open an account; a barber who sells ammunition out of his barber shop; and the public relations people at Kmart who must deal with Moore when he goes to corporate headquarters to get a refund on some bullets, bullets that are still inside the two Columbine survivors who accompany him. (By the end of the film, Kmart agrees to stop selling bullets at their stores.) The viewer comes to feel that Moore's smugness and nastiness hardly compare with the moral corruption of the people and companies that feed the flow of guns.

Bowling for Columbine cements Moore's role as a gadfly and satirist. Unlike various potshot artists, he understands the connection between the big picture and the small one. He finds it interesting, for instance, that on the day of the Columbine shooting, the U.S. dropped more bombs on Kosovo than on any other day during the conflict. And he takes pains to make a connection between Columbine and the Lockheed-Martin plant which continues to turn out weapons of mass destruction not far from the high school.

He also takes on the two issues he feels are at the heart of the problem--fear and racism--through a hugely clever cartoon that starts with the pilgrims coming to this country and ends with the invention of the six-shooter in 1836.

Moore's arguments aren't all rock solid, and his approach can be a bit scattershot. His grilling of doddering Charlton Heston toward the end of the film at first seems unnecessarily cruel. But when we see clips of Heston onstage just days after the shootings in Littleton and Flint, holding a musket over his head as he mouths his signature phrase ". . . from my cold dead hands," we accept Moore's point: you can't worry about the feelings of an aging, conservative millionaire when innocent

children are being picked off on a daily basis.