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CAPITALISM: A LOVE STORY

Watching the early scenes of *Capitalism: A Love Story*, I found myself thinking, none too happily, that the bloom was finally off the rose, and that my fondness for Michael Moore documentaries had, at last, reached its end.

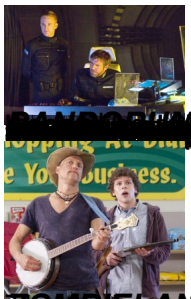
As most of you are no doubt aware, the movie is Moore's latest assault on the evils of big business - with particular attention paid to the hows and whys behind last year's economic meltdown - and its introductory reel will likely annoy the hell out of the filmmaker's detractors. I say this because, as a major fan of Moore, it annoyed the hell out of *me*. *Capitalism* opens with scenes of families in Illinois, Michigan, and North Carolina being evicted from their homes, and while the footage is moving, Moore's employment of it is also rather infuriating, because the director gives us no context regarding the families' plights - no understanding of *why* these people are being forced out. (More than an hour into the film, Moore finally does give us backstory on the Illinois family's financial troubles; the Michigan and North Carolina families aren't referred to again.)

With Moore implying that these families are being ousted for no good reason - although, in actuality, he's just not *providing* the reason - *Capitalism*'s opening scenes are a manipulative and all-too-easy means of getting the audience pissed off at "the banks" right off the bat. And

this familiar tactic quickly leads to equally familiar examples of Michael Moore *in extremis*: a jokey film montage comparing America to the Roman Empire (and Dick Cheney to Nero); an interview with an "expert" (Wallace Shawn!) who offers vague "capitalism is bad" platitudes; an intensely self-serving comment in which, discussing the current financial crisis, the director states, "For 20 years, I've tried to warn people this day was coming, but to no avail." (As he's clearly carrying the weight of the world, it's no wonder Moore's shoulders are so slumped.) The Moore haters will detest all of this, of course, but by now, the filmmaker's *faux* naïveté and grandiosity and passion for cheap, lowbrow jokes have become dispiriting for some of the rest of us, too.

The shock of the movie, though, is that it still works, and frequently works quite well. Despite his egocentrism and attention-grabbing pranks, Moore is also a fantastically engaged and empathetic interviewer - he seems to truly want to *understand* the people he's talking with - and he lets his subjects speak at length and without editorializing; he's wise enough to realize that *Capitalism* isn't his story; it's their story, and it's *our* story. For every bit that makes you want to cower here, there are two or three that are remarkable: Moore's conversation with a man whose wife's death netted her company a small fortune in "dead peasant insurance"; his detailing of events leading to last fall's government bailout; his inclusion of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's address to the nation, arguing for the necessity of a "second Bill of Rights."

Both Moore's interviews and his found footage here bring the insidiousness of capitalism to light in ways that feel fresh and vital, and while the movie is mostly a mess, it's most definitely *alive*; it pulsates with anger and indignation and passion, and against all expectation, it's even hugely optimistic. (And, for many viewers, inspiring - the audience at my screening applauded at the end.) You can bemoan Michael Moore's methods in *Capitalism: A Love Story*, but it would be hard to argue that they're not effective. And while he may, as usual, be preaching to the choir, it's again for good reason - that's the only way you get them to sing.



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