

INFLUENCE | FILM CLUB

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Bowling for Columbine Discussion Guide

Director: Michael Moore

Year: 2002

Time: 120 min

You might know this director from:

Where to Invade Next (2015)

Capitalism: A Love Story (2009)

Slacker Uprising (2007)

Sicko (2007)

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004)

The Big One (1997)

Roger & Me (1989)

FILM SUMMARY

Guns are a fixed feature of American culture. Like cheeseburgers, Hollywood, James Dean, and the Star-Spangled Banner, the concept of what makes the U.S.A. the infamous country it is can be traced back to guns. But when Americans begin wielding these lethal weapons against one another and the media perpetuates an overriding sensation of fear and insecurity, people begin to ask: what's happening to us?

When the lives of 12 students and one teacher were taken by two students on April 20, 1999, in the Columbine High School massacre, everyone listened up. Children, the supposedly innocent of the world, were suddenly wielding immense power. The U.S. was in a state of shock, fear reigned, and gun sales increased. Michael Moore made BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE, his attempt at understanding what was going on in his homeland.

The obvious culprits present themselves time and again. Poverty, racial inequality, a history of violence, aggression on the television, a propensity for war, an obsession with the right to own a weapon offer themselves as the reasons why such an atrocity could take place. Moore travels across the continental United States, asking the average American about their relationship with guns. Then he crosses the Canadian border, to explore the relationship this northern neighbor has to with guns without the corresponding violence.

Uncovering the facts in his characteristically tongue-in-cheek manner, Moore rifles through the multiple issues, unearthing the ugly, contending with the controversial, and leaving with us with an emotionally touching and intellectually turbulent film. Now years after its release, BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE is unfortunately as relevant as ever. Rather than representing a turning tide toward the positive light, Moore's take on the American gun issue serves as a wildly pertinent forecast of the mass shootings which continue to rock the United States today.

FILM THEMES

In his controversial manner, Michael Moore travels across North America in search of an answer to reveal just why “We are the only country that kills one another on this level.” The search continues.

AN UNDENIABLE AMERICAN RIGHT

Written into the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the right to bear arms is viewed by many Americans to be a God-given right, and to limit that right would be to limit the very foundations on which the land of the free and home of the brave was built. In the words of a member of the Michigan Militia, “This is an American tradition. It’s an American responsibility to be armed. If you’re not armed, you’re not responsible. Who is going to defend your kids?” That logic may sound backwards to some, yet it is the rationale upon which a great deal of Americans rely.

GUN CONTROL? WHAT CONTROL?

With apparent ease, most Americans can acquire a weapon. Of course there are background checks and waiting times, but your average citizen – whether or not in possession of the essential skills required to handle a gun safely and properly – can become the proud owner of everything from a simple handgun to a semi-automatic weapon. When the issue of gun control is raised on the political spectrum, it immediately erupts into a heated debate. Americans fear government control in their lives as much as they fear mass shootings, and many fight tooth and nail to maintain their indisputable right to freely possess firearms.

FEAR AS THE FUEL

As a means of communicating the state of society to its people, the mainstream media possesses a supreme power. In the U.S., the media has a reputation of encouraging the sensation of fear, the concept of the lurking bad guy waiting to catapult him or herself upon the weak and vulnerable at any given time. The public consuming that fear becomes one desperate to defend themselves. But of what is the public afraid of? Is the fear justified? Attorney Arthur Busch puts it like this: “The American people are conditioned by network TV, by local news, to believe that their communities are much more dangerous than they actually are.” That perception – rather than reality – keeps gun violence alive on a colossal scale.

“WHAT IS IT ABOUT US THAT IS SO RADICALLY DIFFERENT?”

Michael Moore sets out to answer the question: Why is the U.S. the only country where citizens kill each other on such a staggering scale? People cite a variety of motivating factors, including poverty, racial inequality, an American history of violence, and a population of armed individuals. But nothing seems to provide an indisputable answer. Other nations allow its citizens to own guns. Other societies are poor and driven to violence. Moore digs and digs, striving for an answer, something essential to encouraging a solution, and comes out the other end more baffled than when he started. Over a decade since the release of film, the reasons why still allude us and mass shootings are more prevalent than ever before.

“It’s almost like guerrilla warfare. You don’t know from which direction the enemy will be coming.”

Joe Farmer, school superintendent

“Anger does well. Hate does well. Violence does well. Tolerance and understanding and trying to learn to be a little different than you were last year does less well.”

Dick Herlan, television producer

FILM FACTS:

- When **BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE** was released in 2002, it took the documentary film world by storm, swooping up an incredible number of awards, including an Oscar for Best Documentary (2003), a Writers Guild of America Award for Best Original Screenplay, and international awards at the São Paulo International Film Festival, Sudbury Cinéfest, San Sebastián International Film Festival, London Critics Circle Film Awards, Kinema Junpo Awards, and César Awards. Following the film's screening at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival - marking the first time in 46 years that a documentary had appeared in the festival's main competition - the audience gave a 13-minute standing ovation.
- Michael Moore's 2003 Oscar Award acceptance speech garnered both applause and boos from the audience, as he took the opportunity on stage to criticize the U.S. invasion of Iraq - which had started a few days earlier - and President George W. Bush's administration in general.
- **BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE** set ticket sale records for the highest-grossing documentary of all time until Moore's next film, 2004's "Fahrenheit 9/11," which as of 2015 holds the highest documentary box-office record.
- Moore acquired a lifetime membership to the NRA with the hopes of eventually being elected president of the organization in order set about dismantling it.
- When it comes to gun-related homicides, the U.S. continues to lead the pack in advanced countries, with 29.7 homicides with firearm per 1 million people in 2012 alone. During the same year, Switzerland had 7.7, Canada 5.1, Sweden 4.1, and Australia 1.4.
- The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, passed in 1791, is a part of the first 10 amendments in the Bill of Rights. The exact wording of the Second Amendment states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."
- The United States holds the record for the highest gun ownership in the world, with 88 out of 100 Americans owning a gun. Yemen, the number two country in the world, lags behind at 55 guns per 100 people.
- Police officers in most countries are armed at all times. In Norway, Britain, Ireland, Iceland, and New Zealand, however, regular patrolling police do not carry a gun, and are only armed in special circumstances. Furthermore, most Irish police officers are not trained in the use of firearms.
- According to GunPolicy.org, an international research committee, there were 875 million firearms in the world as of 2007, with 75% of those in the hands of civilians. Every year, 8 million new small arms and 15 billion rounds of ammunition are manufactured.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV) has been working to stop U.S. gun violence since 1974. Join their community of like-minded individuals: <http://csgv.org/take-action/>
2. The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, a non-profit organization founded by attorneys, sets out to limit gun violence and protect citizens. Learn more about their invaluable work: <http://smartgunlaws.org/join/>
3. Dive deeper into the world of director Michael Moore, a documentarian and activist who continues to push the envelope. For example, join his #walkwithmike campaign: www.michaelmoore.com/walk-with-mike
4. If you own or are considering buying a gun, learn about responsible gun ownership and take the pledge to be a responsible gun owner at <http://www.responsibleownership.org/>

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.