

## I Love My Mother

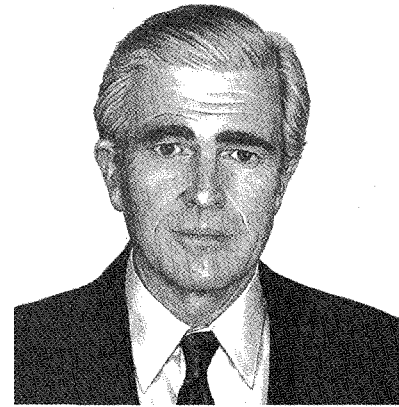
Michael Moore calls his films documentaries, but they're really sockumentaries. He is cinema's heavyweight master of the sucker punch. Behind his slovenly, shambling flabbiness, he packs a vicious left hook. That's politically left, of course. Now, some suckers deserve to be pounded by sneaky lefts. That's the case in Moore's latest match, *Sicko*. Fighting on behalf of socialized medicine, Moore wallops America's haphazard, systemless healthcare, bloodying his hapless free-market foe again and again. It's a mismatch: His careless opponent hasn't bothered to develop his skills and clearly needs a lesson in ringmanship. So you cheer for Moore until the late rounds, when he begins to showboat unforgivably.

Moore's performance—and there's no other word for it—is a nearly two-hour series of deft feints. Wearing his baseball cap, nondescript windbreaker, and filthy jeans, he plays the working-class stiff who has somehow got hold of a mike, a camera crew, and the money to travel from Michigan around the world. As he globe-trots, he keeps bumping into people who open his eyes to the horrors and wonders of healthcare. Not surprisingly, the horrors are all in America; the wonders, all in London, Paris, and, most especially, Havana.

In America, he treats us to the spectacle of folks—almost all of them middle-class—who have been financially and physically ruined by America's patchwork healthcare system. There's the uninsured carpenter who sliced off two of his fingertips. The price for reattachment? The middle finger, \$60,000; the ring, \$12,000. He opts for the cheaper and more romantic tip. The other, Moore tells us, landed in a nearby landfill, which we glimpse as his camera cuts to a couple of rats scavenging along the edges of a mountain of garbage. (They don't find the fingertip, fortunately.) Then we meet an aging couple forced to sell their house and move into their sullen daughter's home after the husband suffers a heart attack and the wife develops cancer. They have been bankrupted by the unrelenting costs for medical services and drugs not covered by their insurance plan. Elsewhere, a woman

tells Moore that her insurance company refused to pay for the ambulance that took her on an unscheduled emergency run to the hospital. Her carrier informs her she needed pre-approval for her late-night transport. When, she wonders, was she supposed to get this pre-approval—*en route*? An 18-month-old girl dies shortly after she's taken from Martin Luther King, Jr.-Harbor Hospital in Los Angeles. The doctors on duty refused to treat her. Her mother's health plan with Kaiser Permanente required the child be treated at a Kaiser hospital. So, after spending two hours at MLK, the girl wasn't diagnosed and didn't get the antibiotics necessary to keep her alive. Testifying before Congress, a physician confesses that she feels responsible for killing at least one patient and harming countless more. She had been a handsomely paid claim reviewer for Blue Shield, which granted her bonuses for denying claims above her stipulated quota. Another doctor took to using a stamp to affix his "signature" to his profitable denials. When Moore confronts him with a few of his stamped forms, he mumbles that he doesn't remember "signing" them. Next, Moore gives us a receding credit crawl of pre-existing conditions accompanied by the *Star Wars* theme. Each condition rules out health-insurance coverage. And, indeed, the calculation behind this kind of corporate preemptive cost cutting is worthy of Darth Vader. A boy is excluded because he is too tall and too thin; a girl because she is too short and too heavy. Moore interviews a woman who had her claim check recalled when her carrier discovered she neglected to report she'd once had a yeast infection. Although Moore neglects to point it out, this is especially galling since it is well known that such infections are usually the side effect of taking a course of doctor-prescribed antibiotics.

Certainly, if these episodes took place as presented, they are unforgivable abuses and cry out for further investigation. But Moore is too intent on landing his next punch to bother himself with checking facts. The denials, for instance. Were these care providers incompetent, stupid, or callous? At what point does an insur-



### *Sicko*

Produced by The Weinstein Company  
Directed and written by Michael Moore

er's legitimate need to guard against unnecessary treatments and outright fraud shade into corporate greed? How many of these patients were foolishly submissive to the professionals? Certainly, refusing to diagnose an ailing infant suggests extraordinary thoughtlessness on the part of the doctors at MLK. Or did they fear they'd be sued for providing unauthorized treatment? There is, however, the mother's apparent passivity to consider. She waited for two hours to be taken to the Kaiser hospital to obtain treatment for her daughter. If we are going to lay blame, we need to know the full context to apportion it sensibly.

As in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore expresses concern for the victims he interviews, but it's clear that he is parading them on screen primarily to further his campaign. He wants the same kind of unfettered healthcare provided in England, France, and Canada—where it's free, he keeps telling us. He must be kidding. Has he seen the tax bills in those nations? I am not against a single-payer national healthcare plan in principle. It might be possible to devise such a system without making an exorbitantly expensive mess of things, and it could have the virtue of simplifying the nightmarish tangle of forms and bureaucracies that now attend even the simplest visit to the doctor. But it wouldn't be free. Notably, Nicolas Sarkozy, France's recently elected president, won in part because he promised to revamp his country's healthcare system, lest it render the entire nation insolvent. Rumbblings of the same sort are being heard in England and Canada.

Anticipating objections to socialized

medicine, Moore reminds us that socialism is already flourishing within our borders. Consider our state-run institutions, he urges—our public schools and our post offices, both examples of socialism in action. Wait a minute. How many of us are happy with what our tax money buys in the way of education and mail delivery? Do we really want medical care provided with all the dedication on display at a typical post-office window? Interestingly, Moore doesn't mention that other socialistic marvel, our motor-vehicle bureaucracy. Governmental employees are notoriously careless about efficiency and costs, a fact Moore witlessly demonstrates with the story of a young Frenchman who had been living in America for years without health coverage. When he became ill with treatable cancer, he quickly returned to France, where he knew his therapy would be covered. All he had to do was get a job for a few weeks, and the state would see to his care. After several months of treatment, he recovers. About to leave the hospital, he's asked if he is ready to return to work or if he feels he needs more time to regain his emotional stability. Oh, but *certainement*, more time, *s'il vous plaît*. For such candor, he is awarded a three-month paid holiday. We last see him water-sporting and night-clubbing with an assortment of beautiful young women in Montpellier. Moore evidently thinks this happy spectacle will sell Americans on socialized medicine. And so it might to the Girls Gone Wild crowd. Others may wonder about the long-term consequences of such careless largesse.

Then Moore really stumbles. He rounds up three September 11 rescue workers who are suffering from respiratory and other ailments. Each has been refused medical coverage for reasons that are left obscure. Moore takes them on a boat to the "one place on American soil that offers free universal health care": Guantanamo Bay. There, members of Al Qaeda and other captured terrorists have, according to the Bush administration, been getting the best of medical attention. When he reaches the base's harbor, he takes out a bullhorn and requests entrance. A response comes when two combat helicopters fly over Moore's boat to investigate. Beating a retreat, Moore takes his charges to Havana. On the spur of the moment—wink, wink—he decides to check in to the city's major hospital. Wouldn't you know, the ailing Americans are greeted warmly and given in-

stant medical attention. And, guess what? They leave a few days later: one, entirely cured; the other two, well on their way to restored health. There's no end to the wonders of dialectical materialism.

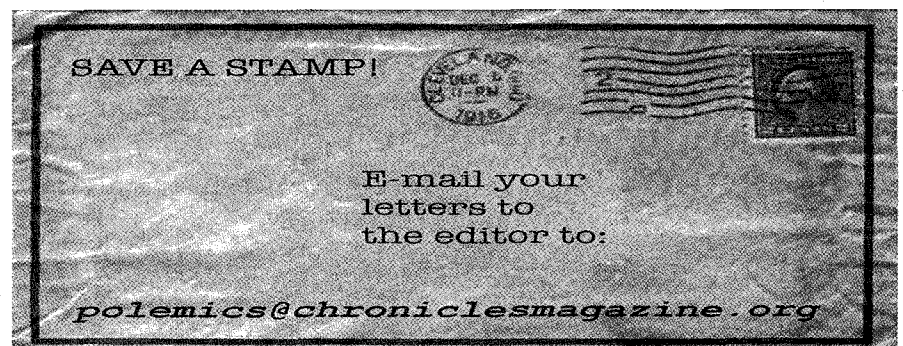
Is this irresponsible propaganda? Unquestionably. Nevertheless, I want to commend Moore. Despite his outrageous tactics and screwy politics, he has done us a service with this film as he did with the equally irresponsible *Fahrenheit 9/11*. His stunts may be juvenile, but they call our attention to real abuses and negligence in our healthcare arrangements—abuses that could be remedied, were our public servants really committed to serving our interests.

When it comes to showing up venal and cowardly politicians, few do it as colorfully as Moore. Here, he uses a shot of our senators standing in their Capitol chamber. Above each head, he flashes the amount of money they have taken from the HMO and pharmaceutical industries. Hillary Clinton leads the pack. She has been showered with nearly a million disinterested dollars by civic-minded corporate leaders. (And you were wondering why she so rarely talks about nationalizing healthcare these days.) But there's more. In a sequence that could have come from a Preston Sturges satire, we watch The Hon. Billy Tauzin (R-LA) addressing his fellow representatives in 2005. He is demanding they pass the Medicare Part II prescription-drug bill. We see Tauzin smarmily entreating his fellow public servants to do the right thing. He is supporting this plan, he assures them, for one reason only. "I love my mother," he calls out in a quavering voice. He cannot bear the prospect of her not having enough money to buy the drugs she needs in her old age. Then, in a montage of other venues, he soulfully repeats himself on behalf of this legislation: "I love my mother," he pleads again and again. Such hypocrisy would be laughable but for this troubling fact: The Medicare Part II prescription law was written not by our public servants but by

the pharmaceutical industry, and it bars the government from negotiating for lower drug costs and seeks to prohibit access to lower-priced drugs from Canada. Already, it is obscenely enriching the pharmaceutical companies at the expense, physical and fiscal, of the American taxpayers. Some analysts say it could bankrupt Medicare altogether. And, another fact: While Tauzin was campaigning for this law, he let it be known he would be resigning from Congress soon and was looking for other employment. Two months after the bill was passed, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, the lobbying arm of the industry, graciously appointed him as its CEO, at an estimated annual salary of between one and two-and-a-half million dollars. The devoted Tauzin no longer has to worry. Should Medicare go bust, he can now afford to pay for Mom's drugs all on his own.

Oddly, Moore has left out another interesting fact about our public servants. The men and women who fight so hard to guarantee our health, who guard us so bravely against the threat of socialized medicine, are themselves, along with their families, life-long beneficiaries of the Federal Employees Health Benefits Plan. Paying 25 to 28 percent of the plan's premium rate, they are entitled to choose from among dozens of private insurers and are free to change plans once per year. Furthermore, they cannot be denied coverage for any preexisting health condition whatsoever, nor can their medical status be grounds for charging them a dime more than anyone else for the same policy. Not quite a socialist's dream, but, nevertheless, pretty sweet, all in all. This tidbit would have given Moore's argument for socialized medicine considerably more luster. In fact, it is almost enough to make you turn red, except for this thought: A national health plan devised by Congress would almost certainly be run by the likes of Billy Tauzin.

Pass the Zolof. It's free, isn't it? ◊





by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## Héctor Agonistes

For more than a week after his encounter with Jacinta Ruiz, Héctor avoided the Pink Store, finding an excuse to drive Jesús “Eddie” to Geronimo’s Bar & Grill in Deming—which Jesús much preferred anyway—instead. All this time, the Centaur’s statue stood on the top shelf of his computer hutch, where he had to make the effort to raise his eyes in order to behold the thing. Handsome as it was, the statue gave him no pleasure but only a sense of distress, arising from moral confusion. In truth, Héctor found he could no longer admire it without suspecting that he really was a bit of a traitor.

He was an American, after all—not yet a citizen, granted, but citizenship would surely follow in time, once the late unpleasantness arising from his failed political candidacy was resolved. Whereas the Ruiz woman, a *bona fide* Mexicana for whom Pancho Villa had fought and died, reprobated Villa and all he stood for because he’d been a relentless enemy of the gringos, certain of whom her great-grandparents had befriended. Héctor himself had few American friends besides Bro. Billie Joe and Jesús “Eddie,” and he wasn’t sure Jesús “Eddie” counted as an American. Never before had it occurred to him that his pride in being a descendant (though a collateral one) of the Centaur might be at odds with his fervent commitment to his adoptive land, including a 100-percent adherence to the American Creed. Now Jacinta Ruiz had exposed the contradiction for him, and Héctor was discovering to his immense chagrin that it was not a matter he could conscientiously ignore. Nor, unhappily, was it one he felt comfortable discussing with AveMaría, who disliked Villa as a notorious polygamist and philanderer, and resented both the society dues her husband sent annually to Namiquipa and the time he spent away from home every summer “partying,” as she expressed it, with the Hijos.

It was a good ten days before it occurred to Héctor that help was right under his nose—more precisely, just across the border, in the Pink Store itself. Despite her hatred of Pancho Villa, Jacinta Ruiz was certainly *sympática*—and obviously well disposed toward his name-sake, whose arm she was given to squeeze

ing affectionately each evening on his arrival at the store and again as he left the bar, following Jesús “Eddie” out to the van. Only, he wanted to talk with Jacinta alone, without his friend around. And when—Héctor wondered—would that ever happen? The possibility was unimaginable, short of Chihuahua becoming a dry state.

His chance, by some miracle, arrived soon enough, within a matter of a few days. Jesús “Eddie,” stir-crazy already from living off in the boondocks and hungry for the bright lights and dark dives of the Rio Abajo, was also concerned about the state of his several rental properties in Belen, ancient ‘dobes crumbling into weedy yards he’d inherited from an uncle and that he leased short-term to winos, vagabonds, and kids from the local community college. As hiding out on the border precluded working his job as a handyman around town, the income from these properties was Jesús “Eddie’s” nearly sole source of support during his sojourn at the ranch, supplemented only by Beatriz’s monthly disability check from Santa Fe in compensation for her late-developing color blindness that had forced her to quit her job as a beautician when she became incapable of distinguishing one tint of hair dye from another. Consequently, Jesús “Eddie” determined that he must return to Belen to make sure of his houses and collect the rent payments that had somehow failed to find their way to Rancho Juárez in his absence. Beatriz was going along to act as chauffeur, and both she and her husband planned on wearing disguises in order to escape recognition by the Muslim community in Belen. In spite of his eagerness to see them off, Héctor could not resist a desire to witness the Juárezes in whatever garb they might choose to get themselves up in for the trip north. AveMaría had no interest in whatever spectacle Beatriz and Jesús “Eddie” made when they went. She just wanted them to go.

After arguing the question back and forth, loudly, for days, the pair decided on assuming the identity of a military couple on leave from Fort Bliss, a role they reasoned should be sufficient to deter any bloody-minded would-be jihadist assass-



sin from a violent assault on their persons. (No one, Héctor had to agree, underestimates the U.S. military.) At an Army and Navy store in El Paso advertising itself as the place where the Minutemen shopped, they purchased fatigues, combat boots, and stiff-brimmed camouflage military caps, which they wore home in the car afterward in order to acquire a feel for their new clothes. Héctor’s instant reaction to the sight of the Juárezes in uniform standing outside on the turnaround was that the Immigration Office had come to arrest him at last, but the next moment he was laughing so uncontrollably he’d had to run to the outhouse and remain there a good five minutes to avoid offending his friends.

Jesús “Eddie” and Beatriz departed next morning for Belen, carrying with them an extensive shopping list made up by AveMaría, after an impassioned, tearful plea by Contracepción that she be allowed to go along to visit her friends upriver. When the Juárezes were gone at last and his daughter lay sulking face down across the bed, Héctor retired to the shaky linoleum-covered table in the parlor where he kept his laptop computer and put in an hour and a half on billing work, while AveMaría and Dubya went shopping in Deming. Distracted and restless, he worked without enthusiasm and knocked off finally around noon, when he wandered into the kitchen in search of lunch. Héctor was wholly unaccustomed, after eighteen years of married life, to preparing his own meals. Now, in his wife’s absence, he took four slices of bologna from the ancient icebox, placed them between two slices of white bread he found in the rusty breadbox decorated with fading hand-painted flowers, and made himself a sandwich. He wrapped the sandwich in wax paper and buttoned it into the pocket of his woolen shirt. Last-