M and M’s for Everyone: Michael Moore and Identity in Utah Valley

Abstract:
This paper places Michael Moore’s extraordinarily successful documentary, Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) in the context of both contemporary U.S. documentaries and the popular mood post-9/11, examining how the notion of an American identity is being contested. I suggest places in Moore’s film which support and those that undermine a more progressive and productive sense of America. Moore’s work foregrounds his own identity and the second part of the paper examines how Steven Greenstreet’s This Divided State (2005) presents the controversy surrounding Moore’s visit to the conservative heartland of Orem, Utah. Although Greenstreet’s title refers most obviously to Utah, the film evidently uses the state to reference battles over identity at a national level. It shows how various artifacts and elements of an American identity are used by individuals to construct their own relationships to the state and nation. Using somewhat different strategies from Moore’s, This Divided State challenges its audience to question traditional conceptions of identity.

M y M para todos: Michael Moore y la Identidad del Valle de UTA

Este papel propone el documentario extraordinario de Michael Moore, Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) entre documentarios contemporáneos de EEUU y el modo popular después de “9/11”, examinando la idea de identificación Americana esta disputada. He sugerido partes en la película de Moore que soportan y otras que disminuyan un sentido más progresivo y productivo de América. La producción de Moore presenta su identidad y la segunda parte del papel examina como Steven Greenstreet presenta la controversia hacia la visita de Moore en el centro conservativo de Orem, Utah, por su producción This Divided State (2005). Aunque el título de Greenstreet claramente se refiere a Utah, es evidente que la película se refiere a batallas sobre identidad en un nivel nacional. Muestra como varios individuales usan artefactos y elementos de la identidad Americana para construir su propia relación del estado y la nación. Usando estrategias un poco diferentes de las de Moore, This Divided State pide preguntar la concepción de identidad tradicional de su audiencia.
While it is true that the term America—in its guise as the United States—is commonly and inevitably a contested term, there are times at which the stakes are higher than others. The events of September 11, 2001 have certainly provoked such a period. Contestation of the image of America, of how the nation can be re-imagined, has been fierce. This is true certainly of sites, whether literal or intellectual/imagined, that are very directly tied to the events of that day, but also to those which might seem more remote. Thus, the control of what kind of ideas and images of America may be available at the memorial-site of the erstwhile Twin Towers has provoked one organization (the Drawing Center) to pull out of its planned home, and another (the International Freedom Center) having already severely circumscribed its proposed activities in the face of opposition to anything which might be perceived as in any way critical of U.S. policy, to be evicted.¹ Meanwhile, in the school history textbook market, debate has been joined about the appropriateness or otherwise of including in descriptions of 9/11, material on the ways in which American policy might have influenced the attack—is there room for debate and analysis, or is any such thing now anti-American?² The re-emergent anti-intellectual trend in the defining of the American nation can be discerned too in areas less directly related to 9/11: in the desire to recall moments in American history as so intimately a part of the meaning of the country as to be immune from critical analysis. In a recent issue of The Nation, under the by-line, “Patriotic Bore,” Daniel Lazare, reviewing several new books on the founding of the American nation, concludes that “[L]iberal historians have succumbed to the country’s celebratory mood, praising an American Revolution that never was” (Lazare 31). His argument is that while they might cite somewhat different evidence for their claims, liberal historians are as prone as their more conservative peers to write history that privileges the celebration of America as a great country, and consequently ignores the complexity, the messiness of history: for example the fact that the indigenous population—not to mention the slaves—commonly supported the British as a defense against land-hungry, and sometimes blood-thirsty, settlers. Of course this celebration of nation is part-and-parcel of any country’s self-definition, an element in the cultural and political negotiation of what a nation stands for. Filmmaker, Michael Moore has been a part of this debate for some time and has previously re-envisaged the U.S. as The Big One: a name more reflective, he argues in his 1997 film of that title, of the role and disposition of the country in the world than is the bland description, ‘United States.’

My purpose in this essay is to discuss how notions of identity—and also, inevitably nation—were brought up by Michael Moore’s visit to Utah Valley State College just before the 2004 Presidential election as portrayed—or reimagined—in Steven Greenstreet’s film, This Divided State (2005). But first a few words about the state of American documentary with regard to its depiction of nation. The success of documentaries at the U.S. box office over the last few years, but especially in 2004, has pleased film critics and many have also noted the especial prominence of political

¹ See Dunlap for details of these events, and Mandell for insightful analysis of their implications.
² The clearest attempt to provide such an analysis of American policy in relation to 9/11 is Foner’s Give Me Liberty! See both “Teaching 9/11” articles by Wiener for further discussion of the issues at stake.
documentaries. The chief exhibit here is Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) which took in more money at the U.S. box-office than any previous documentary. Moore’s film is evidently a rallying-cry to those in the U.S.—and to a less clear extent those outside—for whom the Bush administration’s agenda is anathema, and one of its key rhetorical tropes, as so often in American political discourse, is to argue that this government is indeed un-American— that it has betrayed American values and positioned the country as standing for something which it has not and indeed does not—since the policies pursued are self-serving and destructive of the country’s political traditions and long-term interests. These last are to be distinguished from those of a wealthy corporate elite for whose benefit the war abroad is engaged and and civil liberties at home abrogated. For me, joining the line around the block and watching the film on opening night in Salt Lake City, as for others throughout the country unenamoured of the current administration, this was much less a documenting experience than an act of solidarity and comfort: an attempt to be, at least briefly, in the majority, joining with others to register opposition to Washington. Most of us were glad that Moore’s film was there to rally around even if some of us disagreed with some of his politics, or, at least, several of his rhetorical strategies.

Various reasons have been suggested for the prominence of the documentary in U.S. cinemas over the last couple of years. Certainly the status of the form has risen, leading to increased advertising budgets and improved distribution from companies such as New Yorker and Sony Picture Classics. From 1996-2002, an average of fifteen documentaries were opened on U.S. screens, but by last year that figure had reached fifty, with non-studio distributors taking the lead. *Fahrenheit* opened in an impressive 868 theaters with huge takings of $25,115 per theater average. In addition both critics’ and readers’ polls in film magazines over the last couple of years have started to feature more documentaries. It is harder, of course, to say why this is happening, how long the trend will last, and finally, how many of these films are, in a broad or narrow sense, part of a political debate that seeks to define America and its values. New technologies have helped, while to some extent the phenomenon may be tied to the rise of reality television and the demise of real news—embedded reporters and a lack of political analysis. The notion that the country has been divided by the debacle of the 2000 election and subsequent events, thus promoting the appearance of oppositional social activist agendas on the screen is certainly tenable—thus much of the best of American documentary since

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3 See Arthur, and, from the same special edition of *Cineaste*, “Political Documentary in America Today,” which includes the comments of 11 academics and media specialists on this phenomenon.
4 An easy place to access box-office analysis is at www.hollywood.com. More specifically see Bowen’s comments on *Fahrenheit 9/11*.
5 Jonathan Rosenbaum, probably the most academically-respected of U.S. newspaper critics, comments that 2004 “was such a strong year for documentaries, in overall quality and public reception, that I easily could come up with a top ten list devoted exclusively to them.” However, only *March of the Penguins*, apparently a non-political documentary, though claimed on the right as an argument for ‘family values,’ appears in the 2005 Film Comment readers’ poll.
September 11 has been rhetorically opposed to Bush’s assertion that “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists” (President’s Address). Rather than emphasizing an axis of evil—expanded after the event from Wahhabi-influenced Islamic fundamentalism, to include a diverse group of (selected) secular Arab dictators, shi’i theocracy and unreconstituted communists, with the whiff of renewed social agendas in Latin America not so far off—these documentaries, while often acknowledging the al-Qaeda threat, foreground division at home: corporations bilking their employees out of pension-funds (Enron, World Com, the airlines), and government lying and distorting to justify its ambition (Weapons of Mass destruction, Sadaam’s supposed links with al-Qaeda, the fabricated Niger uranium deal and Valerie Plame).

These films, like most documentaries, use a wide range of techniques and a variety of different materials in order to build their cases/tell their stories—ominous background music, witty animations and slow motion are prominent but the most immediately striking thing about many of them is their dependence on the personality of the filmmaker or narrator to entertain and sustain momentum. Moore’s films, like those of Judith Hefland and 2004 Sundance winner, The Corporation fit this model. It often leads to the depiction of a personal questing or testing as in, say, Supersize Me, in which Morgan Sperlock shows that, somewhat unsurprisingly perhaps, eating at MacDonald’s all the time is really bad for you.

For me the most effective political documents remain films such as Lourdes Portillo’s examination of the disappearances and murders of female employees of Juarez maquiladoras in Senorita Extraviada (2001), a film which works for many critical audiences partly because, while the revelation of ineptitudes and cover-ups is telling and unequivocal, not all pieces of the puzzle are there to be explained. Additionally, the exploitative actions of the multi-national owned plants, though remaining in the background, still tower over the film, locating the critique of one problem within the larger one of corporate deregulation and the combination of trade laws and poverty to disempower large numbers of people. Perhaps the most exciting political film I have seen from the U.S. in the last few years is Travis Wilkerson’s An Injury to One, a film balanced delicately between documentary and experimental poles, as it reveals the brutal silencing of union organizers and the abuse of Butte, Montana by the Anaconda copper mining company over many years. Labor songs in which the words appear on screen and music is played but no voices heard, potently illustrate the struggle of the miners, and the recordings of lengths, depths, costs and quantities, plus diary excerpts from Dashell Hammett in his Pinkerton days, advance the narrative in a formally-engaging and

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6 President Bush’s address to the Joint session of Congress and the American People on September 20, 2001 was widely reported in newspapers across the world. See Bumiller for the New York Times report.
7 Relevant films here include Robert Greenwald’s series Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election, Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War, Unconstitutional: The War on Our Civil Liberties, and Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism, as well as The Corporation, Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room, Why We Fight, and The Fog of War.
consciousness-building manner. Portillo and Wilkerson remain firmly absent from their films—this is not to say, of course, that their attitude to their material or ideological positions are hidden or denied—far from it—but their individual personalities are unimportant to the text. The first-person political documentaries of Moore and Hefland, following in the tradition of the less political work of Werner Herzog and Ross McElwee depend partly, as I have suggested, on the persona of the filmmaker: vibrant, outgoing, determined. While Hefland’s work has been narrowly focused, single-issue advocacy, Moore, especially since Fahrenheit 9/11, has become a lightning-rod for political dissent—and the reimagining of an America in which this matters. He is unmistakable: dressed down in jeans and a baseball cap, unshaven, overweight, seemingly without pretence, his roots in and allegiance to the working-class fundamental to his visual rhetoric. His fearless, unembarrassable pursuit of CEOs and members of Congress is thus enhanced by a choice of clothing that contrasts so sharply with theirs. Perhaps this is why the opening salvos of Fahrenheit 9/11 that show the Bush team being, wiped, smoothed and powdered in preparation for the cameras both works and yet proves disconcerting. Of course politicians are dolled-up for the camera. When Wolfowitz, in mock-impatience with his handlers, licks his comb, then pulls it through his hair, the audience gasps in horror or feels superior. But we must wonder: one, why this action is so different from all the other means of behind-the-scenes grooming?—and, two, while we should care a lot about much that Wolfowitz instigates, who gives a damn about his personal hygiene? It’s a cheap-shot, without political relevance: humor at the expense of substance.

I feel rather the same way about one of the film’s best-known jibes, the image of Bush, having been told of the attack on the Twin Towers while reading My Pet Goat with a class of young school-children, continuing to sit there for [up to] seven minutes. Although celebrated as a damning comment on the President’s incompetence by several reviewers, including B. Ruby Rich in Sight and Sound, one wonders just what he could or should have done at that moment. Now, Moore’s film, of course, makes many much more effective critiques of government policy, as when, for example, he follows military recruiters trying to snare poor, mostly non-white youth at a downscale shopping mall—or, more explicitly, as he targets the business-connections between the House of Bush and the House of Saud. Here Moore inserts a series of shots of Bush senior and junior, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Rice et cetera squeezing the hands of and metaphorically raising a glass to the Saudi royal rulers. The montage is accompanied by REM’s “Smiling, Happy People” and concludes, abruptly, with footage of a public beheading in Jeddah—it takes too swings of the sword. At one point, watching over the permanent U.S. guard outside the Saudi embassy in DC, Moore is approached by the police, and, in his usual manner, attempts to engage an officer in conversation: “Are they giving you any trouble, the Saudis?” he inquires. “No comment,” replies the cop. To which, Moore, “I’ll

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8 Ella Taylor makes a similar point in her thoughtful LA Weekly review, “Burning Bush.”
9 The actual length of time was probably somewhat less. It is measured as approximately 5 minutes in Alan Peterson’s right-wing critique of Moore’s film, Fahrenheit 9/11.
10 For example, Mark Cousins, also in Sight and Sound, Roger Ebert in the Chicago Sun-Times, Peter Bradshaw in The Guardian, Kenneth Turan in the Los Angeles Times, Ella Taylor in the LA Weekly, and Damon Wise in Empire online.
take that as a ‘Yes’.” It’s a wonderful comic moment in part because it flies in the face of impartial analysis: Moore knows what he is doing in going for this laugh, and he cuts the grounds out from underneath possible critique—we all know that objectivity is impossible, subjectivity inevitable. As Errol Morris points out: “Movies are movies [they are neither true nor false]” (Arthur 20). Still, if you are picking at power’s secrets and lies, the relation to truth seems to matter—after all the fate of nations is at stake.

Images of race have been especially important and contentious in defining many American nations and there are moments at which racial and national stereotyping in Fahrenheit 9/11 seem close to smugness—despite the desire to speak truth to power. Moore strays into somewhat racist imagery in his ‘kow-towing to the Saudis’ montage: the danger of fueling anti-Arab sentiment in the U.S. ignored. Derogatory, stereotypical images of other nations are deployed again, later in the film, in Moore’s pastiche of Bush’s ‘coalition of the willing’: Palau, and Costa Rica are proclaimed first—intoned in a portentously drawn-out manner, accompanied by images of garlanded dancers and a horse and cart respectively, mocking their military potential. Next up is Iceland (Vikings), Romania (vampires), Morocco (musicians, snakes, monkees), and the Netherlands (pot-smoking kids). In between, as Moore emphasizes how few troops this group brings to the operation, he inserts additional images of underdevelopment—most starkly a high angle of an (apparently African) woman working at a grinding stone beside a mud hut. This rhetoric of insignificance plays into another national stereotype and also a key issue to have surfaced since 9/11: American ignorance of the rest of the world. How much does it matter that so many Americans know so little about other countries and people? To certain officials in the government and the FBI, not a lot—carrying forward a policy or investigation is what counts, not understanding why people might feel and act as they do. We must assume that Moore would not agree, but his film’s visual rhetoric suggests otherwise, arguing against an informed foreign-policy and greater cultural sensitivity. (In terms of recent American political documentary, one fine place to look at this issue is in Petra Eperlein and Michael Tucker’s Gunner Palace where we see American troops making fun of the efforts of Iraqis to speak English, and one parading around with basketball-netting on his head in impersonation of an archetypal imam. Another place, more encouragingly perhaps, is Jahané Noujaim’s Control Room on al-Jazeera, in which U.S. marine, Lieutenant Josh Rushing, increasingly thoughtfully, does value the qualities of understanding and information, and struggles to fit them into his mission as PR man for the invasion of Iraq.)

11 For an analysis of how U.S. perceptions of Saudi Arabia have changed since 9/11, see Gresh.
12 John Simmons’s Associated Press report quotes Executive Assistant Director Gary Bald as saying “You need leadership. You don’t need subject matter expertise.” See also David Johnson’s report on the possible consequences of this thinking.
13 Rushing’s openness lead, once Control Room was released, to his being ordered not to give further interviews. He was transferred to the Marine Corps Motion Picture and Television office in Los Angeles and left the Marines in October 2004. In September 2005, he accepted an offer to become a journalist for the English language Al-Jazeera International.
I will return to some of the above issues as I discuss *This Divided State*—the state in question is Utah, but the term is deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, Utah is an exception—less divided, for example, than any other state in the union in its support for Bush over Kerry in 2004. Greenstreet’s film, however, shows that in fact, Utah is exemplary of issues at debate throughout the *nation*-state. Even in what one character in the film refers to as the most conservative city (Orem) in the most conservative county (Utah county) in the most conservative state (Utah) in the nation, there is a strong divide. This is not simply a party political debate or one for or against Bush and the war in Iraq; it is also one about the role of a college of higher education—an institution, indeed, planning to introduce graduate programs and hoping to become a full-fledged university. Should such a facility reflect the dominant values of the community in which it sits?—or is the overriding imperative that of intellectual inquiry and the free exchange of ideas? There is little question, I think, of director Greenstreet’s stance on whether Michael Moore should have been allowed to speak at the college—he should have been—nor that Greenstreet is more sympathetic to Moore’s message than to that of slick conservative Fox television talk-show host, Sean Hannity who ended up speaking at Utah Valley State College the week before Moore. Still, his film generally avoids the pitfalls of *Fahrenheit 9/11* as it plunges into the divide.

The main players are as follows. All-American students Jim Bassi and Joe Vogel, President and vice-President of the Student Union have invited Moore: the pair make a photogenic team of ex-missionaries, one tall and the other short, clean-cut and well-spoken. There are several interviews with Bassi; in the most featured he wears sports shorts and a sweat-shirt as he toys with the basketball that sits on his lap. In the opposite corner is Kay Anderson, a member of the community who emphasizes that Orem is, as indeed it proclaims on the sign as you enter the town—and the film—“Family city, U.S.A. Greenstreet follows this image with those of a crossing-guard, fireworks, the flag, mountains, billboards advertising missionary accessories, and the Freedom car-wash, and Mormons walking through leafy Fall streets to church. We see Bush/Cheney signs, dominant in a county where registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by twelve to one. But Greenstreet also slips in a shot of the closed Geneva Steel, a reminder that the ills of American industry have affected Utah County too. Such family-values must be preserved, Anderson believes, by protecting Orem from outside influences so that it may remain a sanctum of clean-living and responsibility in a world plunged into drug-abuse and disrespect. He offers to write the school a check for a considerable sum if it agrees to cancel Moore’s invitation. We also see a lot from faculty—apparently united in their support of Moore’s right to speak, and students—more divided.14 (Greenstreet, raised as a Mormon and a student at the LDS-sponsored Brigham Young University at the time he began work on the film, does not appear on camera himself.)

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14 We do not hear from any non-college affiliated residents of Orem, whatever their political orientation, who support Moore’s appearance at UVSC. By making Anderson, plus briefly his wife and some attendees at Hannity’s talk, the representative of the town, Greenstreet does somewhat simplify—and, arguably parody—a community that is certainly conservative but not entirely without dissenting voices.
The furore surrounding Moore’s visit is in fact several times presented as a great thing in itself—an apathetic student body is suddenly energized and engaged. We see one open discussion forum in which a Togolese student—named for Ephraim, one of the Mormon prophets—temporarily silences the anti-Moore students as he asks them to learn, from restrictions abroad, the value of the freedom of speech for which America should stand. UVSC President and faculty are more concerned with the institution of the College than with the nation in their defense of free speech and civil debate. If Moore’s appearance meant their victory in the former case, they were somewhat less successful in providing a forum for the latter. To balance Moore’s visit—as student President Bassi insisted had always been a part of the plan—the UVSC Student Union duly invited Sean Hannity to speak on campus the week before. Both Hannity and Moore gave the performances of showmen, scoring points and ‘rallying the troops’ as the media attention to the event had perhaps made inevitable. Together they made a mockery of UVSC’s desire to stage civilized, intellectual debate—Moore’s appearance prominently featured the repetition of chants with the support of guest, Roseanne Barr. Greenstreet doesn’t show her, and arguably lets Moore off somewhat lightly, though he does show the ejection—with Moore’s support—of Nader supporters, angry at his embracing of pro-war Kerry and the Democrats. Greenstreet in fact devotes slightly more time, around twelve minutes, to Hannity’s rhetorically-skilled but excruciating performance. After quizzing a ‘self-confessed’ liberal student in the audience, Hannity responds to questions from the floor. We see two UVSC professors ask critical questions over a barrage of jeers. The second of these is a young, long-haired Philosophy professor, whom Hannity first pretends to think a student, then, with a withering look, acknowledges as a teacher, before further classifying him, to the audience’s delight, as an “angry liberal.” At the same time, the questioner must overcome the mockery of those seated around him, as he asks Hannity to justify “the move to a neo-conservative foreign policy that assumes that democracy can be imposed from the top down.” The professor is brave to beard the lion in his den, but Hannity, holding all the cards—the stage, the microphone, the audience, his experience in the limelight—rather than avoiding the question altogether, uses it to make his own point: “What you Liberals do not understand is that 9/11 changed everything.” Thus for the right’s media commentators, 9/11 is a reason not for changing their own outlook on the world but for depicting alternate views as unacceptable, incomprehensible, irresponsible, or ignorant—in the literal sense of the word. Unlike Ephraim, the Togolese student, the young professor is unable, even temporarily, to silence the hecklers, and, indeed, the complaints continued to roll in after Moore had

15 At a public debate in advance of Moore’s visit, College President, William Sederburg opines that: “As these issues emerge civility needs to be the key word that we respond to. We need to have civil discourse, we need to learn how to deal with uncomfortable issues. . . . and we need to respect a variety of points-of-view which might not necessarily agree with us at all times.” Philosophy professor, Pierre Lamarche makes the link to the educational institution more specifically: “Colleges and universities are supposed to be free markets of ideas. It is what they are. That implies that all perspectives, all points-of-view are welcomed and encouraged, including and especially those with which we may disagree strongly. That’s what a college is.”
come and gone. We see Bassi, now in suit-and-tie, checking his messages a couple of
days after the event. Sitting in his office, under a painting of George Washington praying
beside his horse at Valley Forge in the Revolutionary war, Jim is surrounded by a close-
up wedding photograph, another image of himself and vice-President Joe, with their
wives, and a few Western American tchotchkes. He is engagingly wry in his reactions to
the angry messages to which he dutifully listens. His first under-his-breath comment, in
response to an irate caller’s personal axis-of-evil consisting of Moore, Hitler and
Castro—will Jim now invite the other two?—is a mock-response to the Hitler option:
“Can’t. He’s dead.” If Moore’s and Hannity’s supporters find comfort in the presence of
their heroes and the like-minded, Jim’s consolation is his wife. “I have a wonderful
wife,” he quietly intones. In fact, Jim’s reprieve from Utah County politics, set up by the
sense of nation suggested by his office furnishings, involves a couple of American icons:
M and Ms and blissful marriage. The former are symbolic of the comfort offered by the
latter in a shared project with his wife: every October 20th will now be M and M day in
memory of Moore’s visit, a second anniversary created with his partner. What this brief
scene does, I would argue, is construct a distinct series of markers of identity, both
personal and national that Bassi can use to counter the intolerance directed at him from
the surrounding community.

Films like those I have been discussing form just one strand in the response of
popular culture to the current U.S. government’s attempts to reimagine America. “Air
America” has attempted to dent the Right’s control of radio talk show airwaves, while
John Stewart and Stephen Colbert, on cable channel Comedy Central, apparently provide
much of the nation’s youth with its political information—from a viewpoint distinctly
unfriendly to Bush’s vision of America. Bumper stickers pick up on the debate over the
officially unified, unofficially fiercely divided state: “One Nation under Surveillance,”
and the relationship between America and others: “We’re making enemies faster than we
can kill them.” Amongst popular singers, several have proved less enamoured of the
President than Fahrenheit 9/11-featured Britney Spears. (Surely Bush can’t reciprocate
her approval of his performance!) Bruce Springsteen has played the game before, and
seen his “Born in the USA” co-opted for patriotic purpose quite different from his
original design; inveterate Bush-critic Steve Earle, the Dixie Chicks and Iris de Ment who
followed up her searingly satiric “Wasteland of the Free” with “I want my Country Back”
have all sung out against Bush, and done so by arguing that his America is inauthentic,
not theirs and not the true America. Perhaps they have created new anthems for future
dissent. In the meantime, however, the archetypal song which fights for an America
imagined as something fiercely different from that constructed by the wrathful whims of
the plutocrats remains “This Land is Our Land,” with which, accompanied by appropriate
iconic images of American-ness, Greenstreet chooses to conclude his film.

Woody Guthrie’s song is explicitly a reimagining of the nation as ours—it has a
history in both American documentary and political lampoon—I’m thinking here, in the
first case, of its coming on the radio, in the Maysles brothers’ direct cinema classic,
Salesman as the protagonist, the Rabbit, drives around the bizarre mock-Arab city of
Opa-Locka, Florida, with its minareted city hall and street names out of Ali Baba. The
effect is heavily ironic as the Rabbit, unable to find the street he wants, drives in circles,
muttering the exotic names to himself. The title of Guthrie’s song with its possessive pronoun means that its referent can be easily re-interpreted, and this was the strategy adopted by web-animators, Jib-Jab in their version of “This Land” prior to the last election: Bush and Kerry alternatively claim that they will win America. “This Land will Surely Vote for me,” each is made to sing, until, at the end of the song, they join forces, united in opposition to a native American who sings, “This land was my Land.” Since copyright on the song has expired one might say it does “belong to you and me.” In *This Divided State* it accompanies a mosaic of specifically American images which suggest, perhaps, who we are in this instance: the civil rights, labor and women’s movements, immigrants and the statue of Liberty, soldiers in and returning from the war against fascism, Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, and Woody Guthrie himself, plus baseball and the glorious western landscape epitomized by Yosemite’s El Capitan, and American suburbia. There are several images redolent of Frank Capra’s films about the ordinary man, though we also see images with somewhat different class connotations: the Charleston and a pirouetting dancer, plus the corporate image of a MacDonald’s clown, and the firing range. The vision of America, thus created is quite complex. The total effect, I think, is to form an alternative idea of what American identity might mean—an opportunity for individual and collective rights which offers dignity to its people, yet remains open to the outside world while also indicating contrary currents and showing that this is a divided nation-state, as the red and blue illustrates. Lars von Trier has recently created a somewhat similar, though more coherent and more pessimistic, collage of images of famous photographs of the poor as the conclusion of *Dogville*, part of his own ongoing critique of what it is to be American—or perhaps of how we all are. But I’ll finish with a different touchstone from the world of the narrative feature film. Released at the end of 2005 was George Clooney’s *Good Night and Good Luck* about Edward R Murrow, seemingly very much a plea for a critical media, one that will hold the powerful to account and foster dissent. Evidently the same kind of question regarding a college’s independence of its community, might be asked about America’s major media-outlets, existing as they do within the ‘communities’ of big business—Disney, GM, Viacom, Clear Channel and the News Corporation.
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