

[HARDCOVER: US]

The American Dream: from freedom to fear

BY SARAH CHURCHWELL
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

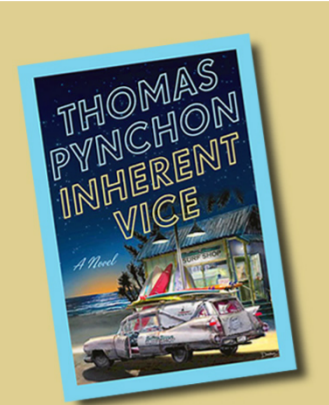
In Thomas Pynchon's 1973 book, *Gravity's Rainbow*, a character sings a song called *My Doper's Cadenza*, which could serve as both sound track and subtitle for *Inherent Vice*. Set in the waning days of the era of free love, as Charles Manson brings a paranoid ending to idealistic dreams, Pynchon's seventh novel bridges *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Vineland* (1990), forming a loose trilogy traversed by the same (marginal) characters and (central) concerns, not to mention a permeating 1960s dope haze. In all three novels, California represents the final frontier of the American Dream and the last stand against corrupt institutions, the ultimate refuge of aimless dreamers riding waves of hope — and fear. Together, the three novels trace an arc from the mid-1960s to the Reaganite 1980s, from the birth of counterculture to the triumph of corporate culture, as the frontier closes for good and the long descent into betrayal and greed begins.

The book's title provides Pynchon with a new metaphor for three of his oldest preoccupations: entropy, capitalism and religion, specifically Puritanism. For insurers and preservationists, "inherent vice" describes the innate tendency of precious objects to deteriorate and refers to the limits of insurability and conservation; it suggests that matter (and thus, by extension, materialism) carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.

As usual, Pynchon prefers to approach serious questions through frivolity and pastiche, in this case a psychedelic spoof of Raymond Chandler. His protagonist, Larry "Doc" Sportello, is a pot-smoking private investigator sent by an ex-flame on the trail of a disappeared property tycoon who may or may not have had a crisis of conscience and be setting up a quasi-socialist commune. The plot proceeds to meander amiably around kidnapping, murder, heroin smuggling, money laundering, loan sharking, insanity, drug addiction and rehab, revolution and counter-revolution, not to mention time travel, the lost continent of Lemuria, and Arrepentimiento, which a character defines as "Spanish for 'sorry about that.'" A spirit of regret and thwarted hedonism prevails, as characters take refuge in sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Along the way, Pynchon assembles a typical cast of eccentrics, misfits and dropouts with wacky names, who live life in pursuit of lost causes. Capitalism in Pynchon tends to take two primary forms (it is always, however, the enemy): the military-industrial complex and

Publication Notes



BY THOMAS PYNCHON
384 PAGES
JONATHAN CAPE

land-grabbing. His protagonists try to resist both, as Pynchon asks how a country that so mythologizes hope can traffic in fear, how it can romanticize its own land while dividing it (into "lots") and selling it off.

Sportello may feel and behave like an outlaw, but he is uneasily aware of his complicity with the forces of law and order. Most mysteries begin in confusion and end in certainty; Pynchon likes to reverse this trajectory, so that what begins in relative order ends in pure chaos. His piling up of incident and jokes, of comic set pieces and hallucinatory discourses is partly pleasure for its own sake; he loves to fool around, extravagantly indulging his own playfulness. His penchant for embedding puzzles, games and jokes in his books is partly why Pynchon's fans tend toward the cultish. But his jokes are also a form of whistling in the dark, dancing on the grave of betrayed dreams and abandoned hopes.

Like many a Pynchon protagonist before him, Sportello is on a doomed quest. Pynchon's novels are always more or less picaresque journeys; his characters travel perpetually, but rarely arrive anywhere meaningful. What *Gravity's Rainbow* calls "the terrible politics of the Grail" means that quests in Pynchon are inevitable and also inevitable failures. At best, they will be mock-heroic; at worst, they will be tragic, but they will never succeed. *Inherent Vice* may be Pynchon's most overtly nostalgic book, featuring a character overcome by a longing he pretends to shrug off.

Remarkably, *Inherent Vice* features both a sympathetic protagonist and a recognizable plot, albeit one that is as impossible to summarize as any other Pynchon shaggy dog tale. And although I couldn't now reconstruct who did what to whom or why, well, no one involved in making *The Big Sleep* knew who killed the chauffeur either.

weakness — and he appropriately enough has an interesting section on strengths and their concomitant weaknesses tucked away in a corner of his book.

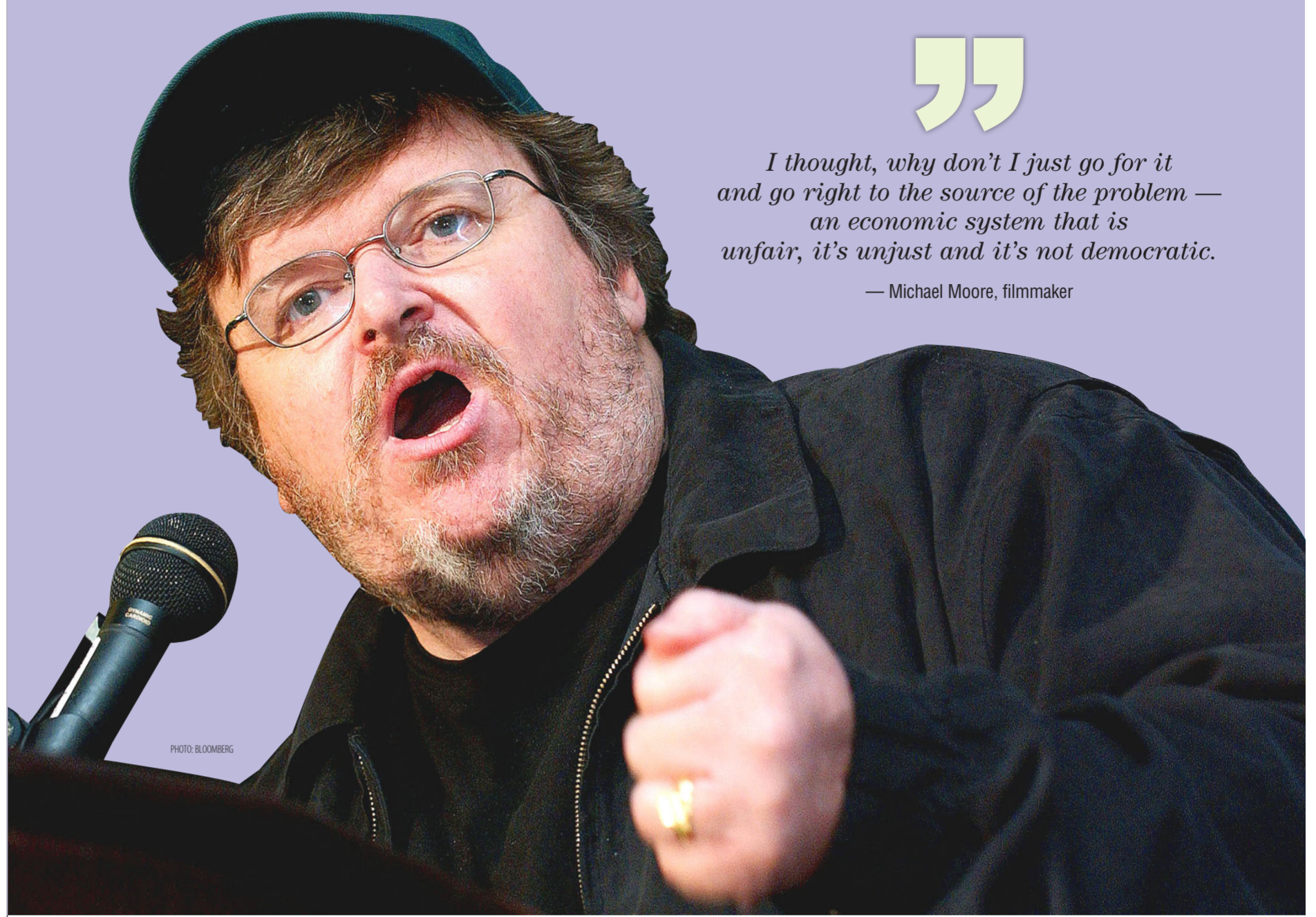
Armstrong is in essence a philosophic popularizer. The range of great names quickly becomes a Wikipedia-like guide to a generous selection of cultural icons from the ancient Greeks to the present day, marshaled into significant sections, with almost every artist or cultural phenomenon receiving the benefaction of Armstrong's wide-ranging approval.

But the contrary social situations his artists, and the phenomena they produced, sprang from appear to bewilder Armstrong, as if he's conducting a disparate orchestra of incompatible instrumentalists with a school-masterly determination that they all can, should, and indeed must, play from the same score, and produce the same kind of optimistic-sounding music.

A man who opts for an all-inclusive stance like this is also going to go for the middle ground,



SUNDAY PROFILE



I thought, why don't I just go for it and go right to the source of the problem — an economic system that is unfair, it's unjust and it's not democratic.

— Michael Moore, filmmaker

Moving on to pastures new

The maker of 'Sicko' and 'Bowling for Columbine' says he's ready to turn his back on documentary filmmaking

BY TOM LONG
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN

Michael Moore, the most successful documentary filmmaker of all time, is thinking of getting out of the business of making documentaries.

Not right away. He's got the sure-to-be-controversial *Capitalism: A Love Story* due in US theaters Oct. 2. But after that?

"While I've been making this film I've been thinking that maybe this will be my last documentary," says the Flint native, who filmed and starred in such hits as *Sicko*, *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. "Or maybe for a while."

Those three films make up half of the top six documentaries ever made, according to boxoffice Mojo.com. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the highest earning documentary ever, with a domestic take of US\$119 million.

But now he's looking to branch out as a director.

"I have been working on two screenplays over the last couple of years," he says. "One's a comedy, one's a mystery, and I really want to do this."

Moore, 55, is sitting in the driver's seat of a dark green van, parked behind the Old Opera House here on a Friday afternoon. He's both frazzled and buzzed.

He's just come from a public panel discussion with the Michigan Film Office Advisory Council, a cheerleading affair for the Michigan Film Incentives law and for the growth of the local film industry.

The discussion was part of the Traverse City Film Festival, celebrating its fifth year,

which Moore created and which seems to grow exponentially each summer.

His wife, Kathy, is on the phone. He has to meet her for lunch and arrange some movie tickets for her folks.

Oh, and he has to deliver his first cut of *Capitalism: A Love Story* to the studio later that night.

If the movie does turn out to be his last documentary, some fans are sure to be disappointed.

"It would leave us with a big loss if he stopped making documentary films," says Ruth Daniels, vice president for marketing for Detroit-area Emagine theaters, who remembers showing Moore's films dating back to 1989's *Roger & Me*.

"His documentaries do make quite a bit of money and he's paved the way for documentary movies to become mainstream," she says. "It will leave a void."

For now, though, Moore is caught up in the enthusiasm of the festival, which ends today.

"This has been the best festival yet, certainly the smoothest run, the largest crowds," Moore says.

At the panel discussion, Moore said the festival had 37 percent more sponsors this year and advance ticket sales were up 25 percent, despite Michigan's economic woes.

Over the past five years, Moore said, the festival has sold a 250,000 movie tickets, and while he's happy the crowds

keep coming, he's intent on keeping commercialism to a minimum.

Sponsorships are kept low-key, no commercials run before films, and industry wheeler-dealers — agents, buyers, distributors — don't make their way to Traverse City, although many of the filmmakers do.

"My goal is to keep it as a festival for movie lovers. The fact that you can park your car and walk to all the venues, it has a real communal feel here," Moore says. "You don't want this to be Park City (home to Utah's far more crowded and industry-oriented Sundance Film Festival)."

Unlike many cultural events, the festival seems to be wholly embraced by the town it's in. Many of the moviegoers are local and more than 1,000 people volunteer at the festival.

Moore is working full time in northern Michigan now, although his perspective certainly hasn't mellowed. In *Capitalism*, the director — who has explored America's health care system, its propensity for gun violence and its journey to war in Iraq — is taking on nothing less than the American economic system.

"I thought, why don't I just go for it and go right to the source of the problem — an economic system that is unfair, it's unjust and it's not democratic. And now we've learned it doesn't work," he says.

"This issue informs all my other movies. I started thinking if I can only

make one more movie — I started thinking this of course during the Bush years — what would that movie be? And this is the movie."

From his first film, *Roger & Me*, in which Moore roasted General Motors, his sense of humor and strong point of view have outraged many critics while drawing in huge audiences.

Moore says "objectivity is a nonsensical concept that's really been misused" and that his approach to documentaries is to make sure they're good, informative, entertaining movies first.

"The term documentary got pigeonholed a long time ago, and 20 years ago when I made *Roger & Me*, I guess my hope was to bust loose through that strict structure and perception of what a documentary should be and allow it to be everything any other work of nonfiction can be," he says. "A nonfiction book can be a book of both fact and opinion, it can be just fact, it can be just opinion."

"Humor is OK in a documentary. Before me, I was told it had to be castor oil. No, you're making a movie; you're making a piece of entertainment. You're asking someone to leave the house on a Friday night to go to a movie."

But time's a-wasting and Moore has to dash off into his busy day. To pick up his wife. Pick up his in-laws. Grab some lunch. And then go finish what may be the last documentary he ever makes.

[HARDCOVER: UK]

What have the Romans, Greeks, Japanese, etc, done for us?

John Armstrong takes a winding road through the cultures of yore, to produce a blueprint for a more civilized world, brought to you by businesspeople

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

This book begins with the spectacle of an author trawling through the past cultures of Europe, with occasional excursions elsewhere, to discover what constitutes civilization, and how its flourishing in different eras was related to the material prosperity or otherwise of the times.

A vast range of famous names is invoked, almost all being given the standard space of a page and a half or so. Why is he doing this? What's the end in view, other than to reinstate the idea of civilization among otherwise often skeptical modern thinkers?

John Armstrong doesn't only look at architecture, painting, music and poetry — he rather exasperatingly also includes elegant dinner parties in his net with, slightly less absurdly, the Japanese tea ceremony. Armstrong is in no sense an exclusionist — anything that's charming, well-constructed or (in particular) infused with love is grist to his mill. This broad approach is both a strength and a

weakness — and he appropriately enough has an interesting section on strengths and their concomitant weaknesses tucked away in a corner of his book.

Armstrong is in essence a philosophic popularizer. The range of great names quickly becomes a Wikipedia-like guide to a generous selection of cultural icons from the ancient Greeks to the present day, marshaled into significant sections, with almost every artist or cultural phenomenon receiving the benefaction of Armstrong's wide-ranging approval.

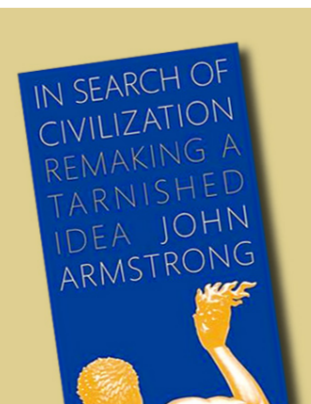
But the contrary social situations his artists, and the phenomena they produced, sprang from appear to bewilder Armstrong, as if he's conducting a disparate orchestra of incompatible instrumentalists with a school-masterly determination that they all can, should, and indeed must, play from the same score, and produce the same kind of optimistic-sounding music.

A man who opts for an all-inclusive stance like this is also going to go for the middle ground,

which Armstrong predictably does. He cites Aristotle, with his concept of the golden mean, and at uncharacteristic length. But his caution also leads him to sit on the fence in several crucial ways. Is civilization dependent on material prosperity? Well, yes and no. Can we recreate the glories of the Italian Renaissance in modern conditions? He's not sure, but thinks we should certainly try harder than we do. And so on.

The problem with this approach, and indeed with the book as a whole, is that what we now regard, quite rightly, as priceless cultural relics or supreme historical moments were actually the products of the most diverse conditions. What have the monasteries of Greece's Mount Athos got in common with the paintings of Renaissance Italy? Nothing whatsoever. The temper that produced one was wholly in opposition to that which produced the other — a rejection of the pleasures of the flesh in the one case, an implicit glorification of them in the

Publication Notes



BY JOHN ARMSTRONG
197 PAGES
ALLEN LANE

other. What has the Japanese tea ceremony got to do with the Athens of Pericles? Nothing at all is the obvious, and indeed the

only, answer.

But Armstrong plugs away nonetheless. His uncertainty even extends into tentative references to his own life story. When he was young, his brother was living in Prague, drinking during the day and playing music in coffee shops in the evenings. He'd opted for freedom, thinks Armstrong, but he himself wasn't so sure about that course. Now he's Senior Advisor to the Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University — the seemingly casual choices we make in youth have major repercussions in later life, it seems.

It's tempting to damn this book with faint praise, to call it "well-intentioned," displaying "broad sympathies" and so on. And it's true that the most challenging books have had no truck with being all-inclusive and finding time for just about everyone and everything.

They strike a bold line, and to hell with the consequences. Armstrong, by contrast, sees good in almost everyone involved with culture (the British artist Damien Hirst and a researcher at Florence's Villa I Tatti

looking into whether the camels in paintings of the Three Wise Men had crossed or uncrossed legs being two exceptions).

It's only when you notice that one of this author's jobs is Philosopher in Residence at the Melbourne Business School that you suddenly understand the motivation behind this book. What Armstrong wants to do is educate business executives of the future in the possibility of making money by engaging in activities that are culturally positive or socially beneficial, and preferably both.

It's then, too, that you see the point of Armstrong's endless boiling down of great moments in the history of culture into a few paragraphs — it's basically so that his business students, with little time for such matters, can readily understand them.

Thus it is that he closes the book by citing the Roman writer Cicero. "Not an original thinker, he took seriously the idea that for philosophy to have an impact on life it had to be presented in a way

that would engage with people who would never be scholars — but who would be generals, governors and senators." This, with future businessmen rather than generals in his sights, is clearly John Armstrong thinks he too is doing.

One of his cultural heroes is especially significant. It's the 12th-century Abbot Suger of St Denis, an administrator who saw that people could be persuaded to give money in return for the pleasure they got from the artistic monuments that resulted. He's a clear precursor to the culturally-friendly businesspeople Armstrong is so anxious to help emerge.

"Could it really be that doing good could be profitable?" our author asks. That his answer to this question is a clear and unambiguous "Yes!" is at the heart of his position. And *In Search of Civilization*, an unoriginal but not uninteresting book, is, first and foremost, his means of promoting that belief beyond the confines of the Melbourne Business School.