

Humor and Film in the Geography Classroom: Learning from Michael Moore's *TV Nation*

Derek H. Alderman and E. Jeffrey Popke

ABSTRACT

How can teachers use humor and film to convert geography classrooms into public spaces for thinking and talking about the world in a critical way? One useful resource for raising student consciousness and critical discussion is *TV Nation*—a satirical television newsmagazine show created, produced, and hosted by rebel-filmmaker Michael Moore in the mid 1990s. *TV Nation* not only serves as a potential instructional resource for geographers but also provides teacher and student a springboard for re-thinking humor and television news as analytical/educational objects. Moore challenges the popular notion that humor should not be taken seriously. By combining laughter with harsh reality, he questions the legitimacy of established ways of seeing the world and provides a unique way of discussing the socially constructed and contested nature of space and place. *TV Nation* also challenges the value traditionally placed on claims of neutrality and objectivity in conventional television news narratives. By making his own perspectives clearly known, Moore exposes the positionality inherent in all media representations of place. Included in this paper is an annotated list of *TV Nation* segments available on video and a description of how one of these news segments was used in a college-level classroom to teach about the complexities and contradictions of free trade and globalization.

Keywords: humor, Michael Moore, television, globalization, objectivity

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INTRODUCTION

One of the recurring challenges of geographic education is to foster in our students an ability to think critically about geographical phenomena in an increasingly globalized world. This challenge has been illustrated in stark fashion by the events of the past year, which have highlighted in numerous ways the interconnected nature of political, economic and cultural processes. All too often, however, complex geographical phenomena are reduced by popular media to simplistic or stereotypical images of places and events. Indeed, as Doreen Massey (1999, 264) has argued, "it is one of the bitter ironies of an age of globalisation that it coincides with a closing-in in some ways of our geographical imaginations." One of our chief tasks as educators, then, should be to cultivate a more expansive geographical imagination and to help students view spatial patterns and processes from a variety of different perspectives in order to generate critical thought and dialogue. In what follows, we suggest that one pedagogical tool for doing so is the strategic use of humor in the classroom.

Teachers may be naturally suspicious of employing humor in their classes, fearing that they will not be taken seriously or worrying (with good reason) about the different levels of sensitivity among students. Indeed, inappropriate humor can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and thus make the classroom into a place of alienation and inequality (Layng 1991; Kehily and Nayak 1997). However, humor—when carried out in a respectful and thoughtful way by instructors—can be useful in developing classroom rapport, generating interest, enhancing the self-esteem of students, and emphasizing socialization skills (Pollak and Freda 1997). Furthermore, as Townsend (1997) has suggested, laughing together is part of participating in a common culture and "communicating about an issue of mutual concern." In this respect, humor carves out "a public space, a field or arena within which all sorts of ideas could be discussed and debated, be they political, social, or moral" (Townsend 1997, 202). This element of humor is suggestive of how we, as teachers, can use humor to convert our geography classrooms into public spaces for thinking and talking about the world in a critical way.

Although the incorporation of humor in the classroom is often discussed in terms of teachers weaving jokes, cartoons, and funny stories into lectures and class discussions, research has also shown the effectiveness of using humorous film and television programs (Coleman 1992). The use of film in the classroom can be particularly valuable, because it has the potential to expose students to different values and political perspectives, allowing students to "unpack" taken-for-granted assumptions about the world (Aitken 1994; Gold et al. 1996).

In this paper, we examine some of the ways that film and humor might be used to teach about geographical processes from a critical perspective. In particular, we introduce and describe a media resource useful for teachers as they employ humor to challenge conventional perspectives, and to raise student consciousness and generate discussion. The resource is *TV Nation*—a satirical television news magazine show created, produced, and hosted by rebel filmmak-

er Michael Moore.¹ *TV Nation* premiered on NBC in the summer of 1994, airing for only eight episodes before being canceled. In this short period of time, Moore built a loyal following, prompting the FOX network to pick up the show for seven episodes in the late summer and early fall of 1995. While the show did not fare well in terms of standard ratings, it drew critical acclaim, receiving an Emmy for "Best Information Series" in 1995. Moore's satire attracted the attention of cable channel Comedy Central, which aired re-runs of *TV Nation* in the 1996-1997 season. Although *TV Nation* has been off the air in America for over five years, teachers can purchase, through home video sale, a two-volume set of four episodes from the show (*TV Nation Double Feature*). The reasonably priced collection (\$25) contains twenty-two news segments.² The segments vary in quality and classroom appropriateness. (Appendix 1 provides a select list of segment descriptions that might be of interest to geographers.) *TV Nation* should not be viewed as a substitute for traditional curriculum material, but used as an entryway to discussion and exploration, which can be supplemented by additional, more conventional resources.

We have both used *TV Nation* in teaching introductory and advanced geography courses at the college and university level and found it valuable in facilitating social awareness and critical discussion.³ First and foremost, this is because Moore encourages us to take humor seriously. By juxtaposing unconventional images of people and places against what we have come to expect, he calls into question the assumed "natural" order of things, and exposes the inherent contradictions and inequalities of life dominated by corporations, government, and the media. In the process, Moore encourages us to re-think the great value we have traditionally placed on claims of neutrality and objectivity by television news. As one commentator pointed out, Moore "combines the roles of investigative journalist, satirist, film-maker, and activist" (Johnson 1998, 63). It is this combination of news reporting, humor, and activism, we suggest, that lends a critical geographic edge to his work.

In order for teachers to benefit from the work of Moore, they need to understand humor and television news as representation. In this article, we provide some insight into these issues as well as a description of how *TV Nation* might be used in the geography classroom. Our intent is not to provide a step-by-step curriculum guide but to provide the concepts, theories, and ideas needed to develop such guides in the future, and in doing so, introduce issues that have applicability and relevance well beyond the work of Moore. Our hope is that they can serve as a springboard for using innovative media resources besides *TV Nation*.

The rest of the article is comprised of four sections. Section one outlines the socially and politically situated nature of humor. We conceptualize humor as a means of expanding the cognitive flexibility of students. Section two establishes the general importance of television news

as a source of place images, suggesting that it is important for students to uncover and critique the subjectivity present in all news representations. Section three takes a closer look at the geography of *TV Nation*. Moore departs from conventional news programs by creating comical representations of place, which allow students to see the world in multiple and potentially contradictory ways, as well as to understand the socially constructed and politically contested nature of space. The fourth section of the paper describes a *TV Nation* segment dealing with NAFTA, which we have used to help college-level students grapple with the critical geographies of globalization.

THE POLITICS OF HUMOR

The use of humor to enhance teaching has been the subject of several recent articles in non-geography education outlets (e.g., McMahon 1999; Moran 1994; Nilsen and Nilsen 1999; Smith and Smith 1991; Wallinger 1997). Humor, according to its proponents, is a valuable teaching tool because it reduces student anxiety or "dread" of courses while facilitating the reception and retention of difficult content. This perspective is especially important when considering the fact that the creation of a positive classroom environment—which can be created using humor as well other techniques—is essential in producing student-centered and student-empowered learning (Kher et al. 1999; King 1999). More importantly, humor can serve to disrupt taken-for-granted attitudes or understandings, and thus potentially help students see society and space in alternative and more critical ways. Indeed, Michael Moore has described *TV Nation* as more than simply a form of entertainment; his humor is also intended to move people to think critically about important issues:

I think humor is an effective means of communicating a message to people. I think we've all seen that too many people are turned off by the sort of soapbox kind of preaching So I decided to use my sense of humor as a means to effect change, to get people thinking about the issues. (quoted in Sheldon 1995, n.p.)

Humor is particularly suited to "getting people thinking," because, according to a number of scholars, a major foundation of humor is that it plays with the predictability of reality. Specifically, humor arises out of incongruity by "juxtapositioning two or more conceptualizations that do not seem to fit together" (Koller 1988, 7). As Mulkay (1987) pointed out, these incompatible conceptualizations can be divergent forms of interpretation or ways of acting. In either case, humor arises from the contrast between a conventional definition of reality—which is consistent with people's established social norms, values, and expectations—and an unconventional version of reality—which represents a violation of expected cultural patterns and social meanings (Macionis 1989, 167-168). The experience of humor, in other words, relies upon our "ability to view a subject matter from multiple perspectives," and it is

this aspect of humor that, for us, makes it a potentially valuable pedagogical resource (LaFollette and Shanks 1993, 329). Perspective is of great importance in teaching geography. As stated in *Geography for Life* (Geography Education Standards Project 1994, 57), "a perspective provides a frame of reference for asking and answering questions, identifying and solving problems, and evaluating the consequences of alternative actions."

In this sense, the educational usefulness of Moore's humor, and any humor for that matter, is not measured by what it gives us in terms of a single accurate picture of world (if this is even possible) but how it engenders the consideration of multiple perspectives, thereby contributing to our "cognitive flexibility." Cognitive flexibility suggests that effective learning is context-dependent, requiring the presentation of multiple perspectives and cases instead of relying on one, oversimplified way of viewing reality (Jonassen et al. 1997). This approach emphasizes the complex nature of the world and the need for learners to construct their knowledge by constantly "crisscrossing" the conceptual landscape at several different points and angles (Spiro and Jehng 1990). The notion of education being a crisscrossing or traversing of landscapes is an apt and useful metaphor within geography. The very power of humor lies in the ability of listeners to "flicker" or oscillate between different points of view and beliefs (LaFollette and Shanks 1993).

For this reason, as anthropologist Mary Douglas (1968, 365) has suggested, humor can function as a form of ideological deviance, "the juxtaposition of control against that which is controlled." In this way humor counters or challenges dominant modes of interpretation that control our everyday cognition, contemplation, and social consciousness. A joke, according to Douglas (1968, 365), "affords the opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity" and "that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective." Douglas is touching upon an important point that could help us in better understanding the relationship between humor and place images. Although not expressed in these explicit terms, there is a "politics" that surrounds the construction of humor, because at base it contests the legitimacy and primacy of the social establishment's ideology.

MEDIA, NEWS, AND OBJECTIVITY

In the last few decades, geographers have shown great interest in the ways in which place images and meanings are communicated through mass media (e.g., Aitken and Zonn 1994; Burgess and Gold 1985; Zonn 1990). This interest has led many geographers to realize the benefits of using media—especially documentary and feature-length films—in their teaching (Bascom 1994; Gold et al. 1996; Jenkins and Youngs 1983; Macdonald 1990; Walk 1994). Somewhat less attention, however, has been paid to the study of television. Adams (1992) defined television as a "gathering place," which serves place-like functions such as providing a context for social activity (involving people

in elections, celebrations, and competitions) and serving as a center for creating cultural meaning (shaping the fashion, attitudes, and values of people). One element in the creation of cultural meaning is the communication of images and understandings about places and regions, whether these images are created inadvertently or carefully crafted (Gold et al. 1993).

Television news is one of the major sources for the construction of place images for students, as well as the general public. Not only are news programs among the most widely viewed television programs, but the images and impressions they propagate are given greater credence because of the assumed neutrality and objectivity of news organizations. In this sense, news images should be seen as a *discourse*, or a way of representing the world and its geographies. Discourses are more than simply ideas and language. They shape how we see and hence react to people and places, encouraging certain thoughts and actions while discouraging others. Recognizing this fact, geographers have focused on measuring place images in television news and critiquing the means by which these images are produced (e.g., Alderman 1997; Brooker-Gross 1983; Parisi and Holcomb 1994). Within geographic education, for example, Vujakovic (1998) has constructed a guide to help teachers identify error, bias, distortion, and forms of representation in news media, including television programs. As Myers and his colleagues (1996, 25) put it, "beneath the information directly contained in most media reports is a driving message, often based on an ideological principle or culturally rooted myth, that the stories serve to illustrate."

In a similar manner, Harrison (1995) has stressed the importance of geography students being aware of the identity and "positionality" of those who create images of places and people (see also Aspaas 1998). Positionality in this sense recognizes the importance of knowing where someone's political and social interests lie so that his/her interpretations and representations of the world are put in a meaningful context. When applied to television news, this implies a recognition that any camera, regardless of who is behind it, is a "positioned camera" that films "a particular frame, and not another, at a particular place and at a particular time" (Natter and Jones 1993, 149).

What we find useful about *TV Nation* is that Michael Moore helps to highlight the ways in which television news works as a discourse, that is, how the news not only reports world events but also frames the meaning of those events for its audience. Moore operates as a journalist and activist at the same time. In doing so, he challenges conventional definitions of "objectivity" and throws into flux expectations people hold about of the genre of television news. Moore himself described how his style of reporting on *TV Nation* broke from the mold of traditional news programs:

Even the people who disagreed with what was in the show found it fascinating and engaging because it's one of the few shows on television,

especially a show that is somewhat journalistic, that has a point of view and says right up front we believe in X, Y, and Z. All the other news-magazine shows are trying to get away with "We're objective and we don't have a point of view," which is not true. They're human beings. And just how they decide what stories are going on indicates subjectivity. And all news in reporting is subjective, not objective. (quoted in Myers 1998, D5)

While traditional news shows deny and hide the values and multiple identities of their producers, directors, and broadcasters, Moore openly reveals his point of view as he reports and represents society and space. In doing so, he provides teacher and student an excellent springboard for discussing the "positionality" in all media representations, including mainstream news programs. This is particularly valuable in the context of the geography classroom, because the representations that concern Moore frequently revolve around the contradictory ways in which place, space and regional change are experienced in the context of globalization.

MICHAEL MOORE AND GEOGRAPHY

Utilizing the format of a television newsmagazine, *TV Nation* frequently focuses on issues that are inherently geographical. The program is not produced in a studio, but consists of a series of on-location "segments," in which Moore or one of his correspondents focuses upon a particular issue.⁴ Through the careful use of film footage, interviews and commentary, the show highlights the ironic or contradictory nature of contemporary geographical change in specific locales. As Jeff Jarvis (1994, n.p.) of *TV Guide* put it:

TV Nation is a magazine show - but it's the *Mad* magazine of shows. It takes us to Love Canal to hear a sincere sales pitch for homes atop America's most notorious toxic dump.... And he visits the last country we liberated, Kuwait, to find that there's not much liberation there - but there is a neat amusement park called Arab World.... All this reported with the iron earnestness we've come to expect from television news - yet it's funnier than television's funniest sitcom. For this stuff isn't made up. It's real.

The humor of Moore's depiction of geographical reality arises from the way in which he uses the camera to juxtapose seemingly incongruous images and meanings of place. This juxtaposing of place images was evident in a series of factoids that first aired July 21, 1995. In the segment, Moore exposes the contradictions of the "We're #1" phenomenon found in many U.S. cities. Claxton, Georgia, and Corsicana, Texas, both claim to be #1 in fruitcake production. Worthington, Minnesota, and Cuero, Texas, claim to be #1 in turkeys, while El Campo, Texas, and Watson,

Minnesota, both say they are tops in goose hunting. To further lampoon this practice, *TV Nation* pointed out #1 statistics that cities often do not claim: New York City is #1 in heart attacks, lawyers, and toilets; Des Moines, Iowa, is #1 in *Playboy* and *Penthouse* subscribers; Tampa, Florida, is #1 in carjacking; Los Angeles is #1 in abortion clinics and Taco Bells; Baltimore is #1 in teenage pregnancies and condom sales. Clearly, viewers are encouraged to scrutinize and cast doubt on the ways in which all cities remake their images to gain some aesthetic advantage in tourism and investment. In other words, *TV Nation* helps us think about place in more "flexible" and critical ways, recognizing that there are "geographies" (many different ways of viewing the world) rather than simply a "geography" (one, correct way of viewing the world).

Another important attribute of Moore's style of humorous news reporting is that he recognizes, as many geographers do, that geographies are not simply stages or containers for human activity but social products. By catching people at their worst and funniest moments, he is able to expose and ridicule the ways in which dominant social actors and groups control how spaces and places are developed and used. For example, in one segment available on video, *TV Nation* correspondent Janeane Garafalo—a noted comic in her own right—leads a busload of New Yorkers to Greenwich, Connecticut, for a day of fun at the beach. While the town's beaches are supposedly public, a local ordinance denies access to those who are not residents of Greenwich. After being turned away at the gate, the *TV Nation* party rents a boat to make a beach landing. Intercepted by police in boats, Garafalo flings herself overboard and swims to land where an angry mob of wealthy residents tell her to get off their beach. "But wait: the mob has a solution. All she has to do...is buy a house for \$1 million or more and pay her taxes, and then she's welcome to come to the beach. Thank goodness for reasonable solutions."

By creating this humorous if not ludicrous scenario of people fighting to go to the beach, Moore is exposing and commenting on a very real struggle over space in Greenwich. In fact, before *TV Nation* covered the story, a law suit had been filed against the Connecticut town over its banning of nonresidents. Incidentally, Greenwich recently lost the suit and has been forced to develop a plan for opening up the beach (Groark 2002). As he does with many places, Moore shows how the landscape of Greenwich can be viewed and understood from conflicting perspectives depending on one's social class or status. By showing serious contradictions and incongruities in these perspectives, Moore provokes us to be more critical of how public spaces are regulated and controlled by people in communities across America. Perhaps unknowingly, Moore points to the possibility of a close relationship between the "politics of humor" (which asserts that there are power relations inscribed in the production of humor) and the "politics of space" (which asserts that there are power relations inscribed in the production of landscapes).

This relationship between politics, space and power was also highlighted in the "Taxi" segment, which took on the contention that taxicab drivers in New York City avoid picking up African-Americans. Moore addressed the issue by staging an experiment: "Would cabbies pass by an Emmy-nominated black actor to pick up a white murderer?" Noted commentator Clarence Page (1999, 31) described the experiment in a column he wrote on taxi discrimination:

He (Moore) asked acclaimed black actor Yaphet Kotto ("Homicide: Life on the Street") to hail a taxi at the corner of 79th and Amsterdam on the city's trendy Upper West Side. At the same time, Moore had a white paroled felon named Louis Bruno hail at taxi a short distance away. After taxis passed up Kotto to pick up Bruno, the television crew asked drivers why. "We always took their word for whatever excuse they gave," Moore said. When the drivers claimed they didn't see Kotto, Moore's crew set up outdoor lights to illuminate Kotto. When a driver said he looked menacing, Moore had Kotto stand with a baby in one arm and a bouquet of roses in the other. "We even replaced Louis Bruno with a guy dressed up as a clown," Moore recalled. "Some drivers would rather pick up Bozo the Clown than an acclaimed black actor."

Moore's depiction of urban social geography provides an entertaining yet biting look into racial profiling. For the geographer, the segment speaks volumes about how geographies of transportation can become inscribed with certain biases and inequalities that clearly affect the ability of African-Americans to travel and negotiate space in cities. In the next section, we provide a more in-depth discussion of how we have used one *TV Nation* segment to help students think more flexibly and critically about the geographies of globalization.

USING *TV NATION* IN THE CLASSROOM: TEACHING CRITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF GLOBALIZATION

Although Moore's work on *TV Nation* deals with a wide range of geographic and social issues, he has shown great interest in critiquing the geographic movements of firms and production and the sometimes disturbing effects that these movements have on places and people. In doing so, he contests many of our familiar images of globalization, which portray it as both inevitable and benevolent. Moore's work in this area parallels a larger debate inside and outside academic circles about the nature of globalization.

A significant discussion has emerged over the past several years about the contours and consequences of "globalization." Within geography, discussions of globalization have focused attention on a number of important geographic shifts taking place in recent decades, especially

those related to economic integration and geopolitical realignment (Cox 1997; Dodds, 1998; Herod et al. 1998; Johnston et al. 1995). Although there is much debate about the extent and consequences of such changes, there seems little doubt that the geographies of production, trade and governance are undergoing significant changes, with important implications for specific geographic localities. These changes are characterized by, among other things: the increased integration of, and interaction between, countries and regions; the deindustrialization of traditional manufacturing regions, combined with the rise of service sector activities and "new industrial spaces"; and the diminishing power of traditional labor unions and the concomitant increase of Japanese-style "team-based" production on the one hand, and exploitative sweat-shop conditions on the other (Amin 1994; Herod 1998; Kelly 1999; Lee and Wills 1997).

Large-scale global processes have uneven local effects, resulting in the relative prosperity of some regions and the sometimes devastating decline of others. These varying, place-specific impacts of globalization, however, are frequently neglected in popular accounts of globalization. The mainstream news media, in particular, seldom highlights the spatially uneven development of processes of economic integration or the negative consequences of free market trade in specific localities. Indeed, as Low and Barnett (2000, 56) suggest, "globalization is routinely offered up as an irrevocable process to which there are no alternatives."

In recent years, this perspective has been challenged by an increasing number of social activists and non-governmental organizations at a series of high-profile demonstrations. From Seattle to Prague and Washington, D.C., protestors have called attention to the contradictions and geographic inequalities that can result from globalization (Massey 2000; Smith 2000; Wood 2000). Although the media has rather glibly characterized this as an "anti-globalization" movement, we believe that it represents an engagement with globalization and its many contradictions. It is significant that students in particular have been at the forefront of these protests, because it suggests a sense of disaffection among younger people, and thus an important opportunity for teachers to help their students view and interpret globalization and its effects from multiple perspectives.

Geographers can play a crucial role in highlighting the ways in which specific political and economic geographies both shape and are shaped by processes of globalization. A number of recent commentaries have suggested innovative strategies for teaching about the geographies of economic activities, by addressing issues such as consumption, labor disputes and non-capitalist activities (Crang 1994; Herod 1999; Gibson-Graham 1999; Lowder and Healey 1994). Others have focused attention on the Internet as a tool for examining the varied impacts of global economic change (Ó Tuathail and McCormack 1998; Risner 2001). In discussing this issue, Ó Tuathail and

McCormack (1998, 357) suggest, "the Internet can, with care, be used to reveal the essentially contested nature of contemporary globalization." In what follows, we suggest that the humor of Michael Moore's *TV Nation* can be considered in much the same way. In order to highlight the potential pedagogical use of this kind of humor, we discuss below a segment available on video that provides a useful entryway into exposing and discussing the complex and contradictory geographies of globalization.

TV NATION AND "FREE TRADE IN MEXICO" (NAFTA)

The segment "Free Trade in Mexico" aired during the premier episode of *TV Nation*. It deals with issues of free trade in the wake of the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was signed into law in 1994. NAFTA reduced or eliminated tariffs on all goods traded between the treaty's three signatories—the United States, Canada and Mexico. Proponents of the Act view it as a means to increase trade and jobs between the three countries, while critics argue that American and Canadian corporations will move to Mexico to take advantage of lower wage rates and environmental controls, resulting in the loss of jobs for American and Canadian workers. It is clear, then, that the seemingly simple idea of "free trade" is subject to multiple meanings and interpretations, and that NAFTA's impacts are felt differently in different communities (Massey 2000). It is important, then, for educators to move beyond standard media accounts of NAFTA (Risinger 2001), and here is where we find the careful use of humor to be valuable.

In the "Free Trade" segment of *TV Nation*, Moore visits the towns of McAllen, Texas, and Reynosa, Mexico, ostensibly to explore the possibility of relocating *TV Nation* to Mexico in order to take advantage of lower labor costs. He meets with representatives of the Mexican Investment Board and the McAllen Chamber of Commerce, as well as with several plant managers in the American-owned factories in Mexico, known as *maquiladoras*.⁵ Most of the people interviewed by Moore believe that he is a serious investor, and thus take pains to highlight the advantages that accrue to American companies when they move to Mexico. We learn, for example, that as of 1994, some 500,000 Mexican workers were employed by American companies in the *maquiladoras*, at an average wage of about \$.75 an hour.⁶ When Moore asks about potential "labor problems," he is told that "operating in Mexico is a much easier process" than in the United States.

Throughout these discussions, Moore allows those he interviews to highlight many of the social and geographical contradictions of the free trade phenomenon, especially the plight of the Mexican workers along the border zone. While visiting a plant assembling washing machines, for example, Moore asks the manager if the workers have washing machines in their homes. "Some, but not most," he responds, then adds "... of course, most don't have plumbed in water." In another instance, a recruiter from McAllen admits that "we've had people that criticize the

fact that the people in Mexico, they earn very, very little." She goes on to explain that Mexican workers do not need a high salary because most do not have a car or own their own homes.

Moore uses the medium of film to provide a sense of the living conditions of the Mexican workforce, scanning across rows of shacks and showing us raw sewage being dumped into the Rio Grande River. Such scenes are juxtaposed against the elite neighborhoods and private country clubs of McAllen, where company executives reside. As the McAllen recruiter tells Moore, "you can take advantage of doing business in Mexico, but enjoy the same quality of life you [currently] enjoy in McAllen."

These scenes from Mexico are also implicitly juxtaposed against the fortunes of American factory workers. When Moore asks one factory manager where his *maquiladora* jobs came from, he cheerfully replies "Indiana, Arkansas and Tennessee." And, when passing by a factory owned by Converse, Moore replays a message that a company representative left on his answering machine: "Because we are an American manufacturer ... we really can't afford any on-camera exposure, where we're touting a factory or even discussing a factory in Reynosa, Mexico ... people know we're down there, but we don't want to, like, advertise it...."

Moore calls our attention to the vastly different geographical worlds that co-exist along the *maquiladora* zone. His exchanges are humorous, because they force us to consider the incongruous nature of economic transformation, such as workers without running water making washing machines or officials justifying poverty-level wages by emphasizing the existing conditions of poverty. Moore's humor challenges us to examine the issue of free trade from multiple perspectives simultaneously, and thus provides a valuable entry point into further critical discussion.

We have used this particular film segment in teaching a world regional geography course, although it would be appropriate for economic, political, and cultural geography courses as well. When using any television or media programs—particularly unconventional ones such as *TV Nation*—it is imperative that the viewing of segments be followed, and perhaps even preceded, by critical class discussion. One means of generating such discussion is to initiate a class role-playing exercise in which students are asked to develop different positions on the issue of free trade. In our use of this clip, for example, we have divided students into groups representing the US and Mexican governments and labor organizations in both countries. Each group is asked to consider NAFTA from the perspective of their constituency, and to come up with a list of key points supporting their argument in favor of or against NAFTA. When responses are assembled on the blackboard, it is clear that students are able to see free trade as a contradictory phenomenon, with both positive and negative impacts on both sides of the border. This often prompts a valuable classroom discussion, during which students slowly aban-

don their "assigned position," and instead offer their own opinion. Students will of course have a wide range of opinions on the subject of NAFTA, some agreeing with Michael Moore's perspective and others disagreeing. Regardless, we hope that students take away from the exercise a sense that, as Neil Smith (2000, 4) has noted, "globalization is first and foremost a political contest," and that contemporary political and economic change has locally specific geographical consequences.

The pedagogical outcome opens up possibilities for more engaged, locally based projects as well. Gold and his colleagues (1993), for example, described the value of using simulations to question the supposed objectivity of the news media and show how social values and interests shape the representation of place. In their simulation, students visit an unfamiliar landscape and assume the role of teams of journalists. While one team of students is asked to report on the place in an "optimistic" or "upbeat" manner, the other team is required to find "evidence of decline and decay." Each team is then required to present and defend their stories in opposing newsrooms. Considerable debate ensues, which assists students in realizing that the same landscape can be viewed and analyzed by the media in completely opposite ways. By performing as journalists, students gain valuable insight into the actual decisions that guide the construction of news narratives.

A similar type of simulation could be carried out in the context of using *TV Nation* in the classroom. Teachers may want to pose this scenario to students: Michael Moore is coming to town to film a documentary. Since Moore is unfamiliar with the area, he needs production assistants who can brief him on the community and its social and economic geography. Consequently, each team of students is required to obtain a disposable, "click and shoot" camera and gather images of the town for Michael Moore to review as he plans a final film sequence. As discussed earlier, Moore's style involves juxtaposing the conventional against the unconventional and exposing the different geographic and social worlds that exist in one place at the same time. With this mind, each student production team would be sent out to assemble a photo essay consisting of photographs accompanied by written explanations and interpretations. Of course, carrying out such a simulation requires that students be instructed on safety and ethical issues related to fieldwork and photography. In compiling a photo essay, students could be instructed to document the contradictory effects of globalization in their local town. Or they could be required to capture images that reflect how a landscape is seen and experienced in different ways by various social actors or groups. Teachers may even ask students to collect a cross-section of local opinions about economic development in the town. By going through the process of selecting, ordering, and interpreting verbal and visual images, students can begin appreciating how the media engages in a "framing" of reality. Once all photo essays are completed, each student production team should explain and pitch their documentary evi-

dence to the other teams. The presentation and comparison of the photo essays represents an important "teachable moment" in which the teacher can encourage students to reflect on the "positionality" found in all media representation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

White (2001) recently surveyed a sample of university professors to assess their use of humor in the classroom. The vast majority of responding teachers employed humor to gain the attention of students and to create a healthy and stress-free learning environment. However, there was less consensus among professors on the role that humor should play in reinforcing knowledge, provoking students to think, and helping students understand other cultures. This pattern was echoed in the perceptions of surveyed students, who said their teachers used humor more often to manage and enhance the social milieu of the classroom than to facilitate critical thinking skills.

In contrast, we have suggested in this paper that humor can serve not only to provide a respite from the routine of lectures, but also to promote a critical awareness of complex social and geographical issues by fostering the cognitive flexibility of students. In our opinion, Michael Moore's *TV Nation* provides one useful example of critical humor in film. Moore's value for teaching geography lies in his ability to juxtapose dramatically different and seemingly incongruous geographical realities, thereby highlighting some of the spatial contradictions of contemporary processes of globalization. As a purported "news" program, *TV Nation* also challenges conventional notions about objectivity, and thus can be a means of fostering in our students a more active and critical engagement with the media in general. It is useful to actively involve students in the process of making media so that they truly understand the mediation and positionality inherent in representing the world through film.

Although we have focused our attention on *TV Nation*, we would encourage teachers to consider the usefulness of incorporating other forms of humor into the classroom. For example, stand-up comedy is a potentially rich medium that we have experimented with in our teaching. As Mintz (1985) suggested, stand-up comedians function as social and cultural mediators. They express and reaffirm shared values, thus creating a community of laughter. However, comedians also provide social commentary and frequently re-examine the legitimacy of established social roles and expectations. Some of the expectations are geographic in nature and some stand-up comedians use their humor to provide critical interpretations of cities, regions, and countries and the differences that exist from place to place. This is quite evident in the humor of Jim Gaffigan, whose comedy routine is aired frequently on the cable channel, *Comedy Central*. Much of his routine focuses on his relocation from Indiana to New York City. Through his humor, Gaffigan forces his audiences to think about the regional perceptions and cultural biases that peo-

ple hold about both places. And in very different context, the country of South Africa has seen an emerging generation of comics who are using humor to cope with and comment on racism and the country's apartheid history (Costello 2001).

Like Michael Moore, these comedians are using humor to challenge conventional ways of seeing the world. In doing so, they prompt in us an engagement with social cultural norms that are too often taken for granted. It is this sense of engagement, of collective debate and discussion that we must foster if we are to significantly advance geographic education in the future.

NOTES

1. Michael Moore's provocative style is already well known to geographers through his film *Roger & Me*, which documented American corporate apathy and community economic decline following the closing of General Motors plants in and around the film maker's hometown of Flint, Michigan (Natter and Jones 1993). It has become one of the highest grossing documentary films of all time. His other projects include: a documentary sequel to *Roger & Me* called *Pets or Meat: Return to Flint*, a fictional film called *Canadian Bacon*, one of the last films of the late John Candy; a documentary called *The Big One*, in which Moore chronicles a tour to promote his best-selling book *Downsize This!* Following the cancellation of *TV Nation*, Moore developed another satirical television news-magazine show called *The Awful Truth*. This program is now in its second season on the cable channel Bravo and has been nominated for two Emmys in the category of "Best Non-Fiction Series."
2. In addition, Moore and the show's producer Kathleen Glynn have written a book entitled *Adventures in a TV Nation*, which provides detailed descriptions of episodes and insights into the making of the show (Moore and Glynn 1998). The publishing of this book is important given that not every episode of *TV Nation* is available on video.
3. Our paper focuses on using *TV Nation* in a university/college setting. Given that high schools and middle schools might have stringent requirements on the types of instructional materials and methods used in the classroom, teachers may find it useful and prudent to discuss their decision to use *TV Nation* with their curriculum supervisor. Regardless of the academic level of students, the program forces us to reverse a long-time trend of using television as an "electronic babysitter" or "electronic substitute" for the instructor.
4. Following the format of many conventional news-magazine shows, each episode of *TV Nation* runs one hour. Each episode begins with Moore introducing the show, followed by 4-6 independent stories or segments. Each segment is about 10-15 minutes in length.
5. The establishment of *maquiladora* factories dates to the 1965 Border Industrialization Program (BIP), and thus predates NAFTA. The BIP allowed for American companies in some industries to set up "sister plants" across the border in Mexico. Parts and supplies were shipped to Mexico tariff-free, assembled, and shipped back to the United States for sale. In effect, NAFTA generalized the BIP across all products and across all of Mexico.
6. According to one commercially available *maquiladora* database, employment as of December 2000 was roughly 1.3 million (source: Solunet: Info Mex, Inc.).
7. There is a wide range of material—both pro and con—dealing with NAFTA in particular and free trade in general. Students might be asked to engage this material more carefully in a brief essay or a longer paper assignment. Much of this material is available on the World Wide Web. For a useful list of Web sites dealing with globalization and economic issues, see Risinger (2001). The full text of NAFTA is available online at the Foreign Trade Information System of the Organization of American States (<http://www.sice.oas.org/trade/nafta/naftatce.asp>). For generally favorable views of NAFTA, see the following:
The Western Hemisphere Trade Information Center at Texas A&M University (<http://www.tamui.edu/coba/usmtr/>)
Mexico-info.com (<http://www.mexico-info.com/nafta.htm>)
The Trade and NAFTA office of Mexico's Ministry of the Economy (<http://222.naftaworks.org/NAFTA/NAFTAHighlights/naftahighlights.html>)
For more critical views of NAFTA and free trade, the following sites may prove useful:
AFL-CIO (<http://www.aflcio.org/globaleconomy/>)
Public Citizen (<http://www.citizen.org/trade/nafta/index.cfm>)
The economic Policy Institute's report on NAFTA after seven years (<http://www.eipnet.org/briefingpapers/nafta01>)
People for Fair Trade (<http://www.peopleforfairtrade.org>)
Global Exchange (<http://www.globalexchange.org/economy>)

Appendix 1: Select segments from *TV Nation Double Feature* video

Volume 1	Segment Description
Free Trade in Mexico	<i>TV Nation</i> travels to Mexico to take advantage of the North American Free Trade Agreement and make the show with cheaper labor and maximize profits—just like GM and Converse
Taxi!	New Yorkers know cabs may be difficult to get at rush hour or during a rainstorm. Black New Yorkers know another reason a cab may be hard to get—drivers refuse to stop for them. <i>TV Nation</i> goes to the streets to find out who is more likely to get a cab in New York City—Yaphet Kotto, a distinguished black actor, or Louis Bruno, a convicted white felon.
Appleton Prison	Appleton, Minnesota, hit hard times. So what did they do to improve the economy? They built a prison, of course, using private and public funds. <i>TV Nation</i> goes to Appleton to discuss with the community the only thing missing to make their dreams come true—inmates.
Love Canal	Remember Love Canal, the small town near Niagara Falls? You may only remember the evacuation that occurred there due to the leakage of toxic waste into homes. But now, some industrious realtors are trying to convince people to move back to the new, less toxic Love Canal.
Looking for Missiles	Remember the Cold War? And threats of nuclear weapons being aimed at us? These weapons are not still a threat are they? <i>TV Nation</i> creator Michael Moore travels to Russia to find the missile still aimed at his hometown, Flint, Michigan, and convince the Russians to redirect it.
5 Million New Jobs	Politicians always talk about the number of new jobs their administration has created. <i>TV Nation</i> talks to a number of people in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to see what “new” jobs they have gotten.
Where to Send Our Boys	The past few years have been busy ones for American troops. Trips to Haiti, Somalia, and Kuwait. <i>TV Nation</i> holds a vote for the American public to decide where the troops will invade in 1995.

Volume 2 Segments

Beach Party	<i>TV Nation</i> invades the public beaches of Greenwich, Connecticut, which are not all that public. The beach is restricted to Greenwich residents only. So <i>TV Nation</i> brings a busload of New Yorkers to enjoy the beach. When the bus is turned away, <i>TV Nation's</i> busload of New Yorkers turn to the sea and swim to the beach.
Slaves	We all know slavery ended in the 1860's, right? Wrong, Mississippi has just gotten around to ending slavery. <i>TV Nation</i> rushes to Mississippi to acquire some slaves before the new law takes effect.
Crackers	<i>TV Nation</i> introduces Crackers the Corporate Crime Fighting Chicken, seven-foot chicken that takes tips and takes action against corporate criminals across the country. In this segment, Crackers talks to New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani about tax breaks given to a company called First Boston to stay in New York. But the company left anyway. Crackers and <i>TV Nation</i> say, “That’s a corporate crime!”
Most Wanted	Brian Anthony Harris is an African-American man living in Washington, D.C. To date, he has been picked up, brought in, and/or arrested over 20 times because he either “looks like a criminal” or because he closely resembles the description of an actual felon-at-large. It has gotten so bad that Harris is afraid to leave his house and drive to his job. <i>TV Nation</i> begins a campaign in Washington complete with bill boards and radio ads to inform all police agencies that “Brain Anthony Harris” is not wanted.
Aquariums of the Damned	Places like Camden, Long Beach, and Tulsa, struggling to get by, have turned to big fish tanks to boost tourism and hopefully save their inner cities. These tourist attractions have failed to turn their communities around. What were town leaders thinking when they devised these “fishy” plans for economic recovery? <i>TV Nation</i> investigates.
Crime Scene Cleanup	<i>TV Nation</i> meets the Barneses, a couple who started a business to cash in on the rise in violent crimes by cleaning up crime scenes. After the bodies are cleared and the police are gone, the Barneses move in, do their business, and collect a hefty profit.
We're # 1	<i>TV Nation</i> visits various cities in America in celebration of their status as #1 in various fields such as Playboy subscriptions and carjacking.

Source: Descriptions from at <http://www.dogeatdogfilms.com/tv/tvarchive.html>.

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