

'Columbine' scores at Cannes

By Michael Giltz

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CANNES, France — "Bowling for Columbine," a biting, funny and sometimes painful new documentary by Michael Moore, has scored the first success of the 55th Cannes Film Festival even before its official premiere today.

The two-hour film uses the Columbine High School tragedy as a springboard to discuss what Moore calls America's "culture of fear." It veers from jabs at U.S. foreign policy to a look at a Michigan militia, from an unnerving talk with James Nichols — brother of Oklahoma City bombing conspirator Terry Nichols — to Moore's trademark ambush interview of Dick Clark. There's even a quick montage of people committing suicide or being shot. But early viewers are most moved by footage taken from a surveillance camera in the Columbine cafeteria on April 20, 1999, when killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold fatally shot 12 students and a teacher before taking their own lives.

Simply competing for the top prize is a triumph for Moore, 48. It's been 46 years since a documen-

Moore documents 'culture of fear'

tary film has even vied for the Palm d'Or.

The film's appearance was heralded on the front page of Variety as marking a new wave of conflict films at Cannes, while The Hollywood Reporter noted strong overseas interest in the film's raucous look at violence in America.

It's far too early in the festival to make predictions, but the response to "Bowling for Columbine" is definitely a change of pace. In recent years, the early days of the competition were littered with the least interesting films. Moore's film has certainly sparked debate among journalists and struck a nerve with the international media, which always seem ready to applaud a jaundiced view of America.

But it's hardly caustic. The film is actually more earnest, heartfelt and ultimately affecting than his earlier work. Moore seems poised for his biggest feature film success since "Roger & Me," the 1989 award-winning indictment of General Motors and the sad state of

Moore's hometown of Flint, Mich., that became one of the top-grossing documentaries of all time and put him on the map.

Those looking for insight into "why" Columbine happened should look elsewhere. Moore avoids that perhaps impossible question by consistently widening his focus to broader issues.

The shootings happened in unincorporated Jefferson County, and Moore points out that defense industry mainstay Lockheed Martin is one of the principal employers in the area. Moore reminds us that on the day of the Columbine shootings, the U.S. was bombing Kosovo. To his credit, Moore doesn't make facile claims for these links; he just raises them as points worth discussing.

"Bowling for Columbine" can be genuinely moving and sad. Certainly the most painful aspect involves the Columbine footage.

"We filed the Freedom of Information Act, and that was part of the material we got," said Kathleen Glynn, a producer on the film



Moore

and Moore's wife. Glynn says the images of students huddling in fear under tables is "horrifying" even after repeated viewings.

"It's still painful for me to watch it," said Moore. But

he wants Columbine to be remembered for the specific, terrifying event it was, not simply reduced to one more name in a list of tragedies.

The film also includes interviews with young men who went to a different school with Harris; students of Columbine who attended the same bowling class (a gym elective) as Harris and Klebold, and Tom Mauser, the father of Danel Mauser, one of the students who was killed. Other diverse highlights include Nichols "jokingly" pretending to blow his own brains out and a goofy animated short describing America's history of fear.