Michael Moore and Propaganda in Documentary Film: Fighting Fire with Fire

© 2010 Brad Hennigan
University of Texas at Dallas
bhennigan@utd.edu

In 2002, Michael Moore released his third feature length documentary film titled *Bowling for Columbine*, which examines America's gun culture against the backdrop of the massacre of thirteen students and teachers at Columbine High School in suburban Littleton, outside Denver, Colorado. The killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, also killed themselves, bringing the death toll to fifteen. Moore was sharply criticized for using techniques such as editing and reassembling speeches to create a meaning inconsistent with the speaker's original intent, and moving events out of chronological order. These techniques were combined with his own statements in a unique, self-deprecating style of narration to make his argument against the proliferation of guns in America more convincing. Moore was labeled a propagandist, while many of his harshest critics proclaimed him an outright liar. Yet *Bowling for Columbine* became the highest grossing documentary film in history, and the film won the 2002 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Two years later, Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11* eclipsed the box office record set by *Bowling for Columbine*, grossing just shy of $120 million domestically, with an additional $103 million overseas ("Documentary" 1). Moore's films consistently meet with tremendous criticism, mostly from people sympathetic to those his films seem to malign. *Fahrenheit 9/11* was no exception: "The film was 'outrageously false,' said White House Communications director Dan Bartlett. 'A pack of lies,' declared radio commentator Rush Limbaugh. Some compared Michael Moore to Adolph Hitler's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels or to his

favorite filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl" (Toplin 2005, 8). Despite his being labeled by many an evil propagandist, four of Moore's films reside in the top ten grossing documentaries in history, five of his films in the top 20. These five films have worldwide box office receipts totaling $342 million ("Documentary" 1). Considering that Moore has only made seven feature documentaries, his record indicates that despite the controversy surrounding his films' accuracy, they clearly appeal to audiences.

Put simply, Michael Moore's critics are correct in labeling him a propagandist. I defend this assertion by examining Moore's use of classic propaganda techniques such as omission, manipulation of cause and effect, contextualization, and traps in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. However, critics are wrong to dismiss Moore because his films are propaganda. I argue that propaganda is not always pejorative, and in fact is rampant in today's media, creating a common "language" that is understood and expected by American viewers. Therefore, in order to remain relevant to a modern audience, Moore rightfully chooses to incorporate propagandist elements in his films. Moore's points of view, while often controversial, are deserving of being heard, and he chooses this common language of propaganda as his mode of dissemination in order to maximize his potential audience.

Defining Propaganda

It is necessary to first establish a working definition of propaganda, a task more difficult than it seems at first blush. Etymologically, the term first appeared in Latin in 1623 to describe the Christian organization charged with spreading the word: *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, or congregation for propagating the faith ("Propaganda" 1). Propaganda was thus established as a means of persuasion. French revolutionaries adopted the term to describe the

dissemination of ideas which led to the overthrow of the French monarchy in 1789. Propaganda took on a distinctly pejorative connotation when it was used extensively by Nazi Germany to glorify the intentions and actions of Adolph Hitler and his Third Reich. This negativity has endured, and today propaganda is typically used to describe the spread of misleading or untrue information, and most often is used by those who disagree with that which is disseminated.

Scholars, however, have recognized that, particularly when dealing with art, a strictly pejorative use of the term is itself narrow and misleading, as it connotes an intent to lie. This "seems to imply that the person persuading believes one thing about a particular state of affairs, yet endeavors to convince others to hold a position contrary to it. A practical problem is that often propagandists do not try to persuade someone to believe a view contrary to what the propagandist actually holds" (Ross 22). A comprehensive yet neutral definition was settled upon by Richard Alan Nelson, and will serve this essay well: "Propaganda is neutrally defined as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels" (Nelson 232).

Nelson's definition allows propagandist techniques to be considered without the burden of the negativity that resulted from the use of propaganda by one as clearly evil as Hitler. Modern media has depended upon the non-pejorative nature of Nelson's definition to make propaganda palatable to the American public. While many of Moore's critics undoubtedly intend their labeling of his films as propaganda to be understood as pejorative, the term is not

necessarily so, and Moore's use of propaganda can and should be considered from a non-pejorative perspective.

Propaganda in *Fahrenheit 9/11*

Fahrenheit 9/11 fits well into Nelson's definition, though it is important to note that Moore was not necessarily intent on persuading those with opposing views that his take on the Bush administration was correct. Rather Moore, by his own admission, wished to create such a firestorm within those who adhered to his politics that they would rush out on election day and vote George W. Bush out of office:

> What I'm asking is that our fellow Americans, as the collective landlord of a public housing project at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., take just a few minutes to evict the tenant who is currently wrecking the place (not to mention what he's doing to the rest of the neighborhood). After all, isn't this one of the coolest things about a democracy, getting to give some payback to those in power? "YOU'RE FIRED!" Oooh, that feels good—especially if the recipient of the pink slip is someone who wants to send your kid off to war. (Dahlgren 28)

His point of persuasion, therefore, was to get the liberal left out to vote. Convincing conservatives to view President Bush's post-9/11 actions with a liberal eye was a long shot at best, and convincing moderates, those perhaps sitting on the fence in regards to their feelings about the Bush administration, would have been icing on the cake.

The first level of influence in Nelson's definition of propaganda is emotion: "Our emotion is the stuff with which the propagandist works....Without it they are helpless; with it, harnessing it to their purposes, they can make us glow with pride or burn with hatred, they can

make us zealots in behalf of the program they espouse" (Edwards 7). To achieve its goal of ousting Bush, *Fahrenheit 9/11* appealed squarely to the emotions of the liberal left, such as their deep-seated hatred of the war in Iraq.

Moore attacks the Bush administration's assertion that Iraq was involved in 9/11, at one point showing then Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice during an interview on CBS's The Early Show, stating, "Oh, indeed there is a tie between Iraq and what happened on 9/11." Here Moore uses omission as a means of persuasion. "One of the most commonly employed propaganda techniques is the omission of relevant or truthful information that works against the propagandist's thesis" (Rhoads 2). Omitted by Moore is the continuation of Rice's statement: "It's not that Saddam Hussein was somehow himself and his regime involved in 9/11, but, if you think about what caused 9/11, it is the rise of ideologies of hatred that lead people to drive airplanes into buildings in New York" ("Cyberalert" 1). Rice clearly states that Saddam Hussein and his regime were not believed to be directly involved in the 9/11 attacks, but this is omitted by Moore because it could detract from his argument. Moore uses omission throughout *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a point his detractors have roundly criticized.

Moore rubs the emotionally open wound of the 9/11 attacks by casting suspicion on the Bush family's ties to Saudi Arabia (most of the attackers were Saudi nationals). Social psychologist Kelton Rhoads explains Moore's use of the propagandist technique of manipulating cause and effect:

> Moore says that Saudi Arabian interests "gave" 1.4 billion to "the Bush family and its friends and associates".... However, *Newsweek* reports that 90% of the amount in question ($1.18 billion) comes from mid-1990 (Clinton-era) contracts

to US defense contractor BDM for training the country's military. The "connection" is that BDM was owned by the Carlyle Group, whose Asian-affiliate advisory board included George Herbert Walker Bush. But G.H.W.B. joined the advisory board 5 months after Carlyle sold BDM. Thus the manipulation of cause and effect: Moore places the ostensible *cause* (G.H.W.B. on the board) *after* the *effect* it was supposed to produce (BDM being asked to train the Saudi military. (Rhoads 15-16)

Moore makes extensive use of the propagandist technique of contextualization, which adds rather than omits information. In one scene, a bucolic Iraqi public is shown flying kites and strolling though parks, followed immediately by a bone-jarring explosion in Baghdad. This juxtaposing of discordant images is purposeful: "Previous scenes set an emotional context for subsequent ones, even if the scenes themselves are unrelated" (Rhoads 7). Though Moore does not explicitly state that a peaceful, innocent Iraq was destroyed by the US war machine, the thought is placed in the viewer's mind. Interestingly, Moore also weaves omission into the same scene: "Moore's portrayal of Iraq under Saddam includes no mention of rape as a weapon of terror, of tongues cut out and victims disemboweled on suspicion of speaking ill of Saddam,…of one in six residents of Baghdad having at least one relative who had been killed by Saddam" (Larner 148). By omitting the multiple negative aspects of Hussein's regime, and bookending images of a serene Iraqi citizenry with horrible Baghdad explosions, Moore is assured of the emotional reaction to a peaceful Iraq blown apart by American capitalist greed that he desires.

Moore also employs propagandist traps, wherein actions are "arranged along a continuum of many possible responses. Whatever response is taken, the propagandist can point to *some other* point along the continuum and claim in the absence of evidence…that it would have been a better solution" (Rhoads 13). Moore extends this technique to include his own control over both directions of the continuum. A prime example of this in *Fahrenheit 9/11* is Moore's claim that Bush was repeatedly given briefs warning of a terrorist threat, but did nothing and thus allowed people to die; and that Bush uses warnings of terror threats that do not occur to manipulate the public through fear.

These clear examples of propaganda techniques in *Fahrenheit 9/11* establish Moore as a propagandist, but the techniques do not discredit the underlying truth statements he makes regarding the Bush administration's post-9/11 actions, though admittedly they open him up to greater scrutiny and criticism. Of importance here is that Moore is not the first documentary filmmaker to employ propaganda, and according to Noel Carroll, propaganda in documentary film does not necessarily connote a pejorative style of filmmaking. Carroll describes two senses of propaganda in documentary, one that "callously twists the facts to polemical ends," and one that is "devoted to persuasion, particularly political persuasion" (Carroll 235). The first sense is perceived as pejorative, while the second is not. Carroll rightfully points out that these two senses often overlap: "It is true that many films that are 'propaganda' in the second sense are also 'propaganda' in the first sense" (Carroll 235). It is fair to characterize Moore as occupying this overlap, as it may be questionable that he, as Carroll terms it, callously twists the facts, but he certainly engages in political persuasion to polemical ends.

Propaganda as an Accepted Language

With Moore firmly established as a propagandist, determining his reasons for utilizing this technique is necessary. We live in a world filled with propaganda: advertising, journalism and popular media (such as television) all employ propaganda techniques, resulting in the maintenance of a collective of common values that are rooted in a capitalist political economy. Social psychologist Larry Gross describes this phenomenon well: "We are parts of a Leviathan, like it or not, and its nervous system is telecommunications…. Never before have all classes and groups (as well as ages) shared so much of the same culture and the same perspectives while having so little to do with their creation" (Gross 190). Much has been written on the dangers of constant and consistent propagandist messages disseminated via the mass media, and though relevant, a discussion of this is not within the parameters of this essay. A brief description, however, of propaganda's use in these forms of media will serve to exemplify its proliferation in modern society.

Advertising is easily identifiable as a propagandist medium, for its function is to persuade consumers to buy particular products. To revisit Nelson's definition of propaganda, advertising is most certainly a purposeful persuasion designed to affect the viewer's emotions, attitudes, opinions and actions, and it does so for commercial purposes. Specific to the modern viewer is the sheer volume of propagandist advertising one is subjected to on a daily basis. "The growth of new techniques of communication has greatly extended the range of propaganda penetration, has expanded the number of products advertised, and has increased the total amount of propaganda disseminated" (McGarry 131). Edmund McGarry wrote this in 1959, reacting to the increase in advertising brought about by television.

Add to this today's advertising on a greatly expanded television (hundreds of cable channels), the internet, popular entertainment (sports venues and events), and even public transportation, and it makes perfect sense that "Yankelovich, a market research firm, estimates that a person living in a city 30 years ago saw up to 2,000 ad messages a day, compared with up to 5,000 today" (Story 1). Assuming one is awake for sixteen hours a day, this equates to exposure to an ad, and by correlation to propaganda, every 11.52 seconds.

Advertising on television works in harmony with the programming it bookends to maintain the collective of common values that define what it means to be American. "News, drama, quiz shows, sports, and commercials share underlying similarities of theme, emphasis, and value…. [Thus] the blending of stylistic conventions allows for a greater efficacy and mutual support in packaging and diffusing common values" (Gross 191). This exemplifies Jaques Ellul's theory of the propaganda of integration, which is used in modern social systems "to promote acceptance and support among its citizens for that system. Integration propaganda is promulgated…in the main channels of communication - newspapers, television, movies, textbooks, political speeches etc. - produced by some of the most influential, powerful, and respected people in a society" (Silverstein 50). Moreover, the blending is not clandestine. On ABC's *Chuck*, virtually every episode includes a much ballyhooed cameo appearance by Subway's latest sandwich creation; on Fox's *American Idol*, the judges always have a large glass of Coca-Cola within reach.

Propaganda within the dissemination of news has increased substantially in the last few decades, raising concerns about the independent press and its role in a democracy. "A free and independent press is one of democracy's most important institutions…. If an issue is distorted

or muted in the press due to corporate pressure or government propaganda, as is often the case, the quality of the debate suffers and the democratic process cannot accurately assess society's problems or prescribe solutions" (Jackson 475). As with other types of television programming, the inclusion of propaganda techniques in news dissemination is not clandestine. Fox News Channel, with its self-proclaimed "fair and balanced" offerings, is overtly pro-business and pro-conservative, while MSNBC (another 24 hour news channel) is unabashedly liberal.

These mass media formats represent a tremendous daily inundation of propagandist messages, and when considering the internet (Youtube, blogs), radio, and periodicals, the daily influx of propaganda borders on obscene. Arguably, this constant stream of propaganda would, over time, create in the viewer an acceptance and expectation of this type of communication, "particularly because it is based upon ideals and biases that are accepted by most members of the society" (Silverstein 50). Succinctly put, the ever increasing inundation of propagandist messages over the last sixty years has triggered a common language of propaganda that is accepted and expected by the U.S. public. Michael Moore recognizes and exploits this common language of propaganda to make his films more accessible and convincing.

Fighting Fire with Fire

During the Iraq war, corporate-owned media conglomerates used this language of propaganda to support the Bush administration's policies, filtering much of the reporting in the first months of the war:

> Television coverage of soldier's activities had been limited to mostly information
>
> that put the servicemen and their actions in a favorable light. "Embedded"
>
> journalists described the soldier's quick progress in the war and their success in

liberating Iraq from the evil dictator Saddam Hussein. Television…showed U.S.

soldiers trying to bring electricity and water to the Iraqi people, build schools for

them, and train the Iraqis to participate in democratic elections. (Toplin 2006,

46)

There is no doubt that these events took place, however the media used propagandist

techniques (omission and contextualization, among others) to paint a one-sided picture of the

war. "The U.S. coverage of the Iraq War was an example of extreme patriotism where the

media functioned as a fine-tuned government propaganda machine. Greg Dyke, Director

General of the BBC during the war,…singled out Fox News for particular criticism over its

blatant pro-war stance" (Jackson 477).

Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* was a direct and important rebuttal to the corporate

media's manipulation of information fed to the U.S. public during the war. Moore chose to

utilize the same propagandist techniques the media used in order to level the information

dissemination playing field. In other words, he decided to fight fire with fire. "Moore

presented a counternarrative and a counterpicture portfolio of the war and its impact on U.S.

servicemen. The words and pictures featured in *Fahrenheit 9/11* were not pretty, but that

ugliness is what made the film distinctive" (Toplin 2006, 47).

Moore also took great care to be accurate in his facts, while admittedly using

propagandist techniques. His website supports the factual claims in the film with more than

two hundred references. The references spring from Moore's attempt to shield himself from a

concerted conservative backlash, as "*Fahrenheit 9/11* gave the political right wing much

ammunition with which to attack him, along with openings to advance the right's own fantastic

takes on truth" (Larner 149).

Propaganda is Here to Stay

Moore's propagandist choices in *Fahrenheit 9/11* reflect an understanding of the

existence of a common language of propaganda in U.S. society. This understanding is certainly

not unique to Moore, it is prevalent elsewhere, and often results in the fighting-fire-with-fire

approach taken by Moore: typically when one media organization (or particular program)

espouses a one-sided view (such as Fox News), another organization or program sprouts up to

counter with a view from the other side (such as MSNBC).

In conclusion, it is of great importance to point out that many of Moore's assertions in

Fahrenheit 9/11 that were most harshly critiqued, in fact called lies, when the film was

distributed have been proven true: Attorney General John Ashcroft *did* tell FBI director Thomas

Pickard, after two briefings in the summer of 2001, that he did not want to hear about terrorist

threats anymore; Bush *was* repeatedly briefed on the possibility of bin Laden attacking the U.S.

by hijacking planes in the month leading to 9/11, but ignored them because he thought they

were historical in nature; White House staff *did* approve exit flights for the bin Laden family and

other Saudi nationals between September 13th and September 24th. Each of these assertions

were corroborated by the 9/11 Commission Report ("9/11 Commission Report" 260-262, 265,

329). Equally important is that a propagandist implication by Moore, that weapons of mass

destruction in Iraq were a fallacy, also proved true.

The importance in pointing out these facts lies in determining whether propaganda has

a place within documentary film. Moore's use of propaganda techniques to emotionally appeal

to U.S. citizens did not discredit the truths he espoused. As I have established, propaganda has become the communicative norm in our society, and it is accepted and expected by modern audiences, a fact supported by the box office performance of Michael Moore's propagandist films. It stands to reason that documentary films should not only reserve a place for propaganda, but should make propaganda a consistent feature. If documentary filmmakers ignore the presence of an accepted language of propaganda in response to critical challenges to the veridicality of their filmic representations, documentary film as a means of communicating with modern audiences will surely slide into obscurity.

Works Cited:

"9/11 Commission Report." *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*. 22 July, 2004. Web.

Carroll, Noel. *Theorizing the Moving Image*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Cyberalert. "Morning Shows Pound Rice on How Baghdad Unsafe, No 9/11-Iraq Tie." *Media Research Center Online*. 1 December, 2003.

Dahlgren, Robert L. "*Fahrenheit 9/11* in the Classroom." *Teacher Education Quarterly* 36.1 (2009): 25-42.

"Documentary." *Box Office Mojo Online*. 7 April, 2011.

Edwards, Violet. *A Group Leader's Guide to Propaganda Analysis*. New Haven: The Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1938.

Gross, Larry. "The Ethics of (Mis)representation." *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*. Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby, eds. Oxford University Press US, 1991.

Jackson, Pamela and James Stanfield. "The Role of the Press in a Democracy: Heterodox Economics and the Propaganda Model." *Journal of Economic Issues* 38.2 (2004): 475 482.

Larner, Jesse. *Forgive Us Our Spins: Michael Moore and the Future of the Left*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006.

Matson, Kevin. "More on Moore." *Dissent* 51.4 (2004): 85-88.

McGarry, Edmund D. "The Propaganda Function in Marketing." *The Journal of Marketing* 23.2 (1958): 131-139.

Nelson, Richard Alan. *A Chronology and Glossary of Propaganda in the United States*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.

"Propaganda." *Oxford English Dictionary Online.* April 2011.

Rhoads, Kelton. "Propaganda Tactics and *Fahrenheit 9/11*." *Workingpsychology.com*. 9 September, 2004.

Ross, Sheryl Tuttle. "Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36.1 (2002): 16-30.

Silverstein, Brett. "Toward a Science of Propaganda." *Political Psychology* 8.1 (1987): 49-59.

Story, Louise. "Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely to See an Ad." *The New York Times* 15 January, 2007.

Toplin, Robert Brent. *Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11: How One Film Divided a Nation*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006.

Toplin, Robert Brent. "The Long Battle Over Fahrenheit 9/11: A Matter of Politics, Not Aesthetics." *Historians Film Committee* 35.2 (2005): 7-16.