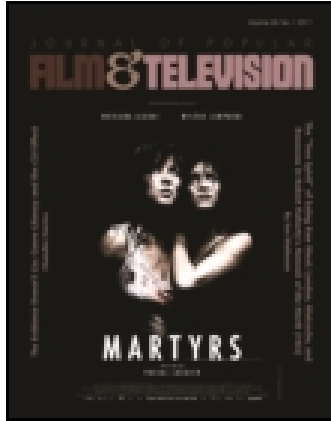


This article was downloaded by: [University College Falmouth]

On: 26 August 2014, At: 06:53

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Popular Film and Television

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vjpf20>

Not a Stupid White Man: The Democratic Context of Michael Moore's Documentaries

Anna Misiak ^a

^a Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

Published online: 07 Aug 2010.

To cite this article: Anna Misiak (2005) Not a Stupid White Man: The Democratic Context of Michael Moore's Documentaries, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 33:3, 160-168, DOI: [10.3200/JPFT.33.4.160-168](https://doi.org/10.3200/JPFT.33.4.160-168)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/JPFT.33.4.160-168>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Not a Stupid White Man

The Democratic Context of Michael Moore's Documentaries

By ANNA MISIAK

Abstract: The author presents the award-winning director Michael Moore as a social phenomenon. His controversial documentary works and public speeches are shown in the context of American democracy. Moore's output is seen through the prism of cultural hegemony as described by Gramsci.

Key words: democracy; documentary; Moore, Michael; political discourse

The controversial documentaries by Michael Moore have provoked public debate on social and political matters since the end of the 1980s. With his films, books (*Dude, Where's My Country?*, *Downsize This! Random Threats from an Unarmed American*, *Adventures in a TV Nation*, *Stupid White Men . . . and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation*), and speeches, Moore at-

tempts to ignite an essential democratic impulse among American citizens. He assumes the role of a provocateur who raises the consciousness of his audiences and offers a polemical voice to the power elite. Whereas Moore's advocates recognize his output as an admirable practical realization of the free speech principle, his adversaries often perceive him as a menace to democratic procedures. Considering the nationwide dispute and the popularity of his movies around the world, the director should be acknowledged as a significant phenomenon on the American political scene at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

In 1988, Michael Moore released his first documentary *Roger and Me*. It held the automobile industry responsible for the impoverishment in the director's hometown of Flint, Michigan. Roger Smith of General Motors symbolized the indifference of corporate



capitalism toward Flint's growing poverty level (Georgakas and Saltz 4). Then, for a short while, Moore worked for television and even managed to produce the feature *Canadian Bacon* (1995). Real popularity, however, escaped him until *Bowling for Colum-*



Michael Moore takes on the war in Iraq in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

bine (2002), an investigative story that takes viewers on a tour from the origin and consequence of omnipresent violence in America through the April 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado.

The “violence” documentary earned

Moore two very prestigious awards: the Special Prize of the fifty-fifth Cannes Film Festival and an Academy Award in 2003. That Oscar night, he took the occasion to pronounce his political opinions in an aggressive and loud manner. His acceptance speech is

remembered well for the words, “We live in fictitious times. We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. . . . Shame on you, Mr. Bush.

Shame on you.”¹¹ Immediately, Moore was accused of exploiting the situation.

Later, during the post-Oscar press conference, he attempted to justify his acceptance speech by declaring, “I’m an American.” And when asked by a surprised journalist, “That’s it?” Moore replied, “That’s a lot.” Then he continued, “I love my country. I love democracy.” Undoubtedly, these words demonstrate the essence of his attitude and provide a reason for all of his undertakings. Moore portrays himself as a devoted believer in American democratic values, and this faith spurs him to action. From the very beginning of his movie career, he puts forward criticism of contemporary American politics and society. According to Moore, democracy is not limited solely to the electoral process but should be practiced to achieve a high level of egalitarianism in American society.

Moore’s incendiary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) disparages the capacity of Republicans to perform governmental duties. Dealing with the presidency of George W. Bush, terrorism, war in Iraq, and the war’s social and political implications, the production instigated much public debate. The social disputation heated up after the director was awarded the Palme d’Or (given for the first time to a documentary filmmaker since Jacques Costeau’s *The Silent World* in 1956) and continued with the difficulties Moore experienced with the film’s American distribution.

Michael Moore came a long way from *Roger and Me* through *Bowling for Columbine* to *Fahrenheit 9/11*. He never conceals that he assumes to fulfill a mission through his documentaries, but, while remonstrating with the failures of corporate capitalism, he appeared to be a social critic. Now with *Fahrenheit 9/11*, he has fully turned into a political agitator. Although the movie’s purpose is to direct viewers’ attention toward hidden facts, he wished this film would awaken the political consciousness of the public. By presenting the Bush administration’s abuse of power, he aimed at influencing the result of the 2004 presidential elections. As he often stressed,

he would be persistent until “this man [George W. Bush] is out of office.”

Expressing his profound discontentment with corporate capitalism, the American Right, corruption, and politics in general, Moore has chosen to make his point of view clear through the documentary form. Nevertheless, his movies are not just imitations of the political realities as he sees them. All through his work in the cinematic field, the director attempts to instruct the American public. His movies are rooted in the tradition of reflexive doc-

All through his work in
the cinematic field, the
director attempts to
instruct the American
public. His movies are
rooted in the
tradition of reflexive
documentary.

umentary. The theoretical standpoint for this mode of filmmaking is grounded in the works of Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard’s postulates, and 1970s British *Screen* journal articles. Very popular among leftist filmmakers and theoreticians, reflexive documentaries serve the intention of challenging the probity of the social and political order of our times’ capitalist and democratic systems.

As Izod and Kilborn write, “The political dimension of the reflexive project lies partly in the way such films imply that people’s memory perception and interpretation of events are distorted by the stereotypes . . . that circulate in our culture” (430). On cinematic grounds, this is exactly the point expressed by Moore. As a declared leftist (Rosenbaum 96), Moore attempts to discourage his audience from accepting the predominant point of view by casting doubt on prevalent assumptions about political and social problems in contemporary America.

The director does not present the counterpoint in a shallow way. His analyses are preceded by careful preparatory work. He makes an effort to trace media information, people’s reactions, and archival materials. Most of all, he is interested in the facts not widely known to the public, and certainly Moore deserves credit for his hard work as a researcher. He should be recognized not only as a filmmaker but also, and maybe most important, as an investigative journalist, who potently reveals the underlying events of political and social matters. What constitutes the core of Moore’s story of America is usually portrayed in the form of superficial and incoherent glimpses on television and in the press. He depicts the other side, usually the darker one, of politics and society.

Moore’s filmic vision of contemporary America comprises the facts that in most cases are not publicized by mainstream media. Through shifting focus to undisclosed political nuances, Moore contrives the strategy of projecting his pictures as personal statements. Instead of speaking as an omniscient narrator, he seeks to capture the imagination of spectators by voicing his subjective concerns. Not only does he send the message, “Look, this is what really happens, and in most cases you are not aware of it,” but usually he indirectly adds, “This is what I found out about the situation.” Furthermore, he appears as one of the characters in his movies, not for the simple sake of showing off but to emphasize that the films are manifestations of his convictions. He titles his film *Roger and Me*, protests in front of Kmart with some of the victims of the Columbine shooting, and tries to persuade congressmen to send their kids to war as soldiers—these are just a few instances of his strong on-screen appearances that form a large part of his rhetorical strategy.

Moore’s documentaries are, as critics call them, “first person tour[s]” (Sharrett and Luhr 36). Commenting on *Bowling for Columbine*, Klawans notices, “On the surface, the director’s latest documentary diatribe is about



Michael Moore takes on American gun violence in *Bowling for Columbine*.

America at its worst. But ultimately, the film reveals as much about the man who made it" (32). Moore's personal appearance serves a strong advantage in his polemic with mainstream media. The information media are impersonal and pretend to be objective. Moore's documentaries surpass them in terms not only of content but also of form. The director-as-participant plays extraordinarily well, particularly when he points out the drawbacks of mainstream media. The encounter between viewers and the filmmaker is emphasized, presenting Moore as a supposed surrogate of his audience.

Michael Moore's self-appearances contribute to his celebrity value and

commercial success. *Roger and Me* grossed over \$7 million (Cohan and Crowds 25), *Bowling for Columbine* \$21.5 million ("Hollywood Abuzz"), and *Fahrenheit 9/11* \$113 million (Box Office Charts), and it became the first documentary to reach number one at the box office during its opening weekend. In their study on the documentary, Izod and Kilborn state, "The reflexive mode has aroused greater interest among observers of documentary than among most members of the public" (430). The numbers quoted certainly challenge this assumption. Moore has forged movies that accommodate both his political goals and still grasp an audience's attention.

Moore's image, which he always puts in the center of his work, is unquestionably appealing to some viewers. He looks like one of the good old boys from the neighborhood. Compared with polished presenters of TV news, he appears to be one of the victims of the system he discusses in his productions. As two critics have characterized, "the reason for his success in the mainstream venues is his big persona—a big potbellied slob from the American heartland in a baseball cap who looks like he buys his clothes in Kmart and sleeps in them" (Sharrett and Luhr 36). Still, some of Moore's adversaries denounce his movie character as nothing more than a working-class stereotype of his middle-class vision. Nevertheless, most agree that the image of the director certainly widens the path of his social reach, but still it does not explain his widespread popularity.

Roger and Me is structured around the social conflicts that are created by capitalist America. What may be seen as desirable on the corporate and governmental levels generates profound negative consequences for the individual citizen and consumer. The American dream and the myth of equal opportunity fail to materialize in this film because of the actions of General Motors, which, due to reorganization, cuts jobs, resulting in impoverished neighborhoods. Those who fall victim to this process are left behind with no help from either the government or GM. Neither democratic nor capitalist ideology offers a solution for them; moreover, they usually become the neglected part of the American population.

Similar social critiques constitute a conspicuous part of Moore's newer productions. His analysis of violence in *Bowling for Columbine* shows how the collective causes of government and capitalism clash with the rights of American individuals, producing paradoxical ideological and social effects that victimize a large part of society. The violence originates on the political level (solving international problems with bombings) and is supported by

corporations producing weapons. These larger patterns are further linked to the right to carry a gun and associated with juvenile crime. Moore sees the fear that is produced by politicians and corporations (including the media) at the root of violence among youngsters.

In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore moves a step further. He aims at stimulating political democratic activity on the part of American citizens. By appealing to the dignity of the American people, he points to the government's exploitation of the lower classes. Although Moore does not directly refer to any masters of social or political thought, as a radical leftist, he situates himself in the Marxian tradition and all through his cinematic activity fulfills the incentives of Antonio Gramsci—the philosophical patron of the American left. Gramsci regards the great role of the intellectual elite in awakening political consciousness of the masses who need to acknowledge their interests to further pronounce them in the public debate. To convince the people to take action, intellectuals are encouraged to critically state problems and put them into an accessible form (Krzemien-Ojak 15–17). After all, according to Gramsci, civil society is the sphere of struggle for people's conscience.

While making *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore assumed he had some power: The nation should exercise its right to deny legitimacy of the government and hold the president accountable for his actions. Moore cherished this Gramscian desire to spur masses into action with expectation of fulfillment. He progressed from the presentation of the capitalist failure, from passive criticism, to the use of the media persona, which he uses in his fight for the political cause, in his struggle for America.

The simple form in which Moore disguises his social message serves precisely the purpose of educating the masses—the Gramscian goal of an intellectual elite. Although he presents quite sophisticated social criticism, it is put in simple language and, therefore, is accessible to almost anyone. To sharpen the parallel between the

fictional totalitarian regime and actions of contemporary American leaders, the director of *Fahrenheit 9/11* adduces the Orwellian vision through his own interpretation of previously produced fictional works on the subject. The title obviously refers to *Fahrenheit 451*. Ray Bradbury's novel and François Truffaut's movie adaptation depict a future society in which books are banned. The fictional world is ruled by a government that prohibits all printed materials and, therefore, attempts to control thinking. The Bradbury/Truffaut social vision resembled

The director issues a
strong caution, warning
citizens of potential
outcomes of the current
administration's policy.

George Orwell's *1984* in terms of its level of extreme manipulation and control. So does Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In fact, the intertextual reference to *1984* is directly pronounced by the narrator toward the end of the film:

George Orwell once wrote: It's not a matter of whether the war is not real, or if it is, victory is not possible. The war is not meant to be won, it is meant to be continuous. Hierarchical society is only possible on the basis of poverty and ignorance. This new version is the past and no different past can ever have existed. In principle the war effort is always planned to keep society on the brink of starvation. The war is waged by the ruling group against its own subjects and its object is not the victory over either Eurasia or East Asia but to keep the very structure of society intact.

The passage is not a precise quote from Orwell but a paraphrase of a section from chapter 9 of the original: "It does not matter whether the war is actually happening, and, since no decisive victory is possible, it does not matter whether the war is going well or badly. All that is needed is that a state of war should exist" (Orwell). Moore regards Orwell's remarks on the essence of a fictional totalitarian

regime as an apposite piece of contemporary America's characteristics. The director issues a strong caution, warning citizens of potential outcomes of the current administration's policy. *Fahrenheit 9/11* opens with the voice-over narration, "Was it just a dream?" and then the whole film provides the answer: What is happening in American politics after 9/11 is dangerous to society and democracy. The worst nightmare of literary and cinematic masters may come true if the society is lulled by the sweet deceptive voices of politicians.

Moore's examination of the political reality leads him to a very pessimistic diagnosis. He draws a parallel between past European dictatorships (especially totalitarian) and the current American administration. It is a not-so-subtle allusion. According to political scientists (Arendt; Friedrich and Brzezinski 3–13), terror is the constituent element of any totalitarian regime. Fear is generated around a supposed enemy. *Fahrenheit 9/11* depicts its contemporary American equivalent: The government raises and lowers security levels, keeping average citizens frightened. This section of the movie is concluded with George W. Bush stating that dictatorship would be much easier. The words of the president obviously are taken out of context, but the frequent security alerts are real. *Fahrenheit 9/11* sends a stern warning that democracy is a delicate system and needs to be guarded at all costs.

Moore demonstrates the menace that comes with George W. Bush's administration, which he presents as not being legitimate enough to govern a free nation. For Moore, Bush is representative of the Republican power elite that abuses the rights of the American people. Both the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq serve the sole purpose of empowering those who rule either financially (direct income from oil) or politically (as defenders of the nation). International conflicts are artificially created to keep the elite in a position of power.

The closest to direct reference to Gramsci is introduced in Moore's dis-

cussion of the political and economic elite. *Fahrenheit 9/11* bares the egoism of the ruling class and its immoral exploitation of those who occupy lower strata of the social hierarchy. The climax of the discussion appears toward the end of the movie. To prove his point, Moore presents a fragment of George W. Bush's speech: "This is an impressive crowd: haves and have-mores. Some people call it 'elite.' I call it 'my base.'" Moore's message, which complies with the Gramscian spirit of bringing social conflicts to the public eye, emerges clearly: The only goal of those who rule is to accumulate both financial and political power at the high cost of abusing average American citizens.

According to Gramsci, the intellectuals should raise the consciousness of the public by critically stating the social and political problems. An average citizen may sense them; however, he or she may face some difficulties recognizing the exploitation suffered. While discussing the drawbacks of Bush's administration, Moore emphasizes logical links between the depicted events. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is divided into sections. The narration units are usually summed up by a voice-over to draw viewers' attention to the core of the problem. For instance, the section discussing the government's unethical reasoning for waging the war that produces deprecation of the soldiers is concluded, "Immoral behavior breeds immoral behavior. When the President commits the immoral act of sending otherwise good kids to the war based on a lie, this is what you get." Simultaneously, pictures of soldiers making racist, sexual comments about a dead Iraqi appear on the screen. Such voice-over commentaries serve a double function: First, they allow the viewer to see the underlying links between juxtaposed facts, revealing their striking pertinence to the overall image of reality emerging from the movie; second, they appeal to emotions of the audience regardless of their educational background, which is another realization of Gramscian postulates for creating an easily accessible, politically engaged discourse.

From the very beginning of his documentary career, Moore's rhetoric drew attention of his adversaries. Just after the festival screenings of *Roger and Me* in New York and Toronto in 1989, Moore was accused by various Michigan newspapers of chronological manipulation of facts. It was pronounced that he made the government

Moore's message . . .
emerges clearly: The
only goal of those who
rule is to accumulate
both financial and
political power at the
high cost of abusing
average American
citizens.

and the corporate capitalists look evil through changing the sequence of real events. Eventually, it was the major reason that *Roger and Me* was not nominated for an Academy Award (Harkness 130). To defend his documentary method, in an interview for *Film Comment*, Moore stated,

It's not fiction. But what if we say it's a documentary told with a narrative style. I tried to tell a documentary in a way they don't usually get told. The reason why people don't watch documentaries is they are so bogged down with "Now in 1980 . . . then in '82 five thousand were called back . . . in '84 ten thousand were laid off . . . but then in '86." . . . If you want to tell the Flint story, there's the Flint story. (Jacobson 23)

The numbers and strict order of events may be interesting for an economist or a sociologist, but they are not what the viewer used to the mainstream Hollywood cinema—Moore's target audience—expects. Moore offers a presentation of difficult political and social problems relying on his spectators' watching habits. First, he attempts to produce an interesting story. Moreover, sometimes he directly makes reference to iconic Hollywood genres:

The most obvious instance is *Fahrenheit 9/11*, in which clips from classical Westerns provide an ironic commentary on the current administration. Catching audiences' attention, it serves its function. Although some critics take it as an explanation, others perceive it as a violation of documentary ethics.

Regarding *Roger and Me*, Pauline Kael put forward heavy charges in *The New Yorker*. She found it unethical to present the poor and lower class victims of the corporate reorganization as comic characters (92). However, most critics see such accusations as unreasonable, as the egalitarian approach of *Roger and Me* justifies comic presentation (Plantiga 49). The satirist-ironic mood is another bow toward the audience to make their reception more enjoyable. The laughter is generated not only to ridicule but also to produce catharsis. We can laugh at the characters, but then the difficult feelings of uneasiness and shame come, which certainly provoke more profound reflections. Similar is the function of comic elements in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Although one of its goals is to poke fun at the incompetent power elite and, most of all, at President Bush, the catharsis still appears: If it is really this way, it is not funny. The social and political message is always at the top of Moore's stylistic endeavors.

With *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore was blamed for having created a shocking image of American social and political reality through careful manipulation of facts. The critical debate that this controversial film instigated revolved around past accusations of violating documentary ethics. Because of that, *Fahrenheit 9/11* produced enough media noise, and the director did not need to add his outrageous speeches to the brouhaha to stir up a wider recognition of his picture.

In Cannes in 2004, Moore's acceptance speech addressed the festival jury, "I have a sneaking suspicion that what you have done here and the response from everyone at the festival, you will assure that the American people will see this film. . . . You've put a huge light on this and many people

want the truth . . . (“Palme d’Or”). This reaction was far from Moore’s Oscar spontaneity, and, significantly, he did not make any direct political comments. Nevertheless, not only the press but also the Republican power elite that is so severely rebuked in the movie quickly responded to Moore’s cinematic provocations.

Although George W. Bush ignored Moore’s movie (he refused an invitation to the premiere in Texas) and the White House announced the movie was “so outrageously false, it [was] not even worth a comment” (“Hollywood Abuzz”), the Republican Party expressed its objections. On July 12, 2004, the Web site of the Republican National Committee posted excerpts from *Slate*, *Newsweek*, *World Tribune*, and the *Washington Post* scorning Moore’s production for twisting and bending the actual events. A longer article titled “The Nine Lies of *Fahrenheit 9/11*” presented a detailed account of Moore’s presumable deceptions. The argument aimed at showing the complete picture of facts that were just glimpsed in the movie. The first of its nine commentaries reads:

National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice is depicted in the movie telling a reporter, “Oh, indeed there is a tie between Iraq and what happened on 9/11.”

The scene deceptively shows the Administration directly blaming Saddam and his regime for the attacks on 9/11 by taking her comments out of context. Now read the entire statement made by Ms. Rice to the reporter:

“Oh, indeed there is a tie between Iraq and what happened on 9/11. 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 led people to drive airplanes into buildings in New York.” (“Nine Lies”)

The author of the article meant it as a revelation of Moore’s manipulation in providing evidence for his movie’s point of view. However, the audiences did not take the Republican perspective for granted. The defenders of *Fahrenheit 9/11* referred to the history of documentary film and often quoted the need to adapt facts to the narrative demands of a nonfiction feature film. Moore is not the first documentarist in

history to be called a liar for his subjectivity. But, after all, should an objective presentation of facts be the ultimate purpose of shooting a documentary? The best answer to this question comes from two critics writing in *Cineaste*:

[Michael Moore] somehow violates the aspirations of objective documentary filmmaking (as if film history hasn’t exposed this delusion decades ago or that he fails to tell both sides of the story) which would make his work about as compelling as network television. Such complaints reveal a conservative impulse having nothing to do with addressing Moore’s real strengths and limitations. (Sharrett and Luhr 36)

If it is to be a powerful form of expression, the documentary must show something more than what an average viewer can see on television. Moore

[S]hould an objective presentation of facts be the ultimate purpose of shooting a documentary?

figured out that the specific difference lies in storytelling techniques and subjectivity.

It is not important to accept the reasoning of just one side of the conflict or the other. The most valuable asset in the whole *Fahrenheit 9/11* controversy is the indirect interaction of the supporters and opponents of the current administration. Finally, the elite in power heard the voice of their political adversary. Although Moore did not convince the ruling party and was mostly discussed in connection to his apparent lies, thanks to him, we observe democracy at work—the political system that allows him to manifest his opinions with no limitations; in fact, it is his indisputable Constitutional right. As the events concerning American distribution of *Fahrenheit 9/11* have shown, this right can be challenged by the corporate powers.

On May 5, 2004, when Michael Moore was to screen *Fahrenheit 9/11* in Cannes, it was reported that Disney—the parent company of Miramax (the movie investor)—refused to release the movie (Thomson C01). Disney wanted to avoid any involvement in the controversial project. An engagement in the public debate touching on social and political conflicts could hurt the overall box office of the company. Immediately, Disney executives were accused of making a politically biased decision.

Disney publicly denied any political allegiance, as chief executive and media mogul Michael Eisner said, “The company did not want a film in the middle of the political process where we’re such a nonpartisan company and our guests, that participate in all of our attractions, do not look for us to take sides” (“Disney Blocking”). However, Moore discerned other underlying reasons behind Disney’s decision. He assumed that the company feared losing its tax breaks in Florida once the film offended the state governor, Jeb Bush, who also appears in the film. Disney dismissed this argument, and, much to Moore’s disappointment, the executives held fast to not releasing the film.

In an interview that followed the decision, Moore asked a rhetorical question: “Should this be happening in a free and open society where the monied interests essentially call the shots regarding the information that the public is allowed to see?” (Rutenberg). The director found himself in a position resembling that of some of his movie characters—trapped by the powers of corporate capitalism obstructing an execution of the democratic right to free expression.

Still, Moore trusted in overcoming the limits that resulted from the clash of capitalism and democracy. On May 5, 2004, he posted a message on his Web site: “Some people may be afraid of this movie because of what it will show. But there’s nothing they can do about it now because it’s done, it’s awesome and if I have anything to say about it, you’ll see it this summer—because, after all, it’s a free country” (Moore, “Disney”).

Meanwhile, the public debate over *Fahrenheit 9/11* began. On May 10, 2004, KCRW Radio in Los Angeles aired its daily political discussion show *Which Way L.A.?* with an episode titled "Is There Censorship in Film and Television?" which was critical in tone not only of Disney but also, among others, of Sinclair Broadcasting's decision not to show ABC's *Nightline* program featuring the naming of American soldiers killed in Iraq. On May 5, 2004, Senator Frank R. Lautenberg called for Senate censorship hearings in connection with the Disney and Sinclair decisions. In his letter to the chairman of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, Lautenberg wrote, "I am concerned that Americans are facing an emerging threat of political censorship—not from the government—but from some of our nation's largest corporations" ("Senator").

Although the public debate did not conclude with an immediate response from Congress, it voiced some citizens' considerations about media moguls attempting to limit civil liberties in the United States, but most of all it stimulated widespread interest in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Americans wanted to see the controversial movie and protested Disney's infringing on the right of the public to access the film. Just when the public dissent intensified, Miramax founders, Bob and Harvey Weinstein, bought the rights to *Fahrenheit 9/11* from Disney and decided to distribute it through Lions Gate Films and IFC Films. Eventually, the movie opened on June 25, 2004 (Breznican).

After the struggle for distribution of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore's strong faith in the democratic process came true. He was able to perform his role as educator, agitator, and social critic. Although Moore could pronounce his partial victory on June 25, 2004, many people expressed further reservations about his approach. Commonly, the director is accused of fashioning a propaganda piece. In the United States and Europe, many journalists and politicians found *Fahrenheit 9/11* repugnant. Most of them echo Ed Koch, the

former New York City mayor, "I went to see 'Fahrenheit 9/11.' The movie is a well-done propaganda piece and scribed as has been reported by most critics. . . . The most significant offense that movie commits is to cheapen the political debate . . . and reinforce the opinions on both sides." Similarly, a critic in *Variety* asks, "Is Moore objective? Absolutely not" (Nesselson 24). In contrast, Moore sees himself as a political agitator who does not speak in the name of objectivity but seeks to convince the public of his point of view.

Propaganda can be understood as a method of directing people's behavior under democratic circumstances. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore scrutinizes the controversial presidency of George W. Bush, and his work certainly is repre-

In his movies, Moore
presents his subjective
opinions, but at the
same time he speaks
out for a part of the
American left.

sentative of propaganda, which in a democracy should not always be considered a dishonest and negative strategy. Persuading voters during a political campaign also shows only one side of an argument and, thus, is propagandist in nature (Pratkanis and Aronson). Propaganda does not need to imply false information; it just supports a particular point of view. Furthermore, it is a part of every existing democratic system.

In any democracy, the government is also granted the right to maintain its own public relations institutions, which, through various links to mainstream media, have an impact on the presentation of facts transmitted to the public (Pratkanis and Aronson). Having recognized the political authorities as a key factor in shaping mainstream media communication practices, the

need for a counterbalance appears quite evident. If the political opposition stays quiet, the aggressive public relations-filtered promotion of the government currently in power would inundate the public discourse.

The main prerequisite of representative democracy is based on an assumption that an average citizen enjoys free and equal access to any political debate. However, most government and corporate public relations activities interfere with such individual expressions. To maintain their influence on foreign and domestic policy, not only must the opponents of the government in power produce information for the public so as to confront the incumbents' political views, but they also need to make themselves understandable and popular to a wide and diverse audience. During the 2004 presidential election, Michael Moore succeeded in this charge with *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Moore's documentaries perfectly fit the current American public debate. Articulating a leftist perspective, he preserves the equipoise of the political discourse. In his movies, Moore presents his subjective opinions, but at the same time he speaks out for a part of the American left. While filling the leftist niche in the public debate, he manages to make his voice heard, and in turn he hopes to convince not only declared leftists but the whole society of his perspective. As Ralph Dahrendorf notes, democracy can operate properly only if there is a dual effort of the authorities and citizens. Still, both parties can be perceived as a threat to democracy: The government can possess too much power, whereas agitating citizens can destabilize the system (Jakubowicz 11–12). In the debate surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore accuses the power elite of forcing dictatorial policy; at the same time, his detractors claim he polarizes the nation and interferes with the country's stability. In hoping to mobilize public opinion, Moore represents one citizen's commitment to democratic values and their preservation. It is crucial to let both sides publicly express their opposing points of view. The foremost threat to democracy resides in limiting

any citizen the right to speak out freely on any issue of great national interest.

NOTE

1. Michael Moore's Oscar acceptance speech and post-Oscar press conference can be accessed at <http://www.peace.ca/michael_moore_oscar.htm/>.

WORKS CITED

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: World Publishing, 1958.
- Box Office Charts. Aug. 11, 2004. Aug. 13, 2004 <http://movies.yahoo.com/box_office/latest/rank.html>.
- Brecht, Bertold. "Against Georg Lukacs." *Aesthetics and Politics: Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertold Brecht, Georg Lukacs*. Ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor. London: Verso, 1980. 60–85.
- Breznican, Anthony. "Moore Releases 'Fahrenheit 9/11' Trailer." *Chicago Tribune Online Edition* June 3, 2004. June 4, 2004 <<http://www.chicagotribune.com>>.
- Cohan, Carley, and Gary Crowdus. "Reflections on *Roger & Me*." *Cineaste* 28.4 (1990): 25–30.
- Dahrendorf, Ralph. "Zagrożone społeczeństwo obywatelskie" ["Endangered Civil Society"]. Ed. Krzysztof Michalski. *Europa i społeczeństwo obywatelskie: Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo* [Europe and Civil Society. Conversations in Castel Gandolfo]. Warszawa: Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego; Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1994. 222–363.
- "Disney Blocking Release of Moore's 9/11 Film." May 5, 2004. June 7, 2004 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4906829>>.
- Friedrich, Carl, and Zbigniew Brzezinski. *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965.
- Georgakas, Dan, and Barbara Saltz. "Michael and Us: An Interview with Michael Moore." *Cineaste* 23.3 (1998): 4–7.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- Harkness, John. "Roger and Me." *Sight and Sound* 59.2 (Spring 1990): 130–31.
- "Hollywood Abuzz about 'Fahrenheit 9/11.'" May 24, 2004. June 7, 2004 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5050832>>.
- "Is There Censorship in Film and Television?" *Which Way LA?* KCRW Radio, Los Angeles. May 10, 2004. June 20, 2004 <<http://www.kcrw.com>>.
- Izod, John, and Richard Kilborn. "The Documentary." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Ed. John Hill and Pamela Church. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 426–33.
- Jacobson, Harlan. "Michael & Me." *Film Comment* 25.6 (Nov./Dec. 1989): 16–26.
- Jakubowicz, Karol. "Media and Democracy." *Media and Democracy*. Ed. Karol Jakubowicz. Strassbourg—Cedex: Council of Europe Publishing, 1998.
- Kael, Pauline. "The Current Cinema: Melodrama, Cartoon, Mess." *The New Yorker* Jan. 8, 1990: 92.
- Klawans, Stuart. "Moore's Dystopia." *Film Comment* 38.6 (Nov./Dec. 2002): 32–35.
- Koch, Ed. "Koch: Moore's Propaganda Film Cheapens Debate, Polarizes Nation." *World Tribune* June 29, 2004. Aug. 8, 2004 <<http://www.rnc.org/news/read.aspx?ID=4386>>.
- Krzemien-Ojak, Slaw. "Filozoficzne myślenie Antonia Gramsciego" ["Antonio Gramsci's Philosophical Thinking"]. Ed. Zbigniew Kuderowicz. *Filozofia XX wieku* [20th Century Philosophy]. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 2002. 2: 6–31.
- Moore, Michael. "Disney Has Blocked the Distribution of My New Film." May 5, 2004. June 8, 2004 <<http://www.michaelmoore.com>>.
- . *Downsize This! Random Threats from an Unarmed American*. New York: Crown, 1996.
- . *Dude, Where's My Country?* New York: Warner, 2003.
- . *Stupid White Men . . . and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation*. New York: Harper Trade, 2004.
- Moore, Michael, and Kathleen Glynn. *Adventures in a TV Nation*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2003.
- Nesselson, Lisa. "Bowling for Columbine." *Variety* May 27, 2002: 24.
- "The Nine Lies of *Fahrenheit 9/11*." Republican National Committee. July 12, 2004. Aug. 5, 2004 <<http://www.rnc.org/news/read.aspx?ID=4386>>.
- Orwell, George. 1984. Mar. 8, 2005 <<http://www.george-orwell.org/1984/16.html>>.
- "Palme d'Or to 'Fahrenheit 9/11' by Michael Moore." May 23, 2004. June 7, 2004 <http://www.festival-cannes.fr/films/fiche_film.php?lague=6002&id_film=4201423>.
- Plantiga, Carl. "The Mirror Framed: A Case for Expression in Documentary." *Wide Angle* 13.2 (Apr. 1991): 40–53.
- Pratkanis, Anthony, and Elliot Aronson. *Wiek propagandy: Używanie i nadużywanie perswazji na co dzień* [Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion]. Trans. Jerzy Radzicki and Marcin Szuster. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2003.
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Are You Having Fun?" *Sight and Sound* 59.2 (Spring 1990): 96–100.
- Rutenberg, Jim. "Disney Forbidding Distribution of Film That Criticizes Bush." *New York Times Online Edition*. May 5, 2004. June 7, 2004 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.
- "Senator Lautenberg Calls for Censorship Hearings after Disney Refuses to Release Documentary Because of Fear of Political Retribution." May 5, 2004. June 7, 2004 <<http://lautenberg.senate.gov/~lautenberg/press/2003/01/2004505B39.html>>.
- Sharrett, Christopher, and William Luhr. Rev. of *Bowling for Columbine*. *Cineaste* 28.2 (Spring 2003): 36–38.
- Thomson, Desson. "'Fahrenheit 9/11': Connecting with a Hard Left." *Washington Post* May 18, 2004: C01.

ANNA MISIAK holds a PhD in sociology from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, in Warsaw, Poland. She was a Fulbright grantee at the School of Cinema-Television at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and a Polish-Czech government grantee at Charles University in Prague. She works for the American Studies Center, Warsaw University. Her research work and reviews have been published in Polish and Canadian academic journals. Her interests include film, freedom of speech, media studies, and sociology.
