

Fast train coming

The political pedagogy of *Fahrenheit 9/11*

Mandy Merck

This August, when *Fahrenheit 9/11* had long since surpassed all records to become the most commercially successful documentary ever made, the *New Yorker* ran an article anxiously attempting to establish it within a generic tradition stretching from Grierson and Flaherty to Fredric Wiseman and Errol Morris. Like Grierson, the *New Yorker's* Louis Menand argued, Michael Moore focuses on 'the drama of the doorstep'¹ (presumably that of ordinary life rather than the dramatic doorstepping that the director also practises with such élan). Like Flaherty, whose apparent anthropological studies were often arranged reenactments of obsolete customs, Moore frequently stages the events he films. Like Wiseman, who unapologetically avows that his institutional portraits are 'totally fictional in form although ... based on real events', Moore's films are markedly subjective. Like Morris's *Fog of War*, which includes footage of former US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara checking sound levels before a statement to camera, *Fahrenheit 9/11* displays a whole line-up of White House heavies anxiously preparing to perform on air. In seeking to place this film in cinema history, Menand reaches all the way back to Lumière's 1895 *Arrival of a Train*, and argues contrary to legend that its audiences, like Moore's, knew they were watching a film, not a massive machine about to flatten them. None of this is entirely beside the point, but no documentary film has taken \$100 million in six weeks at the US box office, or been pronounced mandatory viewing by the previous president of that country, let alone assumed to be a crucial influence on the re-election hopes of his successor. The faint praise of the *New Yorker* obscures those killer facts, as well as *Fahrenheit 9/11* itself.

Critical physiognomy

Moore's work has been described as performative documentary, suggesting that the director's own appearances in his films amount to performances that point to all documentaries' 'performed' or constructed nature.² The director cheerfully agrees. As he told *Film Comment*, 'I believe everybody who appears on camera knows that the camera is on them, and you can't help but behave in a different way. It's all performance at some level.'³ From *Roger and Me* through *TV Nation* to *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore's on-screen persona has not only become firmly established (the comically deflating everyman – shambling, bespectacled and unshaven), it is now extremely famous. His 2003 Academy Award speech denouncing Bush and the Iraq War made him an international star, and now America can see him coming.

For a doorstepping reporter this is something of a disadvantage, and Moore changes tactics in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Throughout most of the film he is invisible. Indeed, a good

deal of its original footage has not been filmed by Moore at all, but instead acquired from sympathetic network and military sources. Although he figures prominently in interviews with *House of Bush*, *House of Saud* author Craig Unger and dissident FBI agent Jack Cloonan, as well as bereaved mother Lila Lipscomb, Moore stages only two of his characteristic stunts in the entire film. The first, and funnier, of these involves Moore hiring a Washington ice-cream van to read the Patriot Act over its loudspeaker to members of Congress. In the second, he attempts to persuade these legislators to enlist their own children in the war they voted for, and they do indeed see him coming. Asked about the 'personality cult' that has developed around him, Moore acknowledges this as further reason for rationing his appearances in *Fahrenheit 9/11*: 'I don't want the public to think that I'm the one who's going to correct the problem.... I'm asking them to do that.... The catharsis has to happen on November 2.'⁴

If Moore's reluctance to appear on camera is strategic, it is certainly understandable, since *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a great exercise in critical physiognomy.⁵ Its key sequence occurs round the titles, which are deferred until the film has narrated the 2000 election, the role of Murdoch's Fox News in calling it for Bush, its condemnation by African Americans in Congress, and Bush's vacation-filled early months in office. Following the president's own protestations that he's really hard at work, this work is suggested to be also that of performance, with Dubya, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice and Wolfowitz shown being groomed and miked for television as the titles roll. The trope's familiar association of such preparations with deception doesn't compromise their fascination. In particular, Bush's adolescent grimaces and nervous eye movements (including one spookily recalling Norman Bates at the end of *Psycho*) are offered as revelations of his character, setting up the subsequent sequence showing his stunned response to the 9/11 attacks.

Formally, the film's opening sequences are its most accomplished, effectively evoking the surreal quality of American politics from Moore's first question, 'Was it all just a dream?' The nightmarish feeling of those months is intensified by slow motion and punctuating fades to black, leading to 38 seconds of darkness, explosions and screams from 9/11 itself. In a reversal of this device, these sounds then cease over a ghostly montage of shredded paper, fleeing people and devastated survivors. Throughout these sequences Moore performs off-camera, in a narration by turns ironic, indignant, sardonic and sad.

Over to Bush on that fateful morning, already aware of the first crash but, ever the photo-opportunist, proceeding with his Florida classroom reading of *My Pet Goat*. Then the second occurs, and an aide whispers to him 'The country is under attack.' My favourite construal of Bush's reaction to this announcement was the *Private Eye* cover of him being told 'It's Armageddon, sir', and replying 'Armageddon outahere!' Whatever he was thinking initially appears as another physiognomic puzzle, but Moore then pre-empts this by launching the first major contention of his film, that the president was concluding that the perpetrators were Saudis, rogue members of the families who were business partners and friends of the Bushes.

This is, to use one of the more polite descriptions it has evinced, a tendentious way to introduce Unger's evidence of the financial alliances between the Bushes and the Saudi ruling class, including the Bin Ladens. Although the film goes on to raise powerful questions about the permission granted to members of that family to leave the United States immediately and unquestioned, and although it indicates something of the Saudi money invested in Dubya's dry wells and his father's more successful interests, it attributes rather more prescience to Bush than seems plausible, while crudely conflating the Saudi royal family, Saudis generally and al-Qaeda activists (many, of course, not Saudi). As with the film's ridicule of the USA's less powerful allies in the Iraq War (the Netherlands represented by a large joint), ethnicity threatens to replace exploitation as

the issue in question. And nowhere is this clearer than in the derisive roll-call of the Coalition, which ignores the participation of the less dismissible Spain, Italy and the UK, and never examines the role of Blair as its cheerleader.

To be fair, a filmed version of Unger's book would have taken up the whole of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s two hours, and still failed to convince the likes of Louis Menand that the war in Iraq 'was about money'. To develop precisely that argument, Moore eventually refocuses in sequences indicting American-installed Afghan President Hamid Karzai's involvement with the US oil pipeline company Unocal; Marine recruiters cynically targeting poor teenagers for enlistment; Bush's black-tie banqueting of 'the haves and have mores' who constitute his 'base'; US corporations preparing to score super-profits in Iraq; and, finally, in a quotation Moore reads from Orwell, the 'ruling group's' perpetual war on its own subjects to keep its interests intact.

Political economy

Outlined like this, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a work of the most audacious economism, saluted by John Berger for reviving 'one of the main theses of Marx's interpretation of history'.⁶ To make it palatable for Menand, Bill Clinton, producer Harvey Weinstein and the millions of other non-Marxists who have gone to see it, Moore interweaves its material analysis with a more popular cause – to wit, opposition to an unjustified, brutalizing and murderous conflict conducted by a unelected cabal fronted by a moron. In filmic terms, this opposition is sustained by the acute use of archive footage (most impressively, that of black congresswomen gavelled down while trying to record the exclusion of their constituents from the 2000 electoral rolls) whose previously unseen status is itself an indictment of the class interests of the US media.

As ever with Moore's work, the film is an essay in political pedagogy, and this time he casts an exemplary student in Lila Lipscomb, a conservative Democrat radicalized by her soldier son's death in Iraq. Patriotic, religious and wholly without irony,



Arrival of a Train, Lumière, 1895 (detail).

Lipscomb is meant to be false consciousness in the flesh, until her son's letters alert her to the futility of the war in which he later dies. If not quite the conversion experience visited upon the redeemed stripper in the anti-porn documentary *Not a Love Story*, her transformation is still unconvincing, in part because Lipscomb is already an articulate critic of economic injustice when we first meet her. More importantly, her appearances before the camera generate suspicion for the same reason that Bush's do, because the film has made us hyper-alert to them as *performances*. Despite her protestations to a passer-by that her tearful visit to the White House isn't staged, the Jerry Springer style of her emoting is too identifiably mediated to be entirely engaging.

Lipscomb, of course, is a stand-in for Moore, another angry, overweight activist from the devastated Michigan town where he grew up and made *Roger and Me*. But no surrogate can deflect attention from the real star of this documentary, however off-screen. And here Moore's foregrounding of performance, particularly mediated performance, rebounds on him. Thus, when I proposed seeing *Fahrenheit 9/11* to a BBC documentary director, she declined, with a very uncharacteristic diatribe about how Moore made millions from his films and treated his researchers badly. Similarly, in the liberal press ('the preening Michael Moore', 'buffoonish self-aggrandisement'⁷) Moore's work seems to attract such *ad hominem*s, since its interest in the deceptiveness of mediated performance directs the spectator to scrutinize his own, in and out of his films. In apparent acknowledgement of this, *Dude, Where's My Country?* includes a letter from the author to the president, thanking him for his 4 per cent tax cut in a year where his savings were more than Bush and Cheney's combined – and then pledging them to the campaigns of opposition candidates. 'There is great irony', he admitted to the *Guardian*'s Gary Younge, 'that, by railing against the wealthy, I have had the fortune of this financial success.'⁸

Can Moore's candour about his financial success re-establish the sincerity of his public persona? It certainly can't bridge the gap between representation and reality that his own performative documentaries disclose. But Moore's success may be the point. Surely the closest precedent for his career is not that of Grierson or Morris but of an earlier 'publicist of genius' criticized by E.P. Thompson for 'glibness' and described in his lifetime as 'no Examiner'.⁹ Like Moore, this self-educated egalitarian stood for a graduated income tax, public funding for education and pensions, arbitration instead of war. And, as we know (not least by his own statements), his publications broke all sales records. Such was their fame that they vastly extended a public sphere confined by limited literacy. Recently Tom Paine's writings have been reconsidered as a harbinger of modern celebrity culture – massified, commercial, phantasmatic but (sometimes) transformative.¹⁰ If the polemics of his political descendant have anything like their influence, Bush could lose on 2 November. On the other hand, that train could run over us all.

Notes

1. Louis Menand, 'Nanook and Me', *New Yorker*, 9 August 2004, pp. 90–96.
2. Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 153–80.
3. In an interview with Gavin Smith, 'The Ending Is Up to You', *Film Comment*, July–August 2004, p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*
5. I'm indebted to Laura Mulvey for this observation.
6. John Berger, 'The Beginning of History', *Guardian*, 24 August 2004, p. 13.
7. Mary Riddell, 'This Is No Parody President', *Observer*, 5 September 2004, p. 28; Kent Jones, 'Much More', *Film Comment*, July–August 2004, p. 20.
8. Gary Younge, 'The Capped Crusader', *Guardian*, 4 October 2003, reprinted in Michael Moore, *Dude, Where's My Country?*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2003, p. 262.
9. William Blake, quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 98–102.
10. Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, Reaktion, London, 2001, pp. 107–10.