

Documentary Rhetoric, Fact or Fiction? University Students React to the Film, *Bowling for Columbine*

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As reader's will quickly notice, the picture of a Website devoted to questioning Moore's perspective is "out of focus." But it is precisely this "out of focus" notion of reality that this essay raises. How can we draw a distinction between fact and fiction in this postmodern age; between what is "clear" and in focus and what is not?

Introduction

In American schools, violence has evolved as one of our most riveting social problems. The FBI reported at least 28 cases of school shootings since 1982 (Diket & Mucha, 2002). Educators are concerned about the growing number of violent acts in schools across America and seek reasons and results. They insist that teachers pay attention to the pictures students create, discuss violence and related issues with them, and make time to talk about understanding a volatile world (Susi,

2001; Diket & Mucha, 2002). Freedman (1997) earlier advocated that teachers encourage students to examine the media. Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) advocate that teachers examine visual culture, notably the theme of violence, and its socio-cultural context. Jagodzinski (1997) points out baby-boomer nostalgia and baby-buster counter-nostalgia as the real problem. Parents avoid the issues of violence and obscene influences. They want to return to their safe childhood. Schools do the same, consider the theme too controversial and thereby ignore the growing problem. Teachers need studies that report the results of practical investigation with students that lead to further examination of this complex problem of violence.

Purpose

As part of my new art education course, Teaching Visual Culture, I encourage my students to be more reflexive. *Reflexivity* is the process of becoming aware of one's immersion in the everyday and popular culture in order to examine one's own position, sometimes through intertextuality. The inclusion of another text and its meaning inside a dominant text, is called *intertextuality*. In this case, the inserted text is history. The assumption is that viewers understand the inserted message (Sturken, & Cartwright, 2001, p. 256). Current trends also assume that viewers understand the history of media and cultural products and their truth.

I arranged for students, a class of 24 university art education majors (mostly Caucasian, only one African-American student), to suggest a film of their choice to critique. Two students suggested *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2003) and the class consented to discussing it. The film sequence that they watched in class was the "History of America" by the South Park animator Matt Stone. They wrote their first impressions. At home, many students watched the entire video as well. All students returned to class the following week to discuss it. After reading and analyzing their reactions, I was surprised to find

that students were awe-struck by Michael Moore's powerful film work, as were the judges at the 2002 Academy Awards when he won the Best Documentary and the 55th Anniversary Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002.

Overview of the Film

The main thread of Michael Moore's (2003) documentary is the Columbine massacre where two students opened fire on fellow students before turning the weapons against themselves, thus plunging the entire country into stupefaction and horror (Marque, 2003). The movie opens with the report, "It was another typical morning.... The President bombed another country... and two boys went bowling in the morning...." The seemingly innocuous report is loaded with subversive messages. Moore's scathing new documentary attempts to find answers to the question why American culture is steeped in violence and fear (Topel, 2003). He interviews the head of a bank that gives away guns, a high school drop-out who's disappointed he only made number two on the town's bomb threat list, South Park creator Matt Stone, shock rocker Marilyn Manson, and Charlton Heston, President of the NRA. The film is amazingly complex as the meanings unravel.

Research Methods

I used a simple questionnaire, followed by a class discussion that I audiotaped and transcribed. I adapted questions from educator Pang (1991) who advocated teaching children about social issues. She wanted to examine cultural stereotypes by asking children their opinions about cartoons in the daily newspaper. I found her questions leading and limited. I kept her questions about purpose, characterization, power, vocabulary labeling, voice [dialogue], and added others involving morals and truth. My findings include questions, examples of students' responses, a discussion with reference to critics of Moore's film, and

history of Moore's film tactics. The structure of Pang's questions is rhetorical and lead to further questions, similar to Moore's use of rhetorical fiction, which is discussed at the end of this paper.

Findings

Students heartily applauded Moore's view of the importance of guns in a brief history of the United States. Students were enthralled with Moore's provocative essay on gun violence in the United States. Like so many reviewers, students find Moore's charisma and persuasiveness as a showman very entertaining. He also has a history for faking scenes and so people cannot believe all they see. Moore is skillful enough that we don't recognize when we're being fooled. His ambushing Charleston Heston for an interview is a bit of counter violence. So what happened to dialogue or is this a Moore monologue? Regardless of how dubious its documentary tactics may be, *Bowling for Columbine* is powerful, thought provoking (Berardinelli, 2002).

What is violence? Students responded: an act of aggression against someone; an angry action, something hurtful or bad stuff on a massive scale; something dangerous; causing physical or mental pain against someone else or yourself, and a state of disharmony. In summary, violence is an unjust exercise of power.

What is your first impression? Some students regarded the opening as "surreal in its juxtaposition of bowling with children playing with guns." Others found it confusing. Still others were shocked to discover that a person can "really open a bank account to get a free gun" in Colorado.

What is your overall reaction?

Students found the documentary to be entertaining, funny, and educational. Several students regarded the interviews as strange, hyper, but revealing. They were generally amazed at connections Moore made between Lockheed Martin, the world's largest weapons manufacturer located in Littleton, Colorado and the Columbine shootings which took place near there. Another shocking linkage was the story of a six-year old boy who shot a six-year old girl near his depressed hometown of Flint, Michigan and the welfare-to-work program that forced his mother to work and leave her children unattended. One student found the film very racist and deliberately offensive. Another student thought the portrayal was blunt and negative.

What is the film's purpose? Most students thought the purpose of the film was to expose the United States' preoccupation with guns and scare tactics. Some students pointed out, "Even a baby or a dog can own a gun (in the animation sequence). The whole movie depicts human fear not just guns!"

How does the animator characterize people? In the animation sequence, students noticed that Matt Stone drew the characters all the same, "with big heads and eyes, just different colors." I asked further, "Does the animation have a balance of characters?" Students generally found racial balance with a few token women, such as the Salem witches, children, and old folks. All characters are the same age and no one has a (obvious) disability. My one African American student noted, "the depiction of Native People as savages and African Americans as poor slaves as in early history books. White Americans are made to look ignorant. Historically, it showed how it all started with the pilgrims coming over and killing the Indians with guns." Another student interpreted, "It is a dark humorous animation that exploits many

American atrocities. A female student complained, "The film focuses on guns and fear from a male chauvinist view and I would like American history told from a female perspective." Students realized that the animation sequence was a satirical play on America's gun civilization. Later, I rented the video when it was released and was stunned to see that the animation, the most creative part of the documentary, was missing. Oh well, it must have been an example of overkill [pun] anyway.

What words are used to label certain groups of people? Examples that students cited were "savages or injuns" for Native Americans and "negroes" for Afro Americans. **What words put down people?** One student noticed that the director equated groups such as the KKK with the NRA throughout the film to suggest white supremacist groups. These organizations have different agendas, even though Moore equates them and makes them overly simplistic.

What literary devices do you notice? Feldman (1970) earlier suggested that art teachers examine the literary components of cinematic forms, such as place, sequence, plot, and symbols. Students discovered that Moore's filmic sequence suggests that United States history is cyclical—the same old war games, but rearranged historical facts. The plot is one big "race and chase" scenario implied a female student. Although the documentary place starts in Columbine Colorado, the exploration expands to include choice United States and world sites. The documentary is "full of overstatement," guessed a second student. Another student noted that Moore blames the US government "for every social ill from the Y2K scare, Killer Bee panic, drive-by shootings, and the terrorists as evil doers." A fourth student suggested that the US government is symbolized as "a bullet or bomb." Students seem overwhelmed by the spectacular drama.

How does the music contribute to the sense of the film? Students found that the music episodes were emotionally effective at particular places in the movie. An example was Nat King Cole's song, "What a Wonderful World" that accompanies quick edits of Saddam speaking, 3,000 people murdered in Kuwait, and such headlines as US bombs Iraq weekly in 1991, 500,000 children died of bombing or sanctions, and ends with the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. This sequence ends with the sarcastic statement, "It's a great place to raise children."

Who is pictured as powerful? Power is the ability to influence and control people. Students definitely agreed "the white guys are powerful because they have the guns." **Who is the weakest?** They all agreed that the white guys also were weak, "trigger happy, scared men."

Several students replied the African Americans were the strongest because "they withstood maltreatment." **Who is the smartest?** Another student felt the animated bullet that acted as narrator seemed the brightest. A third student sarcastically quipped, "Looks pretty black and white to me."

Whose voice predominates? Freedom to give an opinion is voice. In the animation sequence, some students found that the narrator spoke fast with a southern accent, which made him appear ignorant and uneducated. One student noted, "The people have an exaggerated Southern white accent and Moore puts down ignorant people who need to be put down." Moore seems to be sarcastic and "mocks Americans in general." I challenged students, "What is ignorance and who determines it?"

What is the nature of dialogue here? Students realized that there was little dialogue between characters. They noted, "The animation is

narrated by a dancing bullet and the tone or style is in-your-face humor." In the film, director Michael Moore goes after Charleston Heston with the camera, which appears to be an aggressive act. The ambush interview is a Moore trademark and he used it to trap Charlton Heston to unmask himself as uncaringly racist (Fauth, 2003)." I summarized, "The film is full of binary oppositions or two-sided opinions, such as good/bad guys and black/white people. "Contemporary theories of difference have demonstrated the ways these oppositional categories are interrelated and are ideologically and historically constructed" according to Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p. 350). I prompted students further, "The power issue is complex because many forces compete for attention. Dialogue does not occur under overly vigilant conditions. So what's his solution? Moore can deconstruct forever, but how will he reconstruct society?"

What is the moral of the story? How is the film good? Students indicated that they found the film controversial. Some statements were "The documentary mostly expressed an anti-gun sentiment; it showed that the person with the gun has the power; The Whites seemed stronger, but Blacks want to live in peace."

How is it bad? Some students feared that the film's message might be taken literally—it's OK to shoot people. Another student found the story exaggerated. Others considered Moore's opinion as one-sided and extreme. They interpreted, "The portrayal is not a respectful view of the American heritage; White men try to run away from what they can't understand; and Most of the blame for violence seems to be placed on the Southern rednecks. I therefore proposed, "The film then raises more questions about our history."

What would you change in the characters, language, plot? All students agreed to change nothing. One student preferred the blunt

and offensive characters. Either they were tired at the end of class or not interested in talking about art and would rather make it.

What is the problem that most young boys face in education today? When discussing the murder of classmates at Columbine High School by two boys, students admitted that peer pressure was intense. I asked about the atmosphere of the school and the pressure to succeed? One student interviewed in the film complained that teachers scare you to conform. He moaned, "Don't mess up or you will be a fag forever!" Such a comment is not school related, but part of the dominant heterogeneous male culture. Kimmel (2003) interviewed male adolescents to discover what was going on in their angry heads and discovered that insulting their manhood was the ultimate disgrace to invite violent reactions. Peer pressure and academic pressure are really separate issues, but schooling as a social phenomenon is incredibly complicated.

How is the film true? Students believed the film's message as "the truth." They commented, "It's disturbing how Americans are full of fear. The film 'very truly shows the history of the US,'" one student emphatically announced. **How do you know?** I challenged. Not one student checked the facts or the Internet reviews. Then some students acknowledged, "It's a not so nice fairy tale, we need other minority views, and it's biased because many whites fought for freedom and civil rights too."

What are other views on history? I offered other views on truth and history. Moore is very selective in documentaries and his short history. All history is an interpretation. Postmodernism teaches us that we have no grand narratives, just short stories (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernism questions traditional explanations or meta-narratives about the human condition or universal ideas, such as presence, truth,

authority, and progress (Ibid). Another problem is that this is not a history of America—only the United States. Our neighbors to the north and south have their own version of American history. Students were amazed that I suggested that facts didn't exist, only interpretations. According to Nietzsche (1977), "There are no facts per se. What is 'known' represents a group of 'phenomena' or appearances that are tied together and ordered in terms of a particular perspective and reflect the vital demands of a center of Will to Power" (Allison, 1977, p. 194). One student was so surprised about the negative views that she asked for a copy to share with her friends.

In Britain, McRobbie (1992) points out that moral panics play a major role in conservative politics. Similarly, neo-fascist youth groups represent similar dissent in German contexts (Jagodzinski, 2002). A counter hegemonic (control) struggle takes place in different sites, such as the law, the mall, family, school, and in popular culture. What makes this film powerful is its role in promoting dissent and multiple interpretations. Students failed to see this aspect at first.

Futher Discussion

Students initially were enthralled with Moore's provocative essay on gun violence in the United States. University students paid attention to the exaggerated style, documentary genre, and parodic conventions of the film (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 269). Their lack of questions about the truth of the story, however, amazed me. **Parody** is the imitation of either formal or thematic elements in a literal or filmic work (Lynch, 2003). In this case, United States history is imitated in a humorous way. Throughout the film, Moore creates intertextual sequences by combining historical text references and research that is ungrounded to affect its meaning inside the present text with the

assumption that viewers understand the inserted text. His work has been lauded as entertaining and breathtaking by many leading critics; yet other critics find his work is full of documentary rhetoric, political undertones, historical deception, and educational neglect.

Documentary Rhetoric or Fiction?

The art of persuasion or rhetoric is the ability to use language to sway people to accept some opinion or course of action. Rutgers Professor, Jack Lynch (1999) distinguished three types of rhetoric. Lawyers use **forensic rhetoric** to frame an argument in a case and politicians use **deliberative rhetoric** to persuade their audience to take (or not to take) some action. However, filmmakers may use **epideictic rhetoric**, the use of powerfully affective language—pictures, to praise or blame someone or something. Originally from the Latin word, *finger*, to fashion or to form, fiction is usually a narrative or story. So filmmakers use rhetorical devices to convince people of their views on something. In this film, Scenes are full of hyperbole, and exaggeration, as noted by the frequent use of the term “hyper” by students.

Political Undertones

Some reviewers found aspects of Moore’s thesis believable. He is a creative political propagandist with his clever phrases like “commander-in-thief;” but some of the film is beating a dead horse. There is meaningless banter and lots of silence; wondering whether or not Hitler ever went bowling. The commentary is an interesting perspective, even if it doesn’t always work, and the additional interviews give you more Moore (Topel, 2003). S with my students, some reviewers find Moore’s charisma and persuasiveness as a showman very entertaining. He also has a history for faking scenes, so people cannot believe all they see. Moore is skillful enough that we don’t recognize when we’re being fooled. His ambushing Charleton

Heston for an interview is a bit of counter violence. Regardless of how dubious its documentary tactics may be, *Bowling for Columbine* is powerful and thought provoking (Berardinelli, 2002).

Hidden Theme of Historical Deception

Meaning is multi-layered and conflictual, never immediately available, according to deconstructionist Derrida (1976). Throughout his work, Moore uses three obvious themes: his status as the spokesman of the working class, the vices and corruptions of wealth, and the evils of the United States as unveiled in *mooreexposed.com*. Hidden in Moore’s work, however is a fourth theme, which is the ability to historically deceive. Metonymy is the rhetorical or metaphorical substitution of one thing for another based on their association or proximity. For example, in the animated history sequence, action happened so quickly that viewers laugh but find it difficult to decipher the sequence. Moore equates the NRA with the KKK as a terrorist organization (Hardy, 2003). This transformation is a brilliant example of metonymy.

Hardy (2003), who is a lawyer, explained the facts of this historical confusion:

The NRA was founded in 1871 — by act of the New York Legislature, at request of former Union officers. The Klan was founded in 1866, and quickly became a terrorist organization. One might claim that while it was an organization and a terrorist one, it technically became an “illegal” such with passage of the federal Ku Klux Klan Act and Enforcement Act in 1871. These criminalized interference with civil rights, and empowered the President to use troops to suppress the Klan. (Although we’d have to acknowledge that murder, terror and arson were illegal long before that time — the Klan hadn’t been operating legally until

1871, it was operating illegally with the connivance of law enforcement.)

Topel (2003) finds that Moore's most controversial historical bit is a montage of the sordid history of American foreign policy disasters set to Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." The sequence has been attacked as facile, but critically disingenuous. The indignant depiction of reality is not a crime, neither artistically nor morally. As congress moves to give the President power to wage preemptive war while a man-hunting sniper is on a killing spree in the nation's capital, *Bowling for Columbine* is certainly the most pressing movie playing in American theaters right now. Perhaps a world as outrageous as ours deserves a filmmaker as blunt as Michael Moore (Fauth, 2003). The role of radical interpretations is to heighten awareness of different views and to adopt a complex attitude towards such controversial issues (Stam, 1989, p. 22).

Educational Neglect

Another of Moore's faux pas is the fact that he is not an educator, never questions educators, nor cites any educational research. In a cross-national analysis of the violence in school systems, Akiba (2002) discovered that national systems that produce greater achievement differences between high and low achieving students tend to record more violence. He advocated the need to understand different perceptions of violence by students and teachers, to equalize the quality of education for all, and to study poor instruction, like tracking and students who perceive themselves as failures. National educational trends often cause problems.

Future Implications

Teachers need to instigate discussion of media, including documentary film, in order to push students to look for the different dimensions of manipulated imagery and in this case, violence. Violence in the United States is a complex issue. Much of the blame is displaced and involves issues of racism, classicism, and foreign policy as Moore suggests. Teachers need to define other categories for critical review that students often overlook, such as the uses of rhetoric and the truth. Teachers can also introduce students to the website, Youth for Socialist Action, a place where students can voice their views and read about others (Helin & Ritscher, 2003). Teachers also must encourage students to find counter reviews on a subject and the rhetoric behind it right in their own community, as Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) suggest. Educators must push students to probe such questions with "a critical eye" and look for hidden socio-political and economic complexities and contradictions.

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