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# The Evolution and Impact of Documentary Films

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On June 25, 2004, my father's excitement for the release of *Fahrenheit 9/11* was so great, he went to see it by himself on opening night, while my sister and I opted out in favor of the simultaneous release of *The Notebook*. His frustration with the current presidency, and Michael Moore's promise of a more complete look at the administration, drew him in, and he sped to the theater in hopes of finding a more complete truth in Moore's work.

Just over two years, he exhibited the same excitement for the British mockumentary *Death of a President*. While he was fully aware of the fact that it was not based on real events, he was still intrigued to see how the filmmakers simulated the act, and what sort of implications they felt such an act would have. However, due to the ban that was in place from several major movie chains, he was unable to go see it.

In addition to making my father seem fanatical, this pair of scenarios says quite a bit about the potential impact of documentary film, and also what implications the advent of mockumentary film has had for the genre. While the consequences of thousands, even millions of people flocking to the theater in the same way that my father did can have a real effect on the world, could having people flock to a fictional film about the presidency do the same thing? It is also interesting to note that of the two films, the latter, which depicts an imagined situation, was the one that was banned for the most part in the United States, while the former, with its scathing portrayal of actual events, was permitted to be shown nationwide. As a result, it is difficult to say what sort of impact that they had, in relation to each other.

However, in researching the topic, I found a model that I was comfortable using to assess the impact of historical documentaries (those made up to twenty-five years ago), current documentaries (and by “current,” those made within the last twenty five years, though the focus has been more within the last ten to fifteen years), and mockumentaries (those fiction films that are framed, by virtue of how they are made, to look like documentary films). David Whiteman of the University of South Carolina developed a “coalition model” for the assessment of documentary films with regards to political impact, but I’ve expanded its scope to assess impact on all levels:

*I argue that an adequate model (a) must conceptualize films as part of a larger process that incorporates both production and distribution; (b) must consider the full range of potential impacts on producers, participants, activist organizations, and decision makers; and (c) must consider the role of films in the efforts of social movements to create and sustain alternative spheres of public discourse.*

In order to determine the full impact of these films, I will first start by discussing historical films, the techniques they set forth to establish the genre of documentary, and give two case studies of historical films that have had a significant impact on society. Next, I will move on to the bulk of my paper by discussing current documentaries, the characteristics that they have taken from historical documentaries, the techniques that they use to create an impact, and give two case studies of films that have had a significant impact . Lastly, I discuss mockumentary films, the techniques that they use to mimic documentaries, and two case studies of those films that have had an impact, despite their fictional nature.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENTARIES

All movements have a formative point, and the impact of documentary films started as soon as the first films were being made. They revolutionized an industry in a formative stage, and many of them did more than any filmmakers today ever could. They created not just films, but filming techniques and technological advances that made a major impact in their own right.

### *Types of Documentaries*

For all practical purposes, the entire film industry began with nonfiction films. Even before the landmark 1902 film *A Trip to the Moon*, the Lumiere brothers of Lyon, France, revolutionized photography and film with their short movies between 1895 and 1900. Their films fall under what I would like to characterize as **foundational films**, which set the standard for what the genre would become. Their vignettes, which ranged in topic from a train arriving at a station, to workers leaving a factory, to a baby's first steps, featured no actors. Some of the techniques that Auguste and Louis set forth were of great use to Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov, who in 1929 made the revolutionary film *Man with the Movie Camera*, about life in Russia. While the Lumiere films were generally less than a minute long, Vertov's film took more time to establish a storyline through montage techniques. It was also careful to point out that the film was a representation of reality, rather than actual reality. By showing the actual editing process of the film, with editors cutting film and splicing it together, the viewer is made to understand that Vertov's perspective is just that.

Vertov's foundational film also led into the advent of **propagandistic** films; in addition to portraying life in Russia, it also showed Vertov's support for the 1917 Russian Revolution. Another film that showed support for a controversial form of government is 1935's *Triumph of the Will*, filmed by Leni Riefenstahl about the rallies associated with the rise of the Third Reich. Riefenstahl denies that these films were intended to be propaganda, insisting that because there were no titles, no commentary was being made on what was filmed. But as I will investigate later, there are many reasons why these films can still be considered propagandistic.

A third type of historical documentary is the **travelogue**. Pioneered by explorer-turned-filmmaker Robert Flaherty, it defines the sort of documentary films that are designed to take us to another place, with the goal of teaching the audience about another culture that he would not otherwise be able to visit, given that travel was fairly rare, except for the very wealthy, in the 1920s. With films such as *Man of Aran*, *Moana*, and *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty defined this part of the genre with his stories of natives and the practices that they engage in, educating the viewer in the process.

All of these types of films, regardless of subject matter, use the same sorts of strategies to engage the viewer, and these strategies became the foundation of how the genre would be defined from then on.

### ***Techniques to Elicit Impact***

#### *Use of Real People*

A documentary, by nature of what it is, chronicles the lives of real people, and does not feature actors in the roles (unless, of course, the documentary is about an

actor!). The members of the Nazi party featured in *Triumph of the Will* are just that, and not actors hired to behave as such. However, Flaherty raised a great deal of controversy in this area, particularly with *Nanook of the North*, because “his most serious manipulation of the subject was to pay both his technical assistants and his performers” (“Nanook of the North,” 1996). Additionally, he went a step further than this, and established actual characters:

It is now believed that the role of “Nanook” was played by Allakariallak, an Inuk from Inoucdjouac who starved to death two years after the film was released. His wife Nyla was played by Alice Nuvalinga, their son Allegoo by Philipoosie, and the white trader, who is only glimpsed in the castor oil scene, was Bob Stewart, who operated the Revillon Freres trading post at Port Harrison. (Grace, 1996)

Despite this case of concealed identities, the film is still considered a documentary for the other techniques that were used to make it.

#### *Titles to Establish the Setting*

An early title on Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* denotes that the film was “commissioned by order of the Führer” (Liebman, 2002). This titlecard is indicative of the viewpoint that the film will take from there on. And while *Triumph* has no further title cards, the setting and circumstances are established in that opening card.

Similarly, *Nanook of the North*’s explanation of how Flaherty came to filmmaking, and how he came to find the Inuit civilization that he filmed so intimately over the course of several months, it clearly indicates the sort of stance that the film will take on its subject. Flaherty frames his subject Nanook in a way that invites reverence and

adulation over his heroics and bravery. And though Riefenstahl had previously denied framing her subjects in any particular way, she at one time “freely admitted that she consciously sought to go beyond a mere documentary record to [...] solidify the image of a man still somewhat vague in the average German’s mental universe, an image that would successfully ingratiate him in their hearts” (Liebman, 2002). One major aspect of that ingratiation was the title cards that establish the purpose of the film.

### *Establishment of Stories*

In order to draw the viewer into a film, there must be a story for them to follow. In 45 seconds, the Lumiere brothers had a very narrow window of time to do this, but films following their initial efforts had more time to expand upon their story. By focusing on a few main characters, the audience has the opportunity to follow the action with people they feel they “know.” Even with Riefenstahl, she pointed out key figures for the audience to follow through the process of the rallies. And as we already know, Flaherty employed this principle in *Nanook of the North*, as well as with the Samoan Moana, as he went through his coming of age in the 1926 film of the same name. What results from this principle is a personal and emotional connection to the characters, ensuring a lasting memory (and in turn impact) on the viewer of the film.

At this point, I would like to discuss two movies of the historical variety that had significant impact, even at a time when film viewership wasn’t touted as it is now. What resulted from these films was not just a better understanding of the cultures that they portrayed, but a foundation for documentary films that came afterward.

### **CASE STUDY #1: *Triumph of the Will* (1935)**

This 1935 film is a classic example of film as propaganda, and shows just how much one perspective can change the face of a political movement. Vertov noted, in discussing truth in film, that “the movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account” (Rabinowitz, 1993).

And indeed, Riefenstahl’s document of the 1934 Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg did serve all of these purposes- it penetrated deeper into the visual world through its soaring camera angles, catching formations of thousands of Nazi soldiers. And of course, the movement that followed the release of this film will forever be remembered, if for no reason other than to prevent the events from happening into the future.

### *Triumph of the Will and Whitehouse’s Model*

In assessing Riefenstahl’s film in terms of impact, each of the criteria can be fulfilled. First, the production process speaks to the selective accessibility of the Nazi party. As Cineaste (2002) points out, “that she had Hitler’s complete confidence and backing helped quite a lot”. Stuart Liebman goes on to explain just how close the filmmaker got to the party:

She was permitted to insert her sixteen cameramen, most notably the crackerjack SeppAlgier, sixteen assistant operators, and sixteen newsreel cameramen, not to mention twenty-two chauffeured limousines and support staff, into the space of the events in ways that had rarely, if ever, been tried before. Unprecedentedly mobile and seemingly ubiquitous, her cameras were allowed to perch behind



Hitler's car as he rode in his Mercedes past the large crowds of ecstatic devotees lining the streets of the old city, creating a minitravelogue from Hitler's point of view for those unable to attend. (Liebman, 2002)

It is important to note, however, that the formations that Riefenstahl captured "had been orchestrated in advance by Hitler's artistic confidante Albert Speer and his staff long before she [Riefenstahl] arrived on the scene" (Liebman, 2002). So in that regard, the reality that she had been capturing was in fact an orchestrated view of the party.

Orchestrated or not, this view of the Nazi party did a great deal for the career of Leni Riefenstahl, as well as for the participants of the film. While the success of the Nazi party as a result of this film is well documented, Riefenstahl's career is not. In 2002, she reappeared in the public eye, at nearly one hundred years old, to commemorate the release of her newest film. Indeed, she was prolific right up until her death a year after that, not just as a filmmaker, but also as a still photographer, actress, and memoirist. And to her death, she was never implicated as a part of the Nazi party, by virtue of the fact that the Allied commission ruled that "no political activity that supported the regime warrants punishment." She had claimed that she never knew anything about the extent of the crimes that the Third Reich was responsible for, and to this day, has only been classified as a Nazi fellow traveler.

And of course, this film did arouse and maintain an alternate discourse regarding the state of government in Germany. At a critical point following the death of Hindenburg, the Germans needed someone to step up and lead the nation. *Triumph* introduced many Germans to someone who could potentially fill that void, and people

latched on to this image. Through strategies such as cutting down long speeches to important soundbytes, showing devotees with a level of fervor that resembled Beatlemania, or even filming staged ceremonies during the rally not only reassured those who were already faithful to the party, but succeeded in swaying those who had not yet made a decision. What resulted was the support of close to an entire nation, and consequently, the beginning of a revolution.

### ***Triumph of the Will and Techniques of Impact***

#### *Use of Real People*

As I alluded to earlier, the people in the film, despite being orchestrated or choreographed, were real people. This characterization applies to both the soldiers and Third Reich officials, and the onlookers who marveled in adulation; in both cases, these people were not paid to appear in the film, nor were they coached on how to behave beyond their placement in the scene. This lack of coaching is one of the fundamental aspects of a documentary, in the sense that the reality comes from the fact that no characters are created. Arguably, the only character that exists in the film is Hitler himself, who was shot to look taller and more powerful than his stature would otherwise imply. And yet, for all the camera tricks that were employed to make him look imposing, Hitler still played himself in the movie. Those who were swayed from a position of indifference to one supporting Hitler realized later that his portrayal in the movie was correct.

#### *Titles to Establish Setting*

Titles only appear one time in Riefenstahl's film- to discuss the motivation for the making of the film, as well as the aforementioned assertion that the film was commanded by the Führer. In using these titles only one time, Riefenstahl hopes to mediate the claim that her film is propagandistic, insisting that without titles, she cannot comment on what's going on on the screen. However, Liebman (2002) says that this view on the lack of titles "betrays her calculatedly false modesty. It naively understates the power of her visual strategies to control the audiences gaze and thereby to endorse and—perhaps even more important—to impart a positive emotional tone in the Nazified masses and leaders she portrayed so vividly." So while there are limited titles in this film, the ones that do exist serve their purpose of guiding the public opinion of viewers, both German and non-German.

#### *Establishment of Stories*

While there is no traditional narrative in *Triumph of the Will*, in the same way that one can be ascertained in *Man with the Movie Camera* or any of Flaherty's films, a narrative is still established in the labels that show us where each scene is taking place. Those labels, along with the introduction of key figures in the Reich (not just Hitler, but Josef Goebbels, Otto Dietrich, Heinrich Himmler and others), helps us to follow the action, as well as to develop support and gain an understanding for the cause of the Nazi party. Particularly for those who had not decided where they stood in terms of Hitler's policies or opinions, the development of the story is helpful in that it aided them in finding a connection with the party that led to so many loyal supporters. The film I

would like to discuss next, as I mentioned earlier, has more of a story to connect the viewer.

### **CASE STUDY #2: *Nanook of the North***

Robert Flaherty, for all the controversy that his films created upon and soon after their release, was named “The Father of Documentary Film” for his work on this film. The result of a second attempt at an exploration to the Hudson Bay in Canada, Flaherty created a story about an Inuit named Nanook and his family. It was made under extreme circumstances, with film being developed in the tundra, but resulted in one of the most technically innovative films of its time. The Museum of Modern Art underscores this characterization of the film by saying that it “blended realistic, stark, and beautifully composed images with a loose story line and a strong central character.” They also go on to discuss the more controversial aspects of his filmmaking, acknowledging that “with its fictionalization of real-life events, and with Flaherty’s romanticization of his subject, the film continues to raise issues about the objectivity of the documentary genre” (“Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*,” 2007). And indeed, Flaherty’s landmark film will be remembered for those two contrasting principles.

#### ***Nanook of the North and Whitehouse’s Model***

This film, according to Whitehouse’s model, had a great deal of impact in terms of the first criteria. In terms of production, the process was marked by a great deal of hardship. Flaherty himself (2002) detailed the circumstances of filmmaking and film development that make the release of the film all the more impressive:

The resources of the Revillon Freres fur trade post at Cape Dufferin were at my disposal. One of the two living quarters which comprised the post was mine as living quarters and film laboratory combined. My equipment included 75,000 feet of film, a Haulberg electric light plant and projector and two Akeley cameras and a printing machine so that I could make prints of film as it was exposed and project the pictures to the screen so that thereby the Eskimo would be able to see it and understand wherever mistakes were made.

Additionally, *One World* magazine (1996) details how “Flaherty’s blue-green sensitive Orthochromatic stock helped him to render the rugged geography of the sub-arctic in painterly tones [...] shot after shot reasserts the harshness of an environment where nothing grows.” Using deep focus to make the landscape seem extremely vast and barren, it contributes to the testament that Flaherty is trying to make to Nanook and the Inuit population.

The marketing of the film was done with help from his wife and biographer, Frances Hubbard Flaherty. The film was distributed using a “Campaign Book for Exhibitors,” giving them information about how to “pander to the lowest common denominator in public taste,” thus expanding upon the potential audience for the film. What resulted was an extremely commercially successful movie, that also expanded its popularity to “songs, German ice cream bars, and books such as *Nanook of the North* (1925), by British geographer Julian W. Bilby, who used stills from Flaherty’s film to illustrate his tale” (Grace, 1996). Particularly in comparison to his later films, *Nanook* had the greatest impact on the film community, as well as its viewers overall.

The impact that this film had on its participants is not nearly as great as it could have been, given that Flaherty closely guarded his subjects very carefully. It is likely because he erased parts of their identities in favor of creating relatable characters that he tried to keep them from being overly publicized. However, he did try to further the success of the film after the death of Allakariallak, the Eskimo who played Nanook, attempting to garner sympathy by telling many of his death, but not of the circumstances (he starved to death while hunting for deer). As a result, the actual plight of the Eskimos was somewhat overlooked in the making and distribution of the film. Another aspect of his creation of an identity include the fact that Flaherty “hired ‘Nanook’, ‘Nyla’, and their ‘family’ and set out creating the clothing and other props consistent with his vision[...].” (Grace, 1996).

It is here where Flaherty has made his greatest impact. In manipulating the story that he wanted to tell, changing customs in order to make sure that his vision of the story is told, he skates the same line between fiction and documentary that Michael Moore is frequently criticized for today (this fact will be discussed shortly). *Nanook* started the discourse to determine if it was okay that this film didn’t follow the previously accepted conventions regarding documentation of real life. To have a determinate viewpoint is fine; *One World* magazine (1996) argues that “some of his bias, his admiration for Nanook and his ilk, is clear from the opening” with techniques such as referring to Nanook as the Chief, or with tight closeups that are exclusive to his character. However, when the truthfulness of the portrayal is in question, that is another issue. Ultimately, as “Father of the Documentary,” Flaherty is allowed to set the tone for

how films are made after him. And indeed, his future films, such as *Man of Aran* and *Moana*, continued to omit issues regarding the natives in favor of supporting his “vision” (Gray, 1950).

### **Nanook of the North and Techniques of Impact**

#### *Use of Real People*

As I have mentioned previously, Flaherty’s use of real people has been long disputed, given that he gave the subjects of his films new identities, removing crucial parts of their culture (including bearskin clothing and having them favor spears, instead of guns [Grace, 1996]) to support the vision that he had of his film. And I must confess, it is disconcerting to note that “Flaherty does not seem to have been bothered by these ‘nonessentials’ or even to have realized the extent of his eliminations” (Grace, 1996). However, I feel that he can still be considered to be using real people, in that they are parts of that culture and not actors with no experience in the culture. It is a thin line that Flaherty walks on in asking real people to act in his film, but ultimately set the pace for using actors as a part of documentary filmmaking, a practice that is still popular to this day (Germain, 2007).

#### *Titles to Establish the Setting*

Flaherty makes frequent use of titles in comparison to Riefenstahl’s nearly title-free film, not just to ascertain the settings or in what stage they are of their journey, but also to continually establish Nanook as the hero of the story. First, it helps to ensure that the audience doesn’t get lost in the endless tundra, unable to follow the story set forth by Flaherty’s images. It also further expands upon the customs that are being shown

onscreen. As a travelogue, there is an understood obligation that the audience will learn from the film; the titles explaining the action ensure that this can happen.

Second, this establishment through titles allows Nanook to stand out as a shining example of an Inuit to viewers unfamiliar with the culture. Title cards that read things such as “Chief of the ‘Itivimuits’, and as a great hunter famous through all Ungava-Nanook the Bear,” and as a “fearless, loveable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo,” Flaherty is trying to mold our view of his protagonist as just that- the strongest, happiest, and most fearless of the Eskimos. To mourn his death two years later adds to this ‘illusion,’ implying that a great tragedy must have occurred to take down this pillar of the Inuit society. And the combination of images and titles contribute to this representation.

#### *Establishment of Stories*

Flaherty clearly understood that in order for a viewer to follow a story, certain conventions must be followed. As I will discuss later on, using aspects of our society that are familiar to the viewer makes the film easier for the viewer to comprehend, and also make an impact on him. It is likely for this reason that the filmmakers went to the trouble of creating a family structure for the story to follow. As we follow the family, we become comfortable with their story, and thus it is more probable that an impact will be made from an emotional standpoint. Vignettes depicting such “everyday” activities as a seal hunt, a walrus hunt, and the building of an igloo hearken back to the short tales of the Lumiere brothers, and give the audience a glimpse into the lives of these Inuits who we follow on screen and grow to appreciate.



Flaherty, in his creation of *Nanook of the North*, hit upon a few traits that are more characteristic of current documentaries. Here, I will explain more about those documentaries, and what these historic films did in helping them make a connection with viewers.

## **CURRENT DOCUMENTARIES**

After many years of being sentenced to classrooms and art houses, John Corner reported in 1986 that “the dominant model at the time, true of both anthologies and conference, was of the contribution on documentary as something distinctly peripheral” (Corner, 2000). Just over twenty years later, that is hardly the case. Documentary film has gone from being a marginal genre to taking center stage, garnering larger distribution and achieving critical acclaim.

### **Types of Documentaries**

After examining close to forty films in preparation for this project, I have self-identified several categories that these films fall into. These three divisions can help to predict what sort of impact these films will have, and also who they will have the opportunity to impact.

#### *Political Documentaries*

Quite possibly the most easily recognized, political documentaries choose to chronicle the true phenomena surrounding political issues. These issues can range from elections (for films such as *Unprecedented* or *Street Fight*, the 2005 film about the 2002 mayoral campaign in Newark, New Jersey), past presidencies (*Why We Fight*, the expose about the military-industrial complex that is framed by Eisenhower’s presidency, or *The*

*Fog of War*, Robert McNamara's lesson book based on the Kennedy and Johnson administrations), or even current presidents (the ever-present *Fahrenheit 9/11*). Due to the inevitable slant that these films inevitably have, these films are the most likely to be accused of being propagandistic. Like Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, they paint a specific and somewhat manipulated picture of the issues at hand, especially at a time when so much political unrest is occurring; thus the term "docu-ganda" was coined. But is it appropriate? I believe that it is. Part of having an impact, be it through film or otherwise, is being able to move people to do *something*. This would cover Whitehouse's second and third criteria: inciting alternative discourse through their effect on all involved in the picture. Greenwald in particular is a master at this, involving activist groups such as Moveon.org and The Center for American Progress in the making of these films. The goal of that measure is to have them talk to their members nationwide about this film that they were a part of, and to have them spread the message that they preach to as many people as possible ("How to Make a Guerilla Documentary", 2004). The increasing popularity of these films, particularly when they surround political issues, dictates that "viewers should practice critical thinking." Peter Lehman of the Center for Film and Media Research at Arizona State University warns that "the danger of the advocacy documentary is that things might be being kept from you" ("In docu-ganda films, balance is not the objective", 2006) Similar to the social change documentaries, which I will discuss momentarily, it's up to the viewer to be empowered to go out and further investigate information regarding these films, to get the full story if it is not explained to them.

### *Human Interest Documentaries*

On the opposite end of the spectrum are human interest documentaries. Taking the place of travelogues such as *Nanook of the North*, these films are generally less political, choosing instead to highlight an aspect of society that we wouldn't see otherwise. While some of them do lean toward the travelogue format (most notably, the recent success *March of the Penguins*), more often they highlight subcultures that can come to popularity as a result of their exposure on film. For example, 2005's *Murderball* led to greater exposure for paraplegic and quadriplegic athletes. Similarly, *Born into Brothels*, when it won the Academy Award, brought to light issues about the poverty in India and the efforts that were being taken to get those children into better schools. In both cases, they fulfilled criteria C of Whitehouse's model, sparking discussion and alternative discourse on a topic that otherwise would have probably stayed within a small group of people, already aware of the situations here. And in the case of *March of the Penguins*, it has sparked a nationwide interest in these small birds, Hollywood included. With films such as *Happy Feet*, the upcoming *Surf's Up*, and the parody mockumentary *Farce of the Penguins* being released, it is clear that this small French documentary, by being released in the United States, made a big difference to our society. In a way, those penguins were participants affected by the release of the films, thus also fulfilling criterion B ☺.

### *Social Change Documentaries*

Sometimes a hybrid between the previous aforementioned types of films, the social change documentary has probably been the most prolific of the three types, telling

stories in hopes of changing minds and opinions regarding the issues that they detail. These films can detail anything from the Christian right (the inflammatory *Jesus Camp*), to the environment (the Academy Award-winning *An Inconvenient Truth*, which will be discussed more fully a bit later), to Big Business (*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*). This latter subject is frequently explored by filmmakers, and is resulting in several changes for industries that have been victims of their scrutinizing eyes.

Here, we can explore the question that has been broached since my work on this paper began: **can a documentary have impact if it is not seen widely?** Here, the answer is a yes. I say that because the changes that have resulted from these films are affecting more people than just the viewers of these films. Like the sweeping changes of the prison systems that ensued following the release of films like *Attica* and *Titicut Follies*, these films are precipitating changes all over the country. One of the most famous examples of this is the removal of the Super Size options (and subsequent addition of healthier options) from McDonald's, following the criticism that Morgan Spurlock gave in his film *Super Size Me*. And while McDonald's has emphatically denied any connection between the menu change and the film, the wide distribution of the film is attributed to the aggressiveness with which McDonald's has attempted to change the image presented in Spurlock's work. Another example of this pertains to Wal-Mart. The retail conglomerate, like McDonald's, has declined to confirm any connections between the film and the company, though they do admit to having logged the "numerous inaccuracies" in the film. They have, however, made their employees available for a documentary that is designed to highlight the *merits* of the organization, *Why Wal-Mart*

*Works: And Why That Drives Some People C-R-A-Z-Y* (Adelman, 2006). As you can imagine, this falls under criteria B, putting into consideration the full range of potential impact on the subjects of these films. And they also tend to create alternative discourse, as the small groups of people who believe in these causes show these films to their friends. These groups grow bigger and bigger as more people watch the films. “These are not Hollywood-style films, so the fact that people are responding to them, that says a lot” (“Documentary Films Rattle Business World”, 2006). But a major criticism of these movies is whether they fit the definition of a true documentary.

### **Auteurs or Propagandists? Michael Moore and Robert Greenwald**

*Michael Moore*

David T. Hardy, Arizona lawyer and ardent critic of documentary auteur Michael Moore, has argued that many films such as Moore’s 2002 *Bowling for Columbine*, do not fit the understood definition of documentary film. And indeed, the Princeton WordNet definition of the term specifies “a film or TV program presenting the facts about a person or an event”. More specifically, they should be conceived with the goal of “emphasizing or expressing things as perceived without distortion of personal feelings, insertion of fictional matter, or interpretation” (WordNet, 2007).

Hardy’s argument against Moore takes great pains to reveal the lengths that the filmmakers and his editors went to in order to deceive the public, examining the dissection of speeches made by the film’s ostensible “villain,” Charlton Heston. As a lawyer, Hardy researches more fully the claims made by Moore’s movie, and then shows how Moore distorted his sources to fit his agenda. Despite this misrepresentation

of facts, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded Moore an Oscar for the film. Given that the Academy gives awards to documentaries under the supposition that “the distinction between dramatic and documentary film lies in the fact that while dramatic film is fictional, documentary film deals with real, factual situations and circumstances”(AMPAS, 2007), this seems an odd choice in a field that also included *Prisoner of Paradise* and *Spellbound*.

But be they real or fictional, or some unidentifiable hybrid between the two, Moore’s films are garnering interest across the country and overseas. Ever since he burst onto the scene with his controversial techniques in 1989, with his GM-blasting exposé *Roger and Me*, he has been extremely vocal in his disapproval of America’s stance on gun control, elections, employment, and, soon, health care. And in each of those films, he has been criticized for distorting facts and badgering subjects, with the end objective of supporting his beliefs. He has steadily gained exposure, which reached a fever pitch in 2005 with his film *Fahrenheit 9/11*. We will discuss the exact impact of this film later on. For the time being, I would like to concentrate on hallmarks of his particular brand of documentary, dubbed by the Christian Science Monitor as the “new, one-point-of-view documentary” (Wood, 2006).

A trademark of Michael Moore’s films is the intensely personal stance that they take. From the beginning, he has told stories that have some relevance to him, even beginning *Roger and Me* with stories of his childhood playing in the shadow of the GM plant, which would eventually be closed, through home movies and pictures. His hometown of Flint, Michigan was the setting of the film, and would continue to be

featured prominently in each subsequent work. To make it even more personal, he is a character in these films, embarking on a journey to solve a mystery or find a corporate representative. Morgan Spurlock took a similar stance when he set out to expose the danger of McDonald's food in his 2003 exposé *Super Size Me*. It is a controversial technique, however, and "media observers generally welcome the new diversity of viewpoint, even as they urge viewers to beware" (Wood, 2006).

But Moore takes it further than Spurlock, in that he follows his subjects mercilessly, harassing them with questions and resulting in his removal from premises and events countless times. This interrogational style has drawn fire from several participants, in that they sometimes feel pressured to give answers, or else risk looking noncompliant (a significant threat as Moore's popularity began to rise). This latter option is the one that former Miss Michigan Kaye Rafko runs into in *Roger and Me*. She is cornered immediately following a parade in Flint, "when she says on camera, when asked how it feels to drive through Flint when so many workers have been fired from the auto plant-'I feel like a big supporter...'. What is all too obviously (and incongruously) on her mind is the upcoming beauty contest: 'Pray for my victory in Atlantic City in two weeks'" (Orvell, 1994). It is that sort of badgering technique, to those who are clearly not prepared to answer, that has earned him the reputation he has.

As I mentioned earlier, Moore is also known for distorting facts to attain his desired viewpoint in films, even going so far as to take clips from separate speeches, intersperse them with stills to prevent viewers from noticing differences in clothing and setting, and editing them together in order to create incendiary statements from

extremely public figures. Another instance of this sort of editorial splicing occurred in the film, as he shows an article that is supposed to prove that Charlton Heston planned to come to Flint 48 hours after a shooting. The article is strategically highlighted or obscured in such a way to make it seem that Heston was planning to come to Michigan, but would ignore the Kayla Rolland shooting. In actuality, the quote in question was from President Clinton, discussing how he hoped that the shooting would help tighten gun control (Hardy, 2002). Again, this level of editorializing has come under fire with every passing film that he makes.

But despite all of the controversy that surrounds this filmmaker, his films do have an impact. Referring back to Whitehouse's model, Moore's films apply to all three criteria. As I will allude to in more detailed discussion of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, distribution and production play a major role in determining impact of his work. His filmmaking budgets are small, generally used to obtain footage from film libraries, and do not include payment of any people who appear in the films (Epstein, 2005). Though, as Thomas Hardy determined, much of the budget likely goes into editing this acquired footage. These shoestring budgets do not hinder the reception of the films by authorities on the media- twice, Moore has won awards for his work, including the prestigious Palme d'Or, at the Cannes Film festival. Films that win this award are highly coveted by studios, who clamor to be able to distribute such important works. And as one can imagine, the distribution of a film (which directly corresponds to how many people can go see it in theaters) is essential to its ability to make an impact.



This impact also extends to the people involved, including producers, participants, activist organizations, and decision makers. Generally, in the case of Moore films, this comes in the form of participants. Only one person has successfully sued Moore over his portrayal in any of his films, and that was Larry Stecco, a former friend of the filmmaker. According to the Internet Movie Database, he “successfully argued that his portrayal in the movie was not an accurate reflection of his character (“False light invasion of privacy” is the legal term) and won. Stecco was interviewed attending a society fundraising ball and was made out to be a high-society rich pig who partied while people were starving outside. He was actually a lawyer who worked pro-bono for the poorer residents of Flint.” However, other “cast members” of Moore’s movies have attempted to sue, thus garnering media coverage and in turn interest in the films. Among these people are James Nichols, the brother of Terry Nichols (who sued over his portrayal in *Bowling for Columbine*), and Sgt. Peter Damon, a double-amputee from Iraq who sued over the use of an interview he did, making him wrongly appear as though he was anti-war (“Iraq War Vet Sues Michael Moore, NBC”, 2006). For Nichols, Damon, and others who have sued Moore, these documentaries have been life-changing events, altering their view in the eyes of viewers, as well as their families and friends.

And as far as social movements, Moore has attempted valiantly to spark widespread social change with his work, particularly with *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but thus far has failed to create a significant alternative form of public discourse. Though, it can be argued, he has done that with his filmmaking technique, and not the content of these

films. Another filmmaker has taken on a similarly opinionated stance, creating different forms of controversy with his own unique style of documentary filmmaking.

*Robert Greenwald*

58-year old Robert Greenwald, like Moore, also likes to make personal documentaries. But his films, which include *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* and *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* are made with what Robert S. Boynton of the New York Times calls “a ‘guerilla’ method of documentary filmmaking, creating timely political films on short schedules and small budgets and then promoting and selling them on DVD through partnerships with grass-roots political organizations [...]” (“How To Make a Guerilla Documentary”, 2004). His reasoning behind this? “I like going to the movies. I like having popcorn. But if your goal is to create social change, it’s not even a question that this is the way to go” (“Five Questions for Robert Greenwald, 2005). While Michael Moore was waging war with Disney and Miramax to get *Fahrenheit 9/11* distributed nationwide, Greenwald was “forgoing theatrical release and instead screening the film at house parties and community centers.” The strategy is legitimate, but brings up a point about these kinds of films: nonpartisan viewership. Matt Felling of the Center for Media and Public Affairs rightfully points out that one feature of such films is “that they are preaching to the choir. You’re not going to have a fellow with an NRA bumper sticker walking into *Bowling for Columbine*” (“In docu-ganda films, balance is not the objective”, 2006). But Greenwald responds with a legitimate counterargument:

If it’s on at your church, or your neighbor invites you out for a drink and shows the DVD, or if it’s at your student union hall or your bowling alley, it’s an

entirely different thing. Everyone has a friend who disagrees with them politically, everyone has relatives they fight with all the time, people they argue with at work...these are the kinds of people we are reaching with this campaign ("Five Questions for Robert Greenwald", 2005)

A trademark way that he reaches people is by using their own words to tell a story. Unlike Michael Moore, who takes center stage in all of his films, Greenwald uses mainly footage from speeches or television to prove his points. In the case of *Outfoxed!: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, he says that he "wanted to use Fox's own words and images to show exactly what they do" ("How to Make a Guerilla Documentary", 2004). He used a similar technique in *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, framing the film around a speech given at an annual meeting by CEO H. Lee Scott. By using their own words, organically and without controversial editing techniques that have gotten his contemporary Michael Moore in trouble, he shows the flaws of the systems that he chooses to chronicle, without editorializing in such a polemic way.

By Whitehouse's standards, Greenwald's films have a significant level of impact, by all three criteria he defined. The unique process of making *Outfoxed!* shows how allowing outside groups to assist in the making of a film can contribute to its viewing nationwide. He first set twelve DVD players to record Fox News 24/7 for six months. Once he started reviewing the footage, he realized that the punditry and news reports started to fall into predictable categories. From here, he enlisted the help of volunteers from MoveOn.org (a political group devoted to unseating George W. Bush) to find examples in the predefined categories, record those reports and log them for

Greenwald's review. With more volunteers and editors working for severely reduced pay, he finished the film by July. Greenwald's ultimate distribution strategy is what he calls an "upper-lower" distribution model; the "upper" part involves inviting the entirety of the House of Representatives and the Senate, while the "lower" part involves MoveOn inviting 2.2 million members to hold "house parties" to screen the film (Boynton, 2004). In this way, a grassroots following is created, accomplishing the third of Whitehouse's criteria. As a result of *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, several groups sprung up supporting the cause of the film, including 'Wake Up Wal-Mart,' 'Good Jobs First,' and 'Wal-Mart Watch'.

In terms of Greenwald's impact on producers, participants, activist organizations, and decision makers, he cites examples of this in his films. For example, the supplementary end of *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election*, he discusses how the Help America Vote Act of 2002 was created to simplify the voting process, but he also discusses the flaws in the system, thus giving both sides of the issue and its implications on the viewers of the film. By the same token, the end of *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, there are several tales of activist groups that shut down Wal-Marts in their own towns. These activist organizations have gained steam, as a result of the empowerment offered in the messages of these films.

At the end of the day, it appears as though not all are willing to discount these intensely personal documentaries as propaganda or even fiction films. The PBS Media Literacy Program defines "documentary" film as a film that "refers to film or video that explores a subject in a way the public expects to be factual and accurate. Documentaries

may be balanced by including various viewpoints, or they may be subjective, offering the viewpoint and impressions of one producer" (PBS Media Literacy Program, 2007). And indeed, people are responding to all of these types of documentaries. Why are people responding? There are several techniques that these filmmakers use to gain the approval and altruism of the viewers that watch these films; these techniques work together to gain the hearts and minds of society.

### *Techniques to Make an Impact*

#### *Emotional Appeal*

The opening of *An Inconvenient Truth* shows the first photo of Earth from space, recalling the memories that many viewers have from when those pictures were first shown on television and in the newspapers. Emotional appeal is one strategy that these filmmakers use to garner the support of viewers. By appealing to their emotions, their hope is that the stirring in audience hearts will contribute to eventual action on their parts. Later on in the film, images of Hurricane Katrina are attributed to the effects of global warming. Such an emotional tragedy no doubt plays a major role in a viewer's decision to support alternative fuels and other ways to combat the effects of global warming.

Another example of emotional appeal in these films appears in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, in which they show the emotional reactions in Littleton, Colorado following the tragic Columbine shootings. Again, the viewers have emotional reactions because they remember their panic and sadness when the event occurred. Perhaps in later years, the impact that these films have will be different, but at present, these images remain etched

in audience minds. And these memories, and how they affect them, play a crucial role in allowing them to go along with the message of the film, in turn proving that the film has made an impact.

### *Empowerment*

The reason that Wal-Mart was the subject of Greenwald's *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* is because it was "the largest corporation in the world, and they have a huge impact" ("Five Questions for Robert Greenwald", 2005). Thus, Greenwald ends his film with a section showing activist groups that have gathered together to stop the openings of Wal-Marts in their town. For people watching the film, this inspires them to work on their own activist campaigns, making a difference in their own communities. This is the sort of empowerment that leads to significant impact in the real world; not just on the part of corporations, but more for audiences of regular people.

Greenwald ends *Unprecedented* in a similar fashion. After spending ninety minutes touting the imperfections of the Florida voting system, and how many votes were not counted, he likely didn't want to appear as though he was discouraging people from voting. For this reason, a supplementary section was added, showing how the Help America Vote Act was passed in 2002, and ending with narrator Danny Glover saying, "I encourage you to exercise your right to vote." This way, he can chronicle the details of the flawed election without discouraging the viewer from working toward improving society, in the same way that members of MoveOn.org and the Center for American Progress have. These people, having just been shown that they can make a

difference, use the knowledge that they gather from these movies to make an impact on society.

### *Exclusivity*

In *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, some of the most telling footage is actually not footage at all- it is still photographs of McNamara, talking about the war, over exclusive audio of conferences that the former Secretary of State had with President Johnson about the war, and the inability to win. The film has heavy use of montage, to complement McNamara's lessons about his tenure in the White House, but this particular scene is important because the phone calls are previously unshared, or exclusive. Particularly because of the controversy and mystery that surrounds McNamara and his policies during his time in office, this exclusivity makes the viewer feel special that this privileged information is being shared with them.

A similar case is shown in *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*. The filmmakers do their best to show the downfall of the company in an unbiased manner, framing the film around the CSPAN coverage of Jeffrey Skilling's grand jury testimony. But the most telling information in the film is less public. With viewers fully aware that so many documents belonging to Enron had been otherwise destroyed, any exclusive information that can be shown in the film, such as training videos and recorded phone calls, is seen as extremely rare and novel, resulting in a feeling of trust between the filmmaker and the audience. Thus, we as viewers are made believers by the fact that secret information has been shared with us. And that belief leads us to the sort of behavior that can create an impact.

In both of these cases, the impact is somewhat difficult to see. For *The Fog of War*, the understanding of his lessons may not have any bearing on the present. But it has an impact on how he gets viewed by the public. And after so many years of being criticized by skeptics, *The Fog of War* was created in hopes of impacting that image, reshaping it. For Enron, this is also a factor. Although the company is no longer in existence, and Kenneth Lay is no longer around to stand trial for his trespasses, the image of the company lives on. And *The Smartest Guys in the Room* aims to clarify that view, ensure that opinions of the company are based on more information than the media has given previously. Exclusive information serves that purpose, allowing views and society to be changed.

#### *Familiarity*

While exclusivity can do wonders in making an impact on audiences, familiarity can do the same thing. As an example, I use *Outfoxed!*. Fox News works as a subject for a film because society is familiar with it. Its bias is well known, and its pundits are highly recognizable. Thus, Greenwald saw the opportunity to make an impact by covering a topic that people would recognize. Similarly, Morgan Spurlock chose to talk about McDonald's not because they were the only food chain that was having such issues, but because it was the most recognizable. When viewers see these iconic images, they are drawn to them, because they lend themselves to a level of comfort. Consequently, when they find out that these companies aren't consistent with their public images (i.e. Fox News isn't actually "fair and balanced"), it shakes up their perception of the world, and



really makes them think about what they've seen, and how they'll act the next time they come in contact with these images.

*Jesus Camp* is another excellent example of this. We all know people who are very in tune with their religion, who put God above all other. Viewers can watch this film because they know someone just like the characters in the film. Once their eyes are opened to the intricacies of the lifestyle shown in the film, it can change their perceptions. And that change in perception undoubtedly constitutes impact. But the familiarity that viewers have with the types of people in *Jesus Camp* is not the biggest factor that makes an impact.

#### *Fear*

In one of the climactic scenes of *Jesus Camp*, the children at the camp are told by camp director Becky Fischer to break ceramic mugs that are set on a table with hammers. The mugs, Fischer says, represent the government, and their desire to repress aspects of religion in daily life. The kids are then encouraged to smash the mugs, thus "breaking the power of the enemy over the government." The fervor and anger with which these kids demolish the cups, all in the name of God, is unnerving. And it is that discomfort that stays with audiences after they leave the theater or turn off the TV. Fear is something that, though uncomfortable, is indelible in terms of film. What results from that is a desire to do something; it moves people to change or to stand up and act.

*Bowling for Columbine* encapsulates this culture of fear in an excellent montage, in which it showed the culture of fear that is perpetuated by the media and the government, according to Michael Moore. It shows that fear is a device used not just in

film, but in the media overall, to call people to action. And indeed, the film did raise awareness about gun safety issues across the country. By making people afraid that such gun tragedies could happen to them, they will be compelled to take action to make sure that they do not. Fear may have been the most commonly used strategy in the films that I watched, and appears to have more impact than any of the other strategies I found.

At this point, I would like to present two films in particular, which may have had more impact on society in the past few years than any others I've watched: *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2005), and *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006).

#### **CASE STUDY #1: *Fahrenheit 9/11***

As the highest grossing documentary film of all time, it is obvious that this film got noticed following its Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Departing from the traditional format of Moore's (in which he seeks out a target, such as Charlton Heston or GM's Roger Smith), he instead chooses to let his footage speak for itself for the lion's share of the movie. It opens by chronicling the events leading up to September 11, 2001, including the whirlwind of the 2000 election, and the 42% of the time of his presidency, leading up to that date, that President Bush allegedly spent on vacation. Leading up to the opening credits, Moore discusses Bush's whereabouts, again playing up his level of affluence and further alienating him from the constituency. And when the credits finally do roll to open the film, notable government officials are shown getting ready for broadcast- being "miked up," getting makeup and hair touch ups, things of that nature.

In fact, this is the point that Moore is trying to make. The Bush administration, in his eyes, is a performance and one that we have been led to believe is "real life." He

underscores this disbelief by showing the celebration of former “president-elect” Al Gore, asking in seeming confusion and frustration, “Was it all a dream?” He bookends the film with this footage of the officials getting ready to go “on stage,” ending it with them removing their mikes and walking away. This effect does not go unnoticed by the audience, as they are slowly made to realize that what they thought was truth should be called into question. This is the goal that Moore has with all of his films, and this time he got to reach more people than ever before. His tenacity to get the film released (which will be discussed momentarily) had everything to do with this, and resulted with the highest viewership of any documentary in recent history.

### **Fahrenheit 9/11 and Whitehouse’s Model**

When measuring the impact of *Fahrenheit 9/11* against the Whitehouse model of impact, the first two criteria can be followed, while the third was not accomplished (much to the dismay of Moore). The process of production for *Fahrenheit* was much like it was for Moore’s other films- his trademark techniques were used, resulting in low production costs. However, the distribution of the film was paramount, and Moore treated it as such. Moore has said that he made the film with the intention of trying to unseat Bush, and accordingly decided to “get his film out by hook or by crook. His hook, it appeared, was censorship” (“Paranoia for Profit, 2005). Moore had gone to Michael Eisner and Disney in 2003 with hopes of getting them to distribute the film, but Eisner refused, not wanting to seem as though he was anti-American, or against the administration. The Weinstein brothers of Miramax were willing, but needed backing from their parent company, Disney. After *Fahrenheit* received critical acclaim from the

Cannes Film Festival, they reconsidered, and agreed to fund production and distribution costs. By this point, controversy was beginning to swirl around the film, and even its distribution strategy. By placing a full page article in the *New York Times* claiming that Disney didn't want to endanger tax breaks from the president's brother, governor of Florida, Eisner was coerced to deflect that criticism. So to allow them to profit from the film without looking as though they were affiliated, they had the Weinstein brothers set up an "independent" company that would outsource the distribution, but was actually owned by Disney. By the time this occurred, so much controversy and buzz had generated about the film's content that it had become an event. The result? This event pulled in 228 million dollars in theaters, and sold another 3 million DVDs. ("Paranoia for Profit, 2005). With so many people seeing it, clearly the distribution strategy reached American society.

The other criteria that the film fulfills are the impact on subjects as well as decision makers. The former, as it so often does, involved lawsuits. As I alluded to earlier, double amputee and Army Sgt. Peter Damon sued over his portrayal in the film. Moore's technique of using archive footage in favor of paying to do interviews backfired, as Damon sued over the context in which his interview with NBC News was placed by the filmmaker. He says that he was shown to be on the same side of the war as Michael Moore, which is incorrect. However, the case was thrown out of court, by virtue of the fact that filmmakers are allowed to use such footage under the First Amendment. Judge Douglas Woodlock added that he didn't feel as though the placement of the clip

“seemed to be an endorsement of the thrust of what the movie was about” (“Michael Moore’s Case Dismissed”, 2006).

Another aspect of the film that may have had something to do with favorable change concerns the Transportation Security Authority. One harsh criticism that Moore has in the film is the ability to carry matches or lighters on planes, implying that it was pandering to the tobacco industry. (By implying, I mean to say that he says that “someone” must be putting pressure on the airlines, while showing a cigarette packer on the screen, labeling her as “someone.”). Soon after the release of this film, combined with other incidents of “near-terrorism,” led to the abolishment of lighters on planes, a decision that flew in the face of the tobacco industry that the TSA was supposedly catering to. In that regard, an impact was made.

Interestingly enough, the impact that Moore strived for did not occur in terms of the third criteria, creating and sustaining alternative discourse. Here, we run into the unique case of a documentary that, while it is widely seen, does not achieve its *intended* effect. Part of the reason for this may have to do with the fact that many thought that Moore had overstepped the line of exposé into propaganda. Liz Manne of the production company Duopoly, though she doesn’t fault Moore for it, is of that school of thought:

Documentaries are an increasingly fluid form, blending fact, observation, archival material, re-creations, new technologies, and POV. Don't let anyone tell you that traditional, 'voice of God' docs don't have POV, or that they somehow have a monopoly on 'truth' or 'reality' (both highly subjective concepts!), or that

they aren't propaganda in their own right. ("Is Fahrenheit 9/11 is a Documentary Film, or What Is a Documentary?", 2005)

The viewpoint from which Moore came from was an extreme one, and ultimately prompted no change at the polls when it came time for Bush to be elected again. His extreme efforts to get people to vote in conjunction with the film (i.e. pushing to have the film put on Pay-per-View on Election Night, rewarding college-age voters with free underwear and ramen noodles) also proved to be of no avail. Despite high viewership, the film did not have its intended effect, and didn't raise discussion on the issues that it hoped to address.

### ***Fahrenheit 9/11 and Techniques of Impact***

#### *Emotional Appeal*

After the opening credits, the first scene of the film addresses 9/11. However, the event is addressed in sound only. The video is left out, with the goal of recalling the images in the minds of the viewer, rather than bringing up the painful visuals once again. When the video does return, there is a woman crying, demanding "Save their souls, Lord, save their souls, Lord." In the subsequent images, traumatized New York citizens are seen looking up in horror, sadness, and fear. Yet Moore never actually shows the towers on fire, never recalls those images that kept us transfixed for days to our televisions. The sadness of citizens that can see it is enough to bring up those memories of the sadness that we felt upon hearing about the tragedy.

A similar form of emotional appeal is aroused when Lila Lipscomb, a citizen of Flint, Michigan, arrives in front of the White House to mourn her son John that died in

Iraq. She comes upon a woman also mourning the loss of young souls in the war. When another woman intrudes on the scene, insisting that the scene is staged, we feel Lila's flash of anger as she retorts against the woman, insisting that her son's death has not been staged. By showing the emotions of other people in the face of tragedy, Moore hopes to capture the sympathies of the audience; even if the film does not have its suggested or intended effect, we feel for the families and people in pain.

### *Exclusivity*

As I mentioned earlier, the feeling of being "in" on something exclusive is extremely effective in getting them to believe in a cause. And Moore has a lot of exclusive information that goes far to make the viewer feel as though they are a part of something special. One example of this is the records of George W. Bush's military career, which were edited by the administration when they were released in 2004 (interestingly enough, after Moore made a speech accusing him of being a deserter). However, Moore had obtained an uncensored copy of the records four years before. These undistorted records are shown to the public for the first time in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, revealing information that was previously unavailable. In doing this, Moore hoped to present facts, while also proving his point that the Bush administration was guilty of lying.

Another example of this comes in the Zytech Engineering promotional video for the "safe room." previously unseen by a large percentage of the population. Moore uses it as an example of how fear is marketed to the American people as an opportunity for consumerism. It offers another view of the situation, not shown even by the press, and

gives people more information about how their threat levels are being manipulated. A third example of this is shown in discussion of the PATRIOT Act. Porter Goss of Florida is shown defending the Act ardently, insisting that he can be reached at a 1-800 number, where he will talk about any issues that citizens have. At the bottom of the screen, Moore reveals that the 1-800 number does not reach Goss, and then gives his actual office number to encourage concerned citizens to reach him. In all of these cases, the hope is that exclusive information will help to form the whole story. And as Liz Manne said about this new breed of documentary, "They have moved positively in the direction of full disclosure, i.e., the point of view is increasingly visible or personalized, making the films richer [...]" ("Is Fahrenheit 9/11 is a Documentary Film, or What Is a Documentary?", 2005). This full disclosure Manne speaks of is designed to help the audience make a more informed decision, and Moore hopes, one in favor of the side that he has chosen.

### *Familiarity*

On the opposite side of exclusivity is familiarity. All references to 9/11 in this film fall under the category of familiarity, hence the effectiveness of the technique that Moore used to portray the event. He makes it more personal, and brings himself into the grief, in his narration: "On September 11, 2001, nearly 3000 people, including a colleague of mine, Bill Weems, were killed in the largest foreign attack ever on American soil [...]" By including the tidbit that his friend was involved in the attacks, it is hoped that viewers will realize that Moore was also affected by the tragedies.



Another way that Moore makes himself familiar to the audience is by showing his hometown- like in his other films, part of *Fahrenheit 9/11* takes place in Flint, Michigan. In this case, he shows how so many people who cannot afford to not work join the Army to be able to pay for education. While this type of background is likely foreign to anyone who would be watching Moore's films, it shows that he is a normal person, from a humble background and modest beginnings. This familiarity makes him more credible, and shows that he is not far removed from the situation as a filmmaker; rather, he understands the issues that are associated with not being able to afford to live well.

Going along with the references to Flint is the use of a resident of the city, Lila Lipscomb. *Fahrenheit 9/11* shows Lila's transformation from a patriotic and ardent supporter of the armed forces, to a mourning mother who feels deceived by the government after the death of her son in Iraq. A similar situation is portrayed in Eugene Jarecki's 2005 documentary *Why We Fight*, in which a patriotic father and veteran realizes that the government is not the all-knowing powerhouse he's believed for so many years. Many viewers, feeling the same way, will likely be moved to take action against the government that has lied to them. Or at least, that was the hope of Moore when making the film.

### *Fear*

Another recurring theme in Moore's films is the emphasis on the culture of fear that exists in America. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is no exception to this rule; there is an entire montage showing the effects that the terror alerts and terrorism threats that Americans

have been subject to in the wake of 9/11. It is even said in the film that “Fear does work [...] you can make people do anything if they’re afraid.” And indeed, Moore hopes to use that same fear to get people to agree with his method. How does he accomplish this? A strategic move on his part was to show tragedies in Iraq that the news media would not show. A major controversy has been that journalists are reluctant to show the coffins of dead soldiers. Moore combats this omission of images by showing both dead and dying soldiers, and Iraqi civilians that were killed as a result of collateral damage. These images are unnerving in that it shows what the government is hiding behind their talk of “deadly accuracy.” By showing scary images that are not otherwise shown by the government, Moore hopes to plant the seed of doubt inside the viewers head. And in deciding to uncover the whole story, the film has made an impact on that viewer.

#### *What, No Empowerment?*

One somewhat unique characteristic of Michael Moore’s films is that they don’t generally end with empowerment. *Fahrenheit 9/11*, despite its goal of unseating Bush, is no exception to this rule. The conclusion of the film cites a quote from George Orwell, talking about how our society is at war with itself, including the disappointing phrase, “The war is waged by the ruling group against its subjects.” And yet, Moore doesn’t seem to think that his film will help to change that order very much. It is interesting to point out that the empowerment regarding the goal of this documentary didn’t come until after the film was released, in the form of Moore’s unique initiatives to get the film seen by as many Americans as possible. So although Moore made a valiant effort in expressing his opinions, he failed to get the point across that viewers could change the

world. In failing to acknowledge the power of individual citizens, it may have simply come across that Moore didn't believe that they could change anything. Disillusioned and frustrated with the full story that had been showed to them, viewers and followers of Moore stayed home, apparently under the impression that their vote would make no difference. Without encouragement that they could effect change, the film fell flat in inspiring the kind of change that Moore clearly wanted so badly. The following documentary, in comparison, has a far greater capability to inspire change in its audience.

#### **CASE STUDY #2: *An Inconvenient Truth***

This documentary begins with former vice-president Al Gore, dressed in a jacket but no tie, bounding up to a stage where he will give this presentation, the center point of the film. Following applause, he introduces himself: "My name is Al Gore. I used to be the next president of the United States." The statement is greeted with laughter from the small audience, to which he responds: "I don't find that especially funny." This introduction sets the tone for the entire film; despite Gore's reputation for being wooden and formal, here he is relaxed and fun-loving, revealing his favorite explanation of global warming to be a short film taken from *Futurama*. Andrew O'Hehir credits the film for its portrayal of Gore, saying that it "brings this notoriously awkward politician into focus as a human being" ("Hurricane Al", 2006). Yet at the same time, it explains serious science, using a compelling combination of still photographs taken from around the world, and charts based on compiled information from government sources. It is a pop

culture version of a lesson regarding some very serious science. Lonnie Thompson, a professor at Ohio University, sees that as a good thing:

As scientists, we publish our papers in *Science and Nature*, but very few people read those. Here's another way to get this message out. To me, it's an excellent overview for an introductory class at a university. What are the issues and what are the possible consequences of not doing anything about those changes? To me, it has tremendous value. It will reach people that scientists will never reach. ("Did Al Get the Science Right?", 2006)

For the most part, the film was well received in terms of its science. Rather than trying to threaten viewers with the threat of these consequences occurring immediately, "the movie plays it relatively safe by saying, 'These are the things that have happened so far. These are the things that are likely to happen should we continue on the trajectory we're on, and these are the moral consequences of it'" ("Did Al Get the Science Right?", 2006). And audiences around the country are grabbing hold of this message, as did the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; they honored the film with their Best Documentary Award.

### **An Inconvenient Truth and Whitehouse's Model**

In examining this film against Whitehouse's model to assess its impact, it can be evaluated on the first and third criteria. One way to assign impact is to look at the effect of the production and distribution on the overall impact of the film. David Guggenheim, the director, followed Gore over the course of several months on his tour to deliver this speech around the world. What resulted from that travel, rather than periodic filming of

his presentation alone, was a greater understanding of Al Gore the man, rather than Al Gore the politician. Guggenheim moves beyond Gore's professional image as Clinton's vice-president and then, somehow more famously, as a presidential candidate; instead, he shows a "journey [...] from an idealistic college student who first saw a massive environmental crisis looming; to a young senator facing a harrowing family tragedy that altered his perspective, to the man who also became President but instead returned to the most impassioned cause of his life- convinced that there is still time to make a difference." This personalization of Gore is helping people to understand and accept his message, to see him as someone who has truly "re-set the course of his life to focus on an all-out effort to save the planet from irrevocably changes" (Participant Productions, 2006). The process of production is what kept this film from being the dry sort of documentary that was previously associated with the genre. And its accessibility, from an intellectual standpoint, has everything to do with its impact.

The other criterion that the film fulfills is that which allows creation of alternative discourse. While the discussion has been going on regarding global warming for quite some time, it was made a more popular discussion by people who saw this film, and shared its lessons and suggestions with their friends. Admittedly, "the film is not likely to play widely or well among the Fox News demographic" ("Hurricane Al", 2006). But it is enlightening the minds of the undecided and uninformed, resulting in a greater awareness of the issue. The end credits of the film are the best example of this- while crediting those who worked on the movie, they offer suggestions on how to save energy and reduce your individual "environmental footprints." They begin,

appropriately, with the phrase “Are you ready to change the way you live?” By the end of the film, the goal is to persuade the audience to answer that question with a “Yes.” And while the actual distribution of the film was somewhat small, the impact was definitely made.

### **An Inconvenient Truth and Techniques of Impact**

#### *Emotional Appeal*

At one point in the film, there is an animation of a polar bear, struggling to stay on a piece of ice that is rapidly melting, tugging at the heartstrings of viewers who are sensitive to the plight of animals. Gradual disintegration of their habitat is disheartening to the audience, and can lead to them wishing to do something to change their plight. It is this kind of image that leads to people joining the culture associated with the film, the culture of environmental awareness. Another example of this technique is the ending of the film, when Gore discusses the seeming inevitabilities of American society- independence from Britain, the moon landing, women’s suffrage, desegregation, and even the hole in the ozone layer- a previous environmental issue, *solved*. Remembering the impact that these events had on America is an emotional concept, and gives viewers the inspiration to follow the directions of the film.

Adding to the emotional impact is the personal life of Al Gore, portrayed through his discussion of the two darkest periods in his life- his sister’s death from lung cancer, and the near-death of his son at age six from a car accident. The former event led him to aggressively campaign against Big Tobacco, while the latter forced him to focus on what he wanted his life’s work to be. He decided that saving the environment, so that

others could live, was the most worthy cause. Viewers can sympathize with the life-affirming impulse that comes from death or a near-death experience. By relating to Gore, they find his cause more legitimate; because it comes from someone they now trust, they can accept his principles more freely. The result? The ability to impact society through its constituents.

### *Empowerment*

Empowerment is a principle that, in this case, is closely tied to emotional appeal. As I mentioned previously, Guggenheim ends the film with credits that double as a suggestion manual for how to live a “green” lifestyle. By directly offering viewers ways to change their lifestyles, it makes the process of empowering them much simpler. The scene prior to this ending, in which Gore explains the ways in which we’ve changed society before, is another way of empowering the audience. Knowing that such monumental change, change that seemed impossible at the time, is in fact possible, makes it easier to conceive of making a difference in the world.

A third way in which viewers can be empowered is by Gore’s comparison between the dangers of smoking and the dangers of global warming. For a period, the evidence was hidden proving that smoking was in fact dangerous. But once that information was out, and initiatives were created to spread that information, the number of people that smoke decreased dramatically. The hope for some, in watching the film and hearing that, is that it will be possible to similarly reduce the effects of global warming. And after viewing the film, they may have been swayed enough that the

possibility is enough to make them go out and try. As soon as they attempt the change in the real world, it is evident that impact has been made.

### *Exclusivity*

For all the animations and cartoons that Gore uses in his presentation, the bulk of it is based on information in graphs and charts. The statistical data on which these graphs are based are from classified government documents, and it is made to seem as though we are the first ones seeing this information. One of the most severe examples of this is the chart of CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere, in comparison to the average temperature. This chart tracks these numbers 650,000 years back, which is far more information than has been shared with the public up to now. Paired with the hydraulic lift that is used to show just how high these numbers will go, this particular segment is an important one in gaining the support of the audience.

Another example of the exclusivity principle is the chart that he gives of the ten hottest years on record. By showing these numbers, which a large percentage of the population has not seen right now, it makes them feel privileged to have such information shared with them. When people feel as though they are trusted with important information, they may be compelled to use those facts responsibly. Their use of it results in impact being made, and hopefully a positive one.

### *Familiarity*

Some credibility and trustworthiness can be derived from familiarity with the subject area, with the concept, or even with the person who is delivering the facts. *An Inconvenient Truth* strives to create a level of comfort in all three of those areas. In terms



of the subject area, the audience is put at ease with a simple explanation of the phenomenon, while having some fun. The “None Like It Hot!” cartoon from the global warming episode of *Futurama* (on which Gore was a guest star) serves as a way to orient the audience with the problem, and filling in those who aren’t sure of the issue at all. And again, Guggenheim’s frequent interviews with Gore illuminate the type of person that he is behind the media portrayals of him as unemotional and wooden. And when the viewer feels more comfortable with the messenger of the information, he is more likely to heed said message, resulting in impact.

### *Fear*

One of the most poignant and unnerving parts of the film comes when Gore shows time-lapsed animations of what would happen to major cities worldwide if the polar ice caps melted. Flooding is shown invading coastlines of Florida, Beijing, and Calcutta, among other places. But the scariest part, and the part likely designed to induce fear in the audience, is when the potential flooding of Manhattan is shown, covering the area where the World Trade Center once stood. This prospect is not only emotional, but also terrifying that the same site could be hit by disaster twice.

Similar fear is induced when Gore discusses how warmer oceans lead to stronger storms. He first discusses tornadoes and typhoons, before reaching hurricanes. Here, images of Katrina wreckage are flashed across the screen. With images like that still fresh in the minds of many viewers, and with some parts of New Orleans and Mississippi still largely unresolved, it is scary to think that our actions as humans may have had something to do with the destruction that ripped through the Gulf Coast. If

such techniques work, the result will likely be a society that tries to prevent such tragedy- be it through fear or otherwise, this change in behavior could be attributed to *An Inconvenient Truth*.

In both cases of these films, their connection to truth is what makes these films so significant. Regardless of whether or not the truth and reality is in dispute, they are based on true events. One side effect of the popularity of documentary film is the advent of a different type of film- similar in style, and yet opposite in fundamental concept. Yet despite their lack of factual information, they are making waves in the cinematic community and beyond.

### **MOCKUMENTARY FILM**

Consider, for a moment, the movement associated with the release of *The Blair Witch Project*. All over the country, people were confused, thinking that three children really were caught in the forest, while wondering how the tape got back to civilization. In reality, the film's documentary feel was a hoax, and the three "missing" students were revealed to be actors. This elaborate deception is just one example of an emerging genre known as "mockumentary film." The genre, which also includes such films as Woody Allen's newsreel parody *Zelig*, Rob Reiner's wildly successful *This is Spinal Tap*, and the recent box office hit (and controversial anthropologic study) *Borat: Cultural Learnings for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, takes the aesthetic and content aspects of documentary film and applies them to fictional filmmaking. What results are films that in some cases strongly resemble documentaries, but are actually spurious stories. The exact definition of a "mockumentary," according to the Century of Slang

website (2007), is “[...] a comedic, usually parody, fiction film in the style of a documentary.” To be more comprehensive, the book *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* defines this genre as “[...] films and television programmes which ‘look’ and ‘sound’ like documentaries, but are not factual. In other words, they are fictional texts which appropriate the aesthetics of the documentary genre” (Roscoe and Hight, 2002). Like in the case of *Blair Witch Project*, these films can be mistaken to be real (if they’re well made), because they look and sound real. And like regular documentaries, there are techniques that are used to make these sorts of films more believable. These techniques are what make these films convincing, while also strengthening the trends in the genre that allow the concept of a “mockumentary” to perpetuate.

### **Characteristic Documentary Techniques that Establish Credibility**

#### *Archival Photographs*

In preparation for *Zelig*, Woody Allen had film students from New York University stomp all over his film, damaging it slightly, but still keeping it playable. What results is film that looks old, like the newsreel footage from the 1940s. It is this attention that Allen paid to detail that makes his *Zelig* look so close to the old footage he was trying to recreate. With footage that seems old, it gives the impression that the filmmakers had to do research in order to find information on their topic.

*A Mighty Wind's* Christopher Guest uses this same technique to give the impression of research, but in a different fashion. By filming old performances of folk bands with lenses and props that seem like they’re from a different time, the viewer is

led to believe that he had to search for archival footage of the many groups. Adding monoaural sound completes the illusion of an older clip, furthering the ruse that these films are actually a compilation of footage. In the case of Guest's film, and the other mockumentaries in his repertoire (*Best in Show, For Your Consideration*), he frequently follows the parody formula set forth by Roscoe and Hight (2002), where the goal is "to parody, and implicitly reinforce, an aspect of popular culture". He has used several of the aforementioned strategies to infiltrate specific subcultures (just as Altman did with *Nashville* [1975]) such as dog shows, folk singing, and even the film industry (like Altman's *The Player* [1992]), but this time giving the feel of a documentary. And the most effective of these strategies, both for Guest and for Allen, is the use of seemingly archived footage.

#### *Authoritative Narrator*

What separates many fictional films from their nonfiction counterparts is the use of voice-overs and narration. And while it is not characteristic of all documentaries (*Jesus Camp*, for instance, has no narration to help tell its story). Included with this narration are title cards that give information about the film's "subjects". One example of this, in which the film even makes fun of the narrator concept, as a true parody does, is in *Farce of the Penguins*. Periodically, the film will reference the disembodied voice that seems to know all about what the penguins are doing, giving a kind of critique to the genre by questioning the origin or necessity of this principle.

Closely related to the authoritative narrator idea is that of having titles explain the action on the screen. A technique that has been used since Robert Flaherty's

explanation of his motivation in *Nanook of the North*, mockumentaries often use this strategy as a point of legitimacy, in order to strengthen their case and thus be viewed like a documentary. *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, the chronicle of a teen beauty pageant in Mount Rose, Minnesota, uses titles to guide the story, introducing us to the pageant contestants and counting down to the actual pageant night. That tactic, along with having the cameraman audibly ask questions to the participants (just as Errol Morris does for Robert McNamara in *The Fog of War*, an actual documentary), gives the film a feeling of truthfulness, and leads us to believe that this could actually be a true story of girls competing to be Miss Teen USA. But the words and pictures are not enough to make the audience believe that what's going on on the screen is real. The participants in the film must act as though they are qualified to speak on behalf of the film's subjects. What results is the illusion of expertise.

*Interviews with Apparent 'Experts' and 'Eyewitnesses'*

In *This is Spinal Tap*, the film's record release story is made stronger through interviews with the band members, as they speak about their relationships with each other, their musical inspirations, and other aspects of the album recording process. That footage, combined with the visual chronicles of their comeback North American tour, adds to the illusion that they are real people, being spoken to and asked for their opinions. Roscoe and Hight claim that this is one of the reasons why mockumentaries work, "because of the assumptions and expectations that we have of documentary. When we see a text that looks and sounds real, we tend to naturally believe it." And in fact, *Spinal Tap* is one instance in which the ruse is carried outside the film. This coming

summer, the members of Spinal Tap will reunite for a series of concerts to raise money and awareness to fight global warming (“Gore, Spinal Tap Open ‘Green’ Tribeca Film Festival”, 2007). This blur between reality and fiction is the goal of a good mockumentary- to make the viewer question how real the story actually is.

*Drop Dead Gorgeous* also makes good use of this principle, by further elaboration on the tradition of the Miss American Teen Princess pageant, from former participants and community figures, to show what level of importance this pageant plays in Mount Rose. The use of this technique serves two purposes: while introducing the scene and setting for the viewer, it also serves to “make an absurd subject funnier by taking an apparently rational and sober perspective” (Roscoe and Hight, 2002). What results from this technique is a more believable (and to some extent, more sustainable) documentary feel. One of the more controversial mockumentaries I’m going to discuss, *Death of a President*, uses interview with “experts” and “officials” to sustain the belief that people in the Bush administration are actually speaking on his behalf after his death. And as a direct result, a film was made that was so potentially distressing that three major film chains banned its exhibition in the United States.

#### *‘Real’ Footage of Events*

Another extremely controversial mockumentary, *Borat*, is a little bit different from many of the other mockumentaries that are being discussed in this paper. Rather than being a mockumentary based on the previous principles, it is labeled as such because real people are filmed in a scripted situation. This ‘real’ footage is extremely

convincing, especially where real people are concerned. The debate surrounding this film is the direct result of the involvement of non-actors, as I will discuss shortly.

The Christopher Guest films, such as *Best in Show* or *Waiting for Guffman*, commonly use this strategy as well. In the latter film, the creative process of a pageant is followed by a camera crew, and the footage of the full process makes it more credible. When you see the full pageant at the end of the film, it makes the rest of the story seem as though you had to see it to understand the play. Many of Guest's films follow this formula- the culminating event of the film requires knowledge of many of the events before, events that are available to us (and that make the events more credible) in watching the remainder of the film.

All of these strategies, when combined, result in films that shed light on the nature of documentary film, and how we should question the truth that we allow them to shine on society. But in the case of these following two films, they shed light on society in a completely different way.

***Case Study #1: Death of a President***

In September of 2006, an interesting sight showed up on the front pages of British newspapers. Thousands in the United Kingdom woke up to find photographs of American president George W. Bush falling, as though struck by a bullet. In fact he had been struck, or had in a way. The photograph was actually the promotional picture for Film Four's documentary *Death of a President*, and the man struck was an actor playing our commander-in-chief. The film details a fictional scenario regarding the assassination of George W. Bush in Chicago in 2007, during a political rally. A combination of re-

enactments, archival footage, and near-unknown actors allowed this film to startle thousands with its realism and convincing nature, while allowing tens of thousands more to openly and fervently denounce it on principle alone. Wall Street Journal columnist Joe Morgenstern confesses to having done the same exact thing:

A distinction must be made between provoking controversy with obviously fictional, albeit incendiary, events, and provoking panic over a nonexistent fire. What's more, Mr. Range, an Englishman with an uncommon gift for simulating reality on screen, plays a clever game with his audience, inviting a rush to judgment on the merits of his film. I confess to having done just that—jumped to the conclusion, sight unseen, that nothing the film might contain would be likely to justify the implicit opportunism of its premise. (“Mockumentary Filmmaking”, 2006)

The White House opted to stay silent on the matter, but the film had its effect in numerous other ways.

### *Death of a President and the Whitehouse Model*

The shock that the promotional photos from *Death of a President* evoked recalled the widespread fear during and following Orson Welles' famed 1939 radio broadcast of “War of the Worlds”, in which mass hysteria erupted when Welles “transformed the famed H.G. Wells novel into a series of radio announcements, on-the-spot reporting, interviews with ‘scientists,’ even interruptions into regularly-scheduled broadcasts of dance music” (Rhodes, 2002). And indeed, the method of distribution had everything to do with the impact of that fateful broadcast. At the time, the prevalent channel of



distribution was radio; now, its television. And *Death of a President's* original presentation was on Film Four, a television station of British origin. Once filmmakers realized they could move the film outside the confines of a television screen and into movie theaters, a great deal of the impact came about. The first awareness that any Americans (myself included) had of the film likely came when the film premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in October, just before the film's screening on Channel Four. It instantly evoked both intrigue and outrage as it was viewed as both a "tasteless publicity grab" and "a plausible event that could have dramatic ramifications for the world" (Sullivan, 2006). The controversy hit a fever pitch when the film was packaged for American distribution, and major chains Regal and Cinemark rejected the opportunity to show it outright. Regal Spokesperson Dick Westerling said that Regal "did not feel it was appropriate to portray the future assassination of a president" ("US Cinemas Reject President Film", 2006), Cinemark followed suit, informing *the Hollywood Reporter* that they would not screen the film either. Moreover, major media outlets CNN and National Public Radio declined to show or broadcast ads for the Gabriel Range film. Newmarket Films, the production company that helped to make the film, responded by saying, "To refuse to accept ads for a movie is tantamount to saying it shouldn't be seen, and this runs counter to everything we are supposed to believe in a free society" ("CNN, NPR turn down ads for *Death of a President*", 2006). Just as it has happened so many times before, the controversy surrounding the distribution (or in this case, non-distribution) of the film incited criticism from those it impacted the most: the Republican party. The White House never officially commented, saying only that "we are not going

to comment because it does not dignify a response.” Gretchen Essell, while seeming contradictory to public opinion, actually managed to encapsulate the emotions of much of the nation in speaking out against the film:

I cannot support a video that would dramatize the assassination of our president, real or imagined. The greater reality is that terrorism still exists in our world. It is obvious that the war on terror is not over. I find this shocking, I find this disturbing. I don't think there are many people in America who would want to watch something like that. (“Row Over Bush TV ‘Assassination’”, 2006)

Once again, the question can be raised as to whether a film can have impact if nobody sees it. In fact, this is just the sort of film that has its impact on subject matter alone. It fulfilled Whitehouse's third criteria as it created an alternative discourse about what films should be allowed to portray, even from staunch opposition who had not yet viewed the film. Numerous politicians spoke out about the film, even while admitting they hadn't seen it. In addition to the statement from the White House and from the Republican Party, Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) has said that she finds it “despicable. I think it's absolutely outrageous. That anyone would even attempt to profit on such a horrible scenario makes me sick” (Worley, 2006). *The Washington Post*, in one of the less critical discussions of the film, cited previous examples of director Gabriel Range's filmmaking, including a TV movie entitled “The Day Britain Stopped.” The 2003 work detailed, with similar technological and documentarian techniques, what would happen if a massive breakdown of British public transit were to occur (Sullivan, 2006). Moreover, American cable channel FX, a division of News Corporation, took a similar

route when they broadcast a pair of “what if” mockumentaries in 2005- *Smallpox*, about the potential effects of a smallpox outbreak on society, and *Oilstorm*, a tale of skyrocketing oil prices in the wake of a devastating hurricane in New Orleans (oddly enough, it aired just months before Hurricane Katrina did devastate New Orleans), hitting a major oil pipeline (“FX’s *Smallpox* Offers Terrifying Scenario”, 2005; “Oil Storm”, 2005). The reasons that *Death of a President* in particular had such an impact are two-fold: first, because of the prevalence of the subject matter. Morgenstern acknowledges the conflict by remarking that “works of art can and sometimes should evoke fear and dread in the beholder. The next questions are whether *Death of a President* is a work of art, and whether it puts us through what it puts us through in order to illuminate something else beyond the anger and potential violence of contemporary life” (Morgenstern, 2006). I would argue that the answer to both of these questions is “yes,” an assertion I intend to make in my discussion of credibility techniques. But in the case of evoking fear, true-to-life stories have a tendency to do that for people. While recent films have dealt with both timely issues and with presidencies, no film prior to this had attempted to deal with both so openly (even *Oilstorm* and *Smallpox* were based on nonspecific hypotheticals), and on such a large scale. If there was assassination in a film, it dealt with previous presidencies (i.e. Oliver Stone’s *JFK*), or involved a fictional president (as on television’s *24*). The second likely reason for the scale of the uproar regarding *Death of a President* was the shift in the overall definition of a mockumentary. Previous definitions have taken great pains to include the terms “comedic” or “parody.” With such a grave event depicted on film, and subsequently publicized as much as this

film was, the genre as a whole showed that it would tackle serious subjects as well. Peter Dale, head of More 4 which broadcasted the film, said it best:

Its an extraordinarily gripping and powerful piece of work, a drama constructed like a documentary that looks back at the assassination of George Bush as the starting point for a very gripping detective story. It's a pointed political examination of what the War on Terror did to the American body politic. ("Row Over Bush TV 'Assassination', 2006)

Prior to Range's 2006 film, a mockumentary would never have been thought to play such a role in society. But with the techniques of credibility listed above, it achieved this seemingly unattainable goal.

### **Death of a President and Techniques for Credibility**

#### *Archival Footage/Photography, 'Real' Footage of Events*

The pivotal point of *Death of a President* is, understandably, when the president is gunned down by an unknown sniper. Prior to that shooting, footage of the president is masterfully juxtaposed with actors to create the illusion of Bush being shot. In the aftermath of the shooting, a series of still photographs depicting major surgery is used to explain the long hours that doctors spent trying to save Bush from the damage that the sniper bullet . This combination of actual footage, re-enactment, and still photography mimics the strategies used to show profiles of people in actual documentary film. It goes without saying that *Death of a President* stands in a unique position in that it can use actual footage to create credibility- most other films have to create that 'real' looking footage. *Death of a President* does not, and that undoubtedly makes a world of difference

when watching the movie. The technology associated with making this movie involved a high level of usage of this archival footage and photography, interspersed with re-enactments with British actors. What results is one of the more realistic mockumentaries I viewed, if not the most realistic. A later example in the film of this principle involves pictures and video of the Syrian suspect of the shooting, gradually building the case against him visually. Here, the use of 'real' footage is made more complicated in that it doesn't involve real people. Thus, the footage is modeled from other training videos of militant groups or photographs of the 'suspect' in the case in incriminating situations (i.e. with a gun he said he never fired, in training camp with other militants). It tells the story of how he came to be suspected, and it does it better than voiceover from an authoritative narrator ever could. And again, the technology associated with putting together this footage contributes to the credibility and seeming reality of the film.

#### *Interviews with 'Experts'*

The archival footage and photography, as well as the real footage from Bush campaign stops and Cheney speeches, was punctuated by interviews and testimonials with high-ranking "Bush officials" in chronicling the events leading up to the shooting. Again, the pivotal scene of Bush's shooting is bookended by testimonials from his head of security. When his teary and nostalgic recollections are played in conjunction with the increasingly tense footage of Bush walking toward his motorcade shaking hands, we feel the same urgency as we do when we see JFK's motorcade turning the corner, moving toward the book depository. With full knowledge that the former event is fake, we feel that urgency because the structure of the film is designed to make us feel that way. A

similar rush of emotion occurs at the conclusion of the film, as we start to realize who committed the crime. Interviews with the family members of the culprit take center stage here, intermixed with archive footage leading up to the attack, incite frustration and near anger (at least in my case) about how the “government” chose to deal with it. In both cases it was the word of ‘experts’ or other people central to the story that helped to create the illusion of reality, and thus, the reality of emotion. Whether they are real experts or not means very little. Once they’ve affected our desire for credibility, their words can muster our support, resulting in impact, even if only from an emotional standpoint. But, as a film that has been described as one that “raises questions about the effects of American foreign policy and particularly the war on terror”, as well as the less complimentary view of it as “completely tasteless,” or a story that “crossed the line” (“Bush ‘Assassination’ Film Makes Waves Across the Pond”, 2006). And yet, for all the impact that *Death of a President* had, in England, as well as overseas, the next film I will examine played an even bigger role in the hearts of Americans and those overseas.

***Case Study #2: Borat: Cultural Learnings for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan***

When Sacha Baron Cohen received his Golden Globe Award for his dedicated portrayal of Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev, his first sentence was, “I’d first like to thank everyone in America who has NOT sued me.” If nothing else, the film will likely be remembered for the level of litigation that surrounded this story about the misguided journalist from the republic of Kazakhstan. Its second most likely legacy will be educating Americans about the existence of the nation, which many were unaware of

until their Ambassador and Foreign Minister weighed in on the matter. The fact of the matter is, Borat has brought up more controversy about the social norms and prejudices of our society than any movie before it, and likely more than any that will follow it. Until, of course, Cohen's next movie starring Bruno, the Austrian fashionista, begins production.

### ***Borat and Whitehouse's Model***

Between production and distribution, the controversy and subsequent impact fall more as a result of the former process. The standard procedure for filming a segment of this film was seen by many as "fishy," but was consistent for all the segments that appear in the movie:

It always began the same way: with a phone call out of the blue from a producer representing a phony company called One America Productions. The producers claimed to be working with "a Belarus TV station" [...] on a documentary about America. They used fake names, gave out inactive cell phone numbers and email addresses, and paid interview subjects between \$150 and \$400 an hour. (Gordon, 2006)

Under the impression that their opinions would only be seen in Eastern Europe, participants were apparently far more open than they would have been. The effects of this are another part of what this film will likely be best known for. Many of the participants of the film, most notably two University of South Carolina fraternity members, claim that their "performance" in the film was the result of their understanding that the movie would not be shown in America. They dealt with it as any

Americans would- they filed lawsuits. But their case was dropped, because of the airtight waiver form they signed. After years of doing this style of comedy, Cohen has the process of getting these waivers signed down pat:

The producers usually pulled it out just before a moment of maximum bustle [...] Most of the folks contacted by NEWSWEEK admit they barely read the release. Even if they did, they might not have grasped the legalese about waiving claims for “breach[es] of alleged moral behavior” and “fraud (such as any alleged deception or surprise about the film)”- which is a nifty way of getting people to agree that it’s okay to defraud them. (Gordon, 2006)

And indeed, the court did rule in favor of the production company, pointing out that the participants did not have to sign the contract if they didn’t understand it. David Ansen of NEWSWEEK (2006) put it best when he said “a comedy like *Borat* couldn’t have been made in another era, not just because of its raunchy content, but because we’re living in a culture in which everyone seems more than willing to preen in front of a camera.”

But on the positive end, it turned around the cinematic career of one of its co-stars, Ken Davitian. As the stodgy and ubiquitous film financier Azamat, Davitian provides Borat with a voice of reason, as well as the comic relief that comprised the other part of Sacha Baron Cohen’s Golden Globe speech- the naked hotel wrestling match which spanned the hallway, the elevator, and even through a presentation that was being held in the conference room. In that one scene, Davitian was forever transformed from the struggling actor and successful Los Angeles restaurateur to a memorable film image (Abcarian, 2007).



I mentioned previously that the ambassador and foreign minister of Kazakhstan spoke out against the film, expressing disdain for the style in which Cohen portrays Kazakhstan. However, their view gradually changed from one that derided him for his ridiculous portrayal of the nation; a month later, ambassador Erian Idrissov took back his initial criticism, noting that the Eastern European nation “owe[s] Sacha Baron Cohen, *Borat*’s creator, a debt” (Idrissov, 2006). The United States likely owes Cohen a debt as well. In allowing him to interview us with his rumpled shirt and wavering cadence of speech, he has showed the prejudices in our society against the Jewish, Arabs, and homosexuals, while also revealing misogyny and racial tension as well (Ansen, 2006).

### ***Borat and Techniques to Establish Creativity***

#### *Authoritative Narrator*

Although *Borat* has no narrator, the film opens with Borat speaking to the camera about his country, clueing the audience in on just how life is (or allegedly is) in Kazakhstan. Because a large portion of the viewers have no point of reference regarding the accuracy of his claims, we choose to believe that this is how his country is. This method is used again at the end of the film, when he shows how his trip to America has affected his village.

In between, the story is steered by titles displaying who Borat is meeting with. These titles are written in what we assume is Kazakh, with English translations, to further the illusion that this film was made for the Kazakh government. These labels give the story of how the naïve journalist’s journey progresses, as does the map which

charts his route from New York to California. And although these techniques are not quite the same as narration, they serve the same purpose- to lend authority to what we are seeing onscreen.

#### *Interviews with 'Experts'*

Much of the interviewing that Borat does is with authorities in fields such as etiquette, women's rights, driving, and humor. Their information is regarded as correct because they will initially be identified as experts. Additionally, once Borat begins spouting his narrow and backward views (as least in relation to how we as Westerners are trained to think), they become even more knowledgeable and credible *in comparison*. They become more highly regarded as real, and the film is more highly regarded as real in turn. Even the experts themselves were likely to believe that the project they were participating in because their services were requested for the film.

#### *'Real' Footage of Events*

In between the interviews with experts, other encounters between Borat and other Americans- at car dealerships, gun shops, and with other everyday citizens. These interludes serve to "round out" Borat's experience in America, making it a more full one, and to make the experience seem more real for the viewer.

*Borat* is an unusual case of a mockumentary, in the sense that while the central storyline is false, many of the participants are not actors, and the film was scripted very loosely. It is hybrid films like this that can blur the line between documentary film and mockumentary film. The 1998 thriller *The Blair Witch Project* faced a similar dilemma upon its release, in that it was made by relative unknowns and was distributed in such a

way that many believed it was real. The rag-tag manner in which it was made, and the presence of non-actors in the story, made it harder to tell the difference between documentary and mockumentary. Given that the credibility of both films was constantly questioned, it invites the overall question, "Can we trust actual documentaries, or films that purport themselves as such?" Despite the unique case of Borat Sagdiyev's trek across America, as well as the deliberate ruse regarding three students lost in the woods, I think that we can.

What films like *Borat* and *Death of a President* should do, instead of causing us to doubt the claims of legitimate filmmakers, is to look beyond what is presented to us on screen. Rather than taking these films and the information that they present at face value, we should instead examine more fully the issues addressed in these films, be they real or fake. Engaging in that process, for mockumentary and documentary films alike, shows that the films we choose to investigate further have had an impact. Even if they don't lead to action on our part, if they drive us to think a little bit more about the issues being presented to us, then their role has been played, and the film has had an impact.

As a whole, documentary film was considered dry and boring- John Corner of the University of Liverpool asserted in 2000 that up until recently, "the dominant model [...] both of anthologies and conferences, was of the contribution on documentary as something distinctly peripheral." Nowadays, it has become quite the contrary; it has become a genre that people trust, that people find entertaining, that people literally flock to, as in the case of my father. Mockumentaries, in turn, are becoming more and more popular, to complement the rise in documentary filmmaking.

The style of these films based in reality has been more important in recent years than ever before, and as a result these films are both more prolific and more significant. Based on the foundation of historical documentaries, both documentaries and mockumentaries today are using newer techniques to gain the hearts, minds, and actions of their viewers, resulting in impact on political, social and emotional levels.

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