

Fahrenheit 9/11

FILM SYNOPSIS

Fahrenheit 9/11 is a documentary about the political agenda surrounding America's decision to wage war on Iraq. The film's central premise is that US President George W. Bush is, and has been from the start of his term, unfit for office and does not act in the interests of the American people. Fahrenheit 9/11 presents the idea that President Bush, as a result of his political and commercial allegiance to Saudi Arabia, deflects the responsibility for the tragedy of 9/11 and uses it as a thinly veiled excuse to go to war with Iraq.

Michael Moore is an established filmmaker with many documentaries to his name. His work is thought provoking, challenging and often controversial. Moore decided to forego the opportunity to have Fahrenheit 9/11 nominated for an award, which would have meant delaying the release date, as he wanted it to be in cinemas before the US election in November 2004.

- What are your thoughts after viewing Fahrenheit 9/11? Are you shocked? Outraged? Disappointed? Bored? Scared? Can you say why, exactly?
- What other films by Michael Moore can you think of? What is the subject matter and what is his stance in each? Do they comply with his beliefs as presented in Fahrenheit 9/11?
- Does it surprise you that this film was given a theatrical release in America? Why do you think it was?
- Documentary film in general is rarely seen at the cinema. Can you suggest reasons why this might be?
- The pre-credit sequence of the film quickly builds a picture of President Bush as an unpopular choice for office and incapable of the job. What events do we see and what do we hear which combine to create this impression? How important is the commentary at this point?
- The credit sequence itself continues this negative impression and extends it to include members of the Bush administration. How is the tone different to the preceding scenes and how is this conveyed through both image and sound?
- Comment on the style of the credits and how they interact with the images we see.

- We see Michael Moore at various stages in the film, interviewing the participants. What can you say about the way he chooses to present himself on screen? Consider his clothes, hairstyle and facial expression as well as the locations in which we see him appear.

THE DOCUMENTARY FORM AND MICHAEL MOORE

STYLE

Documentary is a film genre in its own right and carries with it a certain set of conventions. It is commonly seen as presenting us with factual information about real people, places and situations but as a sophisticated cinema and TV audience we acknowledge that what we are being shown is not necessarily reality itself but rather the filmmaker's presentation of reality. As within any other genre, there is no one definition of documentary, but a collection of many different styles. For example, fly-on-the-wall documentary is where the camera becomes 'invisible' whilst following people about their daily lives. Investigative documentary places great emphasis on the presentation of evidence or argument. In a third type, objective documentary, the only commentary comes from the people about whom it is made. Some documentaries set out to present us with a balanced account of the subject matter, others to present a specific point of view.

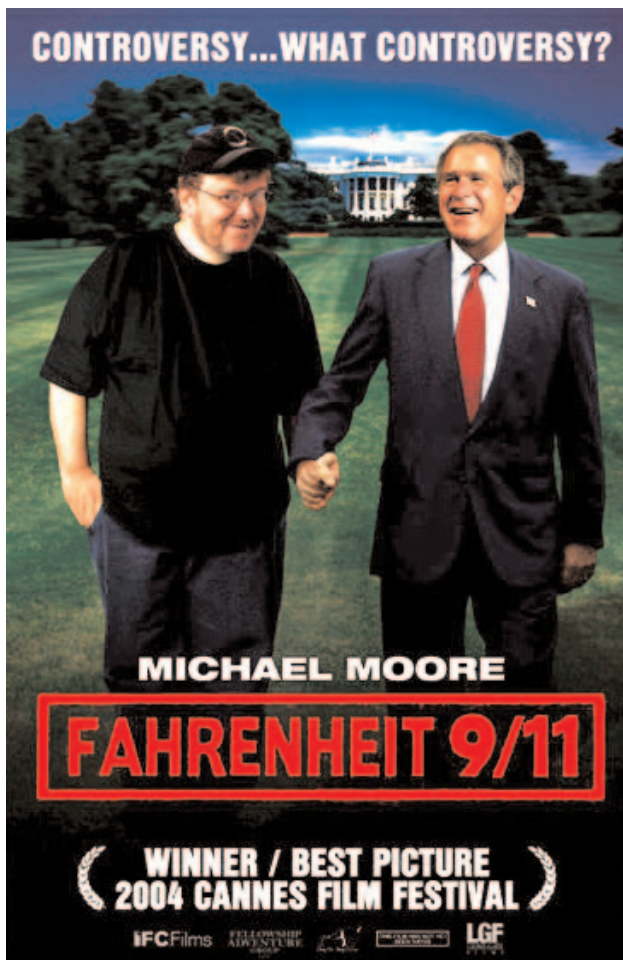
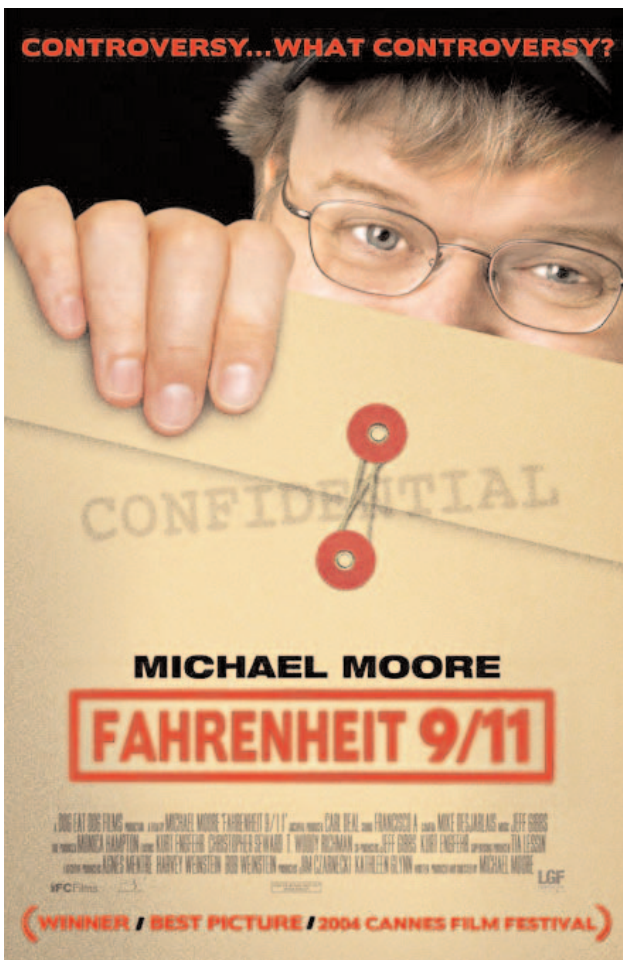
- What style or styles of documentary filmmaking does Michael Moore employ? Relate your answer to examples from Fahrenheit 9/11.
- How do you feel about Moore's style of filmmaking?

Discuss the following statements about documentary in relation to Fahrenheit 9/11.

- Documentary and Propaganda are the same thing, underneath.
- Documentary is *'the creative use of actuality'*. (John Grierson)
- *'A story must come out of the life of a people, not from the actions of individuals'*. (Robert Flaherty)
- Fiction film is just another form of documentary.

- *'I tend to make everyone in a film more or less palatable...it makes the film more complicated – because it's like meeting someone that you don't expect to like and then finding that you do.'* (Molly Dineen)
- Documentary is nothing but clever editing.
- *'Documentary achieves an intimacy of knowledge.'* (John Grierson)

Look at the posters promoting Fahrenheit 9/11. What impression does each of them give about the style of documentary you will see? How important is it that we see Michael Moore in each instance?



CONVENTIONS

For many people the word 'documentary' sums up images of newsreel footage from the Second World War or instructional films from the Department of Health on how to eat healthily. In other words they are seen as serious and 'worthy', unlike fiction film, something to somehow be endured, but not really designed to entertain. It is also common to stereotype the genre in terms of film language; documentaries are invariably visualised in black and white, shot on low quality 'grainy' film stock, with poor lighting and sound and a shaky, hand-held camera. The rise of television 'docusoaps' has helped to dispel this outdated image but it still endures.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is an entertaining and lively documentary that skilfully combines many different elements of film language. Whilst the film undoubtedly retains many of the modern features of the documentary genre, Michael Moore extends and expands the resources at his disposal to create a filmic perception of reality which is both memorable and indeed, unique.

Fahrenheit 9/11 employs the following film elements. Read through the list and for each one:

- a) find an example(s) from the film
- b) say whether it is a traditional element of documentary film
- c) discuss with a partner the effect of including it in the film

- Use of statistics
- Use of news footage
- Slow motion
- Clips from old TV shows
- Hand-held camera
- Interviews
- Staged sequences of real events
- Footage shot on a domestic video camera
- Clippings from newspapers
- Music used to make a comment on the images we see

- Commentary in colloquial language
- Use of non-diegetic sound
- Filmmaker appearing on screen
- What are the most memorable parts of the film for you, and why? Are these parts traditional documentary features?

ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

For a documentary to have impact it must engage an audience every bit as successfully as a feature film. This means catching and holding the attention of everyone in the auditorium, regardless of age or social background, and appealing not only to their intellect, but also to their emotions. The success of *Fahrenheit 9/11* lies not necessarily in the subject matter, gripping as it is, but in the way Michael Moore involves his audience at every stage of the film. As we have seen in the previous section, Moore uses a range of stylistic techniques to present the information he wishes to reveal. He also skilfully manipulates our emotions, making it very difficult to remain detached from what we see and hear and encouraging us to view people and events from his perspective.

- Michael Moore has constructed the central premise of *Fahrenheit 9/11* around a narrative. What is this and how does it engage our attention as an audience?
- Think about the sequence which portrays the tragic events of 9/11. We are not shown these in typical documentary style, but more like watching a re-enactment within a feature film. What is the first emotion you experience at this point and how has Moore created such an atmosphere? What other emotions do you feel in the minutes following and how does the film language support this?
- The only story with which we become involved in any depth is that of Lila Lipscombe, whose son was killed on active duty in Iraq. Why do you think Lila and her family have been chosen in particular?
- We meet Lila at two separate periods of her life, before the death of her son and after. What impression are we given of her at each time and how is this conveyed to the audience through what we see and hear? Comment on Michael Moore's attitude to her during the interview he holds.
- What is the purpose of Moore's requests to the Congressmen to send their children to Iraq? How does this make us feel as we observe?

- Comedy is an excellent way of engaging an audience, albeit not traditionally popular in the documentary genre. At what points in the film do we laugh, and why?
- There is a marked shift in tone as the film progresses. How do we feel at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end?

CHANGING THE TONE

Fahrenheit 9/11 is clearly and unashamedly Michael Moore's interpretation of the motives and actions of the US government with regard to the war on Iraq. The images we see have all been carefully chosen and collated to present a single argument and there is no sense of ambiguity about what Moore is saying. What anchors the meaning more than anything else is the commentary, delivered in Moore's own voice in a colloquial and conversational tone which belies the startlingly serious nature of his revelations.

Think back to the sequence where George W. Bush sits in the classroom at a Florida primary school and is delivered the news of the Twin Towers tragedy. Moore's commentary is particularly scathing at this point as he makes fun of Bush's impotency in the situation and apparent lack of action. Assume you have been employed by the CIA to censor and adapt Moore's film. With a partner, re-write the commentary for this section to present the President in a positive light.

Author: Anita Abbott

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