Bowling for Columbine: Fact or Fiction?

February 10th, 2004
Dr. Mark Doorley
The American Heritage Dictionary defines a documentary as “a work, such as a film or television program, presenting factual information without editorial comment or fictional elements.”

1 By this definition *Bowling for Columbine* should not be considered a documentary because the injection of Michael Moore’s personal beliefs cannot, and should not, be overlooked during the analysis of this film. To do so would be to separate his evidentiary backing from his conclusions and subsequent thesis: “American policy and culture is driven by fear.” Because Moore presents the statistics and historical examples as means through which his thesis attains legitimacy and not simply as ends unto themselves, his choice of facts and the way in which he presents them must be taken into account when evaluating the validity of his thesis. It is undeniable that Moore’s criticism of American policies and culture are controversial. Moore’s leftist political agenda combined with the contradictions within and the subjectivity of his work, undermine his attempt to reveal the truth. The above all serve to disqualify *Bowling for Columbine* as an authentic documentary and simultaneously bring into question the motives behind its making. Here is where the real controversy lies. In order to avoid falling victim to the same criticism this paper attributes to Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*, that of subjectivity, conservative criticism will not serve as the basis for the main argument, but will simply augment contradictions made by Moore himself.

Although most people are aware of Michael Moore’s controversial acceptance speech at the 2003 Oscars, many may not have heard the post-Oscar press conference where Moore fielded questions and comments in regards to that speech.2 This discussion proved to be the most helpful for analyzing the motivation behind the “documentary” and

---

1 American Heritage Dictionary
2 http://www.octanecreative.com/american_prayer/michaelmoore/
comprised the most truthful statements Moore made concerning the subject matter in *Bowling for Columbine*. One point that he mentions consistently throughout the discussion, in response to many different questions in fact, states that the beauty of America is that you can say anything you want; we have freedom of speech. This also serves as the primary justification for his anti-Bush remarks. Ironic though it may seem, he does not see any limitations to that freedom, but clearly views it as an absolute, because if anything were to be banned one would think it would be derogatory comments about the President of one’s country. Moore feels, however that limitations on others’ freedoms are perfectly acceptable. For example, the first amendment which he so boldly supports as his right and that of his fellow Americans, becomes a freedom Moore portrays as inappropriate to exercise by associations such as the National Rifle Association. The NRA’s right to freedom of assembly, speech and also the second amendment: the right to bear arms, are portrayed by Moore to be out of place and insensitive. Moore’s argument in *Bowling for Columbine* focuses on the timing of the rally, as Moore notes its occurrence a mere ten days after the Columbine massacre. In an article published by the *Wall Street Journal*, however, David Hardy, a former Interior Department Lawyer, examined discrepancies within Charlton Heston’s speech depicted in the film.³ The speech shown is actually a compilation of two different speeches which Moore disguises by separating the images with a camera shot of a billboard announcing the rally. Interestingly enough Charlton Heston is wearing two different color shirts and ties which lead can lead one to the logical conclusion that the speech is actually a combination from two different speeches, as Hardy suggests. Given the lack of a coherent, complete speech, it is impossible to make judgments on the snippets Moore

³ http://www.opinionjournal.com/forms/printThis.html?id=110003233
chooses to show. His judgment choice deprives the viewer of his or her own value judgment. This example of creative splicing of footage many would see as deceptive, whose root word is “deceive” which the American Heritage dictionary defines: to cause to believe what is not true; mislead.\textsuperscript{4} Given this logical sequence of events the conclusion may be drawn, without any outside prompting or explanation of how A connects with B, that Michael Moore did not create a work of non-fiction, nor a work of truth as he claims. He merely presents one side of the story rooted in actual events, but adapted to suit his personal agenda: his judgments of US policy and culture.

More generally Moore’s anti-Bush, anti-conservative, leftist liberal stance is no secret. It is precisely this position that fuels his agenda and motivation throughout the film. \textit{Bowling for Truth}, a website dedicated to ferreting out inaccuracies and deception in \textit{Bowling for Columbine}, offers an important angle on the creation of scapegoats and how this ties into cultural forces versus individual choices and responsibility.\textsuperscript{5} One may be quick to criticize the afore-mentioned source, and for that matter the \textit{Wall Street Journal} as Moore would most likely consider both to be products of conservative propaganda. As with the \textit{Wall Street Journal} article, however, one need not take the word of a source with unknown motivations, but instead may simply trust one’s own logic. What the website argues, and what becomes clear upon further analysis of the traveling blame for the Columbine incident is in his attempt to pin the tail on the proverbial donkey and attach the blame for Columbine to one person, policy, nation or entity, Moore shifts the blame from Marilyn Manson and violent video games to the President, Lockheed Martin, and even bowling. Moore is undoubtedly correct in his

\textsuperscript{4} American Heritage Dictionary
\textsuperscript{5} www.bowlingfortruth.com
satirical title *Bowling for Columbine* which emerges from the argument that just because A precedes B, one cannot conclude that A causes B. The absurdity of the title carries throughout Moore’s argument as to why Lockheed Martin is to blame; many of those living in Columbine work at Lockheed Martin which builds missiles, therefore the violent influence originates from the parent’s workplace. Upon visiting the Lockheed Martin website and searching for the Littleton, Colorado site, the recruitment page states the Littleton plant deals with “Management and Data Systems” and interestingly enough listed under other sites is none other than King of Prussia, PA, right down the road from Villanova.⁶ So if Lockheed Martin’s Data Systems’ plants are to blame for the violence at Columbine then one may ask why was there not a similar incident at Radnor? This example, which is ironically close to home, illustrates the futility of scapegoats, which Moore himself advocates, unless of course the President or national defense may be targeted. Here is where the cultural influences versus individual choices debate surfaces. In addition to the Lockheed Martin example, I will offer myself as an example proving that Michael Moore’s attribution of blame is unfounded; I have bowled and lived throughout the presidencies of both Clinton and G.W. Bush and I have neither had the urge to, nor carried out any murderous actions towards my fellow classmates. This is simply a suggestion, but perhaps one should look at Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris as responsible for their actions, or should we simply blame the President? Which has a more logically direct connection to the event?

One need not look for outside criticism to debunk Michael Moore’s arguments in *Bowling for Columbine* as an outside critic may come under fire for promoting rightist propaganda in his or her attempt to illustrate the liberal propaganda being perpetuated by

---

Moore. It is through the application of Moore’s own statements and beliefs to his arguments that one can unravel his piecemeal logic to reveal baseless claims, rooted primarily in selected and previously interpreted facts and events. The first point mentioned discovers Moore’s contradiction in firmly proclaiming his own first amendment freedoms while simultaneously condemning the NRA for exercising those same rights. Secondly, in his valiant effort to free Marilyn Manson from the oppression of blame, he suggests the blame should shift onto Lockheed Martin and President Clinton, thereby undermining his original argument that the violence that occurred at Columbine cannot simply be explained by one variable: that the boys listened to Marilyn Manson. None of the variables mentioned in the example above and in the film, Manson, Lockheed Martin, and Clinton are unique to those two Columbine students. In his film, Michael Moore does not present a coherent thesis statement based on impartial facts but rather he manipulates the hard evidence through such methods as selective screening and splicing of events and therefore, undermines the legitimacy of his conclusions and renders his documentary just another entertaining movie disguised as a clever insight into the flaws in American society and political policy.