MICHAEL MOORE: DEFIER OF GENRE IN POSTMODERN FILM

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Michael Moore seems to be the type of filmmaker, and person, in that an individual either loves or hates, as there is almost no room for any type of middle ground. Some may see Moore's films as brilliant, factual, and intuitive, while others may feel they are highly controversial, fictitious, and unsympathetic. These two diverse opinions are no more evident than when discussing the film *Bowling for Columbine*. While one could argue that opinions as diverse as these could be the case with any filmmaker, there just seems to be something a little different about Michael Moore.

Could it be that Michael Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine* lacks clear boundaries by which it can be classified and identified? Does this lack of boundaries cause a feeling of uneasiness among viewers and critics, which can lead to great disappointment or dislike of the film? [Well, I certainly think so, and aim to support this idea in this term paper.]

In the postmodern filmic world, in which we live today, one cannot deny that historically, many films have blurred boundaries, when it comes to genre. However, I believe that one of the reasons why Michael Moore's films are subject to

sometimes extreme and harsh backlash, are due to the fact that his films tend to blur many genre categories, and some would argue, even blur the sacred line separating the non-fiction and fiction film. My belief here is that many people simply don't want to be lied to or fooled. So when you have suspicions that something is fiction, when it is presented as non-fiction, individuals may have the tendency to become a little angry and react negatively to a film.

Michael Moore is a documentary filmmaker who makes it his business to display the atrocities and poignancies in American society and American culture, as he sees them through his own eyes and his own perception. He presents these events and situations with his own signature flair, in which he uses a wide variety of tools and tactics at his disposal, to present and support the point he is trying to make, or agenda he is attempting to push upon the audience.

Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* is a perfect example of a postmodern film that blurs the boundaries that help make up the classic Hollywood film and film genre. This blurring can be seen as having both a negative and positive effect on film. The negative argument for the blurring of boundaries suggests that films could simply all merge into one another, possibly rendering them meaningless. The positive argument for the blurring of boundaries suggests that blurring allows for differences between films, both similar and dissimilar, to be fully exhibited (Marris & Thornham, 2000, p. 371).

One of the duties of the postmodern film is to collapse boundaries and cross genres. But when I say Michael Moore's postmodern film *Bowling for Columbine*

makes viewers feel uneasy due to its crossing of boundaries, I do not intend to suggest that all films that cross boundaries cause a feeling of uneasiness. I personally do not think that the Hollywood genre film and genre audience fears postmodernism, as many films today eagerly mix and match genre types. In fact, many films today would have a hard time limiting themselves to only one genre, as films have taken a liking to exhibiting characteristics of many different genres and subgenres. A little comedy here, a little drama there, presents no real problem. However, I believe that it is the blatant genre mixing, which is evident in a film like *Bowling for Columbine*, which scares people or makes them feel uneasy.

Why would audiences become scared of blatant genre mixing or uneasy about its existence in the Hollywood film industry? In the postmodern world of film, I think audiences have been successfully trained by movie studios and other producers of film to expect to see certain things when they commit to the genres of the Hollywood film. Genre is Hollywood's way of rewarding viewers for taking the time to look at a film's designated genre category and come and see the film. Similar to the old computer application WYSIWYG, What You See Is What You Get, whenever an individual sees a genre designation that will be what they can expect to see on the screen. I believe the reward here comes on the monetary side of the film, as viewers can make conscious decisions on what genres interest them the most, and drawing on other films that they may have seen before from the same genre, make the decision on whether or not to spend their time and money viewing a film. On the Hollywood studio end, this type of reward encourages viewers to see

more films, so that they can make an educated decision on whether or not they like a particular genre of films. By only watching a couple films in each genre, a viewer can decide like or dislike, because it is assumed all films under the same dedicated genre will be enormously similar.

I also believe another reason for the feeling of uneasiness among some viewers stems from genre designation possibly existing as the last form of control that the viewer may have over a film. This control can be seen as the viewer's ability to choose what they want to see and do not want to see, as well as, what they wish to pay for and do not wish to pay for. If they choose, a viewer could decide by simply looking at a synopsis, a tagline, and an assigned genre category, if they wish to view a film, based solely on their previous experiences with films under the same genre category. The way the Hollywood genre is set up now, a viewer can enter a theater knowing they will see what they wish to view, which gives a little control back to the viewer, who virtually has no bearing over any other aspects of the film production or process.

Both the pleasure and displeasure that individuals received from Michael Moore's film have been well documented through movie reviews and publications. *Bowling for Columbine* is simply a collection of complaints in which Moore only offers a slight glimmer of hope for a resolution to the problems presented to the audience (Doherty, 2003, p. 20). Some U.S. critics believed that the film was basically an anti-American look at American gun culture, which portrays America as a gun-crazy country (Johnson, 2002b). "Columbine is a Molotov cocktail of

interviews, cartoons, news footage and righteous rabble-rousing. It is also a road movie in search of the troubled soul of America" (Corliss & Sachs, 2002, p. 89).

Bowling for Columbine is a great film that presents the audience with truthful situations and the point of view of the American working people in an entertaining and humorous way (Morello, 2003, p. 114). *Bowling for Columbine* is an entertaining and humorous film, which forces the audience to pay attention and think (Rozen, 2002, p. 44). Moore himself actually told Time Magazine, "It's a film about why we're so violent toward each other, and why we tend to export a lot of this violence around the world. Because otherwise we're actually pretty good people" (Corliss & Sachs, 2002, p. 89).

"Moore is an activist filmmaker who has an agenda that permeates his new documentary, but it's an agenda that works because it exposes the double standards and doublespeak that Heston and others have promulgated for years. Moore is serious, silly and funny in this film -- one reason "*Bowling for Columbine* is effective as both a piece of entertainment and as a Chomsky-like critique of American society" (Curiel, 2002).

Michael Moore has been quoted as stating, "I have long admired the old filmmakers who used comedy and satire as a means to discuss or illuminate social conditions, whether it was Charlie Chaplin, Will Rogers or even the Marx Brothers" (USA Today, 2002). *Bowling for Columbine* seems to be Moore's way of paying homage to these filmmakers, as comedy and satire play a large and important role in this film.

One of Moore's main wishes for the film was to make people laugh at the film harder that they had laughed at a film in years, while still strategically arranging the material so that they would also constantly find themselves becoming choked up and fighting back the tears of emotion and sadness (USA Today, 2002).

Although these were Moore's wishes for the film, the boundary blurring is ultimately what helped the film cross genres and become controversial. First and foremost, the film was shot and edited as a documentary film, and distributed and entered into film competitions as a documentary feature. However, there were a few instances in the film, which have been questioned by critics as far as to the representation their content. Such instances have been accused of blurring the line of non-fiction documentary and scripted fiction. But the question arises, that asks, What is Truth?

Michael Moore says that the film is a documentary that contains real, unscripted events, while his critics say that the film is not a non-fiction film. But who is right, and who is wrong? Until hardcore evidence can be produced that proves the film is not a documentary, we must continue to envision the film as non-fiction. Besides, what separates *Bowling for Columbine* from other past documentaries? Who says that famous documentary filmmakers Robert Flaherty, John Grierson, or Dziga Vertov didn't make scripted fiction and pass it off as a documentary film? No one, because there is no hardcore evidence to prove anything of that nature. So, shouldn't Michael Moore be afforded the same luxury of innocent until someone can produce hardcore evidence that proves otherwise? However, with that said, I feel

that it is still important to look at some of the alleged untruths that reside in the documentary film, *Bowling for Columbine*.

The movie is titled *Bowling for Columbine*, because Moore suggests that the two students who led the shooting at Columbine High School apparently went to a bowling class on the day the attack occurred. However, it has been reported that police have said that this is not true and that the two students actually skipped their bowling class on the day of the shooting (Lyons, 2002, p. 59).

But Moore suggests that he used the title for a number of reasons. One such reason was to simply poke fun at the notion that any one person or thing could have caused the shooting events at Columbine High School. Moore simply says, "blaming bowling for their killing spree would be as dumb as blaming Marilyn Manson" (Moore, n.d.).

In one scene, Moore points out that that the students at Columbine might have been driven to violence because Littleton, Colorado based Lockheed Martin plant was producing weapons of mass destruction in their city. However it was reported that the Lockheed Martin plant in Littleton doesn't make weapons of mass destruction, it makes space launch vehicles for TV satellites (Lyons, 2002, p. 59). Moore disputes this point and suggests that the Lockheed Martin plant, does in fact produce missiles, some of which he believes have been instrumental in both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (Moore, n.d.).

In another scene in the film, Moore introduces the audience to North Country Bank & Trust in Traverse, Michigan, where he says you receive a free gun if you

open an account with the bank. It was reported that the transaction was staged and that an individual could not just walk into the bank and get a gun. You supposedly had to buy a long-term Certificate of Deposit (CD), subject yourself to a background check, and then pick a gun from a gun shop (Lyons, 2002, p. 59). However, Moore insists that the way the scene was shown in the film was exactly the way it happened (Moore, n.d.).

In one scene the film tries to present statistical evidence of what Michael Moore calls a "culture of fear". Moore present the idea that although Canadians have 7 million guns in only 10 million households, a much greater amount per household versus the United States, they have a much lower murder rate. However some feel the data is misleading because it fails to inform the audience of the vastly different gun ownership between the two, as Canadians tend to own hunting rifles, not assault weapons or concealed handguns (Johnson, 2002b).

Michael Moore has denied that these instances are evidence that proves that *Bowling for Columbine* contains fiction and staged scenes. Moore has even gone so far to label such individuals "Lying Liars", and explains some of the scenes that have been cited for dispute, and gives his own account of the truth about the scenes, as he recalls it. He usually answers his *Bowling for Columbine* critics in some form of sarcastic and witty manner.

The film uses a lot of archival footage that ranges from comedic stand-up performances, to newsreel footage, to declassified military footage. This footage helps provide the film with some of its most dramatic and satiric moments. As stated

before, Moore's aim was in fact to cross boundaries and make you laugh hard and cry hard at the same time.

An example of a very dramatic moment took place when Moore visited National Rifle Association (NRA) president Charlton Heston, and questioned him about the role that the NRA plays in American gun culture, and about the possible connection between American gun culture and the high number of gun-related deaths in America. While Moore is leaving the Heston estate, he leans a picture of a child killed by another child, up against a wall, which creates a very dramatic moment. "It's a shameless bid for pathos, but it was enough to bring audiences to tears in standing ovations at the Cannes and Toronto premieres" (Johnson, 2002b).

Throughout the film Moore makes sarcastic and witty remarks and comments in both the narrations and interviews which could be seen as an attempt to lighten the mood of the film at times, as well as, add the component of laughter in the film. This help Moore achieve his goal of trying to make his audience laugh harder than they had in years. The film makes use of a mini cartoon titled "A Brief History of the United States of America", which the development and history of the gun culture in America is explained. The cartoon seems to be meant to be viewed as a humorous account of the history of the gun in America, due to the amount of satire present during the events being described.

In *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore also loves to use black humor to point out some of the ills of violence and the gun culture in America. One prime example of this is evident a scene where Moore chronicles some of the military stances and

military offenses taken against other countries, which consisted of archival footage, while the song "Wonderful World" by Louis Armstrong is playing in the background. Moore even takes a political shot at the U.S. government when he shows footage of an airplane crashing into the World Trade Center and text that suggests that it was due to previous U.S. military action.

The footage shown in this scene is arguably very gruesome and unsettling, and I believe that Moore knows this. But by placing the upbeat music score behind the images, he forces the viewer to have some kind of opinion about the scene. Once can simply become enraged about the way Moore used the footage or one can accept the scene for the purposeful attention grabber that it is. This scene can be used to basically sum up what I believe Moore is trying to do throughout the film, which is shock, scare, and inform the audience of gun violence as he sees it through his eyes.

Moore uses satire in the film to show irony as well as pick on certain individuals. His witty editing in the film creates a clear good and evil factor to the gun violence issue. Moore basically makes two enemies in the film by creating the illusion of us against them. When he takes a couple of Columbine victims to K-Mart headquarters to confront the corporation, he and the students become our heroes, and K-Mart becomes the evil corporate empire. It is quite comical when Moore basically coerces K-Mart to commit to doing something about selling bullets in their stores, due to the huge media storm that Moore brings with him to K-Mart headquarters. Moore also makes the National Rifle Association (NRA) an enemy by

cutting between NRA rallies and anti-NRA and gun opponents' footage in the film. This forces the audience to take a side, which means that they must automatically disagree with the other side.

Time and time again in *Bowling for Columbine*, these are example of what Michael Moore does, as he has mixed broken boundaries and crossed genre lines, while producing the film. I believe that one of the main reasons for *Bowling for Columbine's* success and controversy is the presence of semiotic excess throughout the film. Granted, every film has signs, and some have many signs, but *Bowling for Columbine* seems to have them layered, one on top of the other. These different signs allow the viewer to decode the messages in many different ways.

The film is arranged in such a way that it tries to be so many different films all in one. The drama, the comedy, the fiction, the non-fiction, the animation, all give off their own ignorance and arrogance. At times, the film seems to make you think maybe Moore is so intelligent and aware of his audience, that he purposefully used satire and anti-American sentiment to present audiences with absurd perceptions of guns in America. At the same time, you could read Columbine as Moore being so stupid that he might actually believe that the story he is telling is perfectly true, and that he is the only one who can see the problems and present possible solutions.

One of the main characteristics of American genre filmmaking resides in its facelessness and desire to include itself into the larger field of genre cinema, and not to identify each individual film as a unique example (Dixon, 2000, p. 1). A lot of films today want to fit into a particular brand, which ultimately serves the commercial

purpose of distribution and financial success. They simply want to impress and refrain from insulting the viewer, so that investors and producers can enjoy profits.

But don't get me wrong, as I am not stupid and realize that in the end this is the nature of the beast that is Hollywood. A beast that seeks to maintain General Motor-like assembly lines for film and strengthen the boundaries of genres, until every film is produced in a cookie-cutter like fashion. But one cannot complain as myself and other viewers have accepted these genres as law, and learned to live with them and live for them. As stated before, I think audiences, including myself, have kind of been dummied down to look for celebrities, costumes, and special effects, instead of unique stories. This is why when a film such as *Bowling for Columbine* goes against these desire that have been instilled in the audience, viewers become antsy and retain a feeling of uneasiness.

Overall when you look at the film *Bowling* for *Columbine*, it really accomplished a lot, not only for a documentary, but as a film as well. The film became on the most successful documentaries ever produced, as far as financial gains and box office receipts. It became the first documentary to be accepted at the Cannes Film Festival in over 46 years.

Lastly, I pose the following statements that I feel sum up my analysis of the auteur Michael Moore. So what if *Bowling for Columbine* is simply Michael Moore's attempt at the shameful promotion of himself and his films. So what if couple of scenes were staged? So what if only a portion of the film is non-fiction. So what if the celebrities and other individuals in the film were shown in a negative light.

These statements could all be true, could all be false, or any combination of the two. To be fecicious, *Bowling for Columbine* made a lot of people think about a serious problem because a fat little man, made a little Canadian financed documentary film, about a serious issue in America, using a wide range of journalistic techniques, loads of footage, and a somewhat anti-American attitude, to cause an uproar in the American public, and eventually win an Oscar. Now if that doesn't make Michael Moore a modern auteur and defier of genre, what does?

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