

## **Problems in 'Political' Documentary: Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11***

Dugald Williamson  
School of English, Communication and Theatre  
The University of New England  
Armidale NSW Australia

### **Abstract**

The controversy over Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) reflects a number of unresolved issues about the film's form and function as a 'political' documentary. Many supporters see the film as a courageous documentary exposing the lie that America's invasion of Iraq was necessary because Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. They welcome its depiction of the consequences of his actions for American soldiers, their families, the Iraqi people, and the cause of democracy generally. From this viewpoint, the film is empowering; it strikes a blow for free speech by counteracting the bias of mainstream media that have supported Bush's deceptive rhetoric.

Detractors have argued that the film is poorly researched, bends facts and recycles conspiracy theories about Bush's rise to power and the war in Iraq. They say that it uses cheap editing tricks to distort the words and actions of those it criticises, and exploits the loss and despair of marginalised people to whom it merely appears to give a voice. On this view, the film is propaganda: it damages the cause of democratic debate that it purports to serve, encouraging easy, emotive responses and discouraging more rational consideration of events and their causes.

The paper argues that to understand this controversy and the notion of empowerment that *Fahrenheit 9/11* represents, it is necessary to consider two interrelated processes at work in the construction of the film. The film appropriates documentary forms in a way that enables it to synthesise a range of sources for representing the post 9/11 situation that Moore addresses. However, it uses the documentary forms in a way that reduces their ability to gain a purchase on the complex political realities with which it attempts to deal critically. The overall effect is that the film offers a more limited framework for understanding urgent political issues than Moore and advocates of the film acknowledge.

*Fahrenheit 9/11*, which was written, produced and directed by the American filmmaker Michael Moore, has been the subject of widespread controversy, before and since its release in 2004. This paper examines aspects of the controversy that relate to the conference themes of 'empowerment, creativity, innovation' and the concern with ways in which uses of media can be seen as politically 'challenging'. *Fahrenheit 9/11* has been acclaimed as innovative and empowering in several ways. It can be seen as giving expression to dissenting and disenfranchised viewpoints, and to the stories of ordinary people – families bereaved by war, soldiers disaffected by it – that the mainstream media do not represent. Similarly, many have claimed that it opens viewers' eyes to what has really been happening in government and, in the United States context, encourages them

to register, vote and politically oppose George W. Bush and the Republicans (Moore, M., 2004, pp. xiii-xvii and 187-226.). However, reactions to the film have been polarised. Moore's criticisms of Bush in the film, extended by his more general advocacy for the Democrat John Kerry in the 2004 presidential campaign, have been met by counter-claims of a 'grassroots movement' against Moore's own mode of operation. This movement is seen to grow from audiences' recognition of misrepresentations in Moore's work, which has led to distrust of the filmmaker (Hardy & Clarke, 2004a, pp. 189-197).

The background to this paper is thus one of dispute over the role of the documentary as political communication. To examine the controversy and the notion of empowerment that *Fahrenheit 9/11* embodies, the paper outlines the context and content of the film, then examines criticisms and defences of it. This leads to consideration of the way in which the film employs documentary forms in its treatment of politics. The overall interest is in what kind of 'political' understanding the film constructs and what type of intellectual approach supports this understanding.

*Fahrenheit 9/11* won Best Picture at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival and enjoyed nationwide theatrical release in the United States. According to Moore, at the last minute his distributor 'was told by its parent company, the Walt Disney Company, that they would not distribute our film' (Moore, M., 2004, p. xiii). However, critics have disputed this problem of distribution as having been planned by Moore himself for publicity purposes (Hardy & Clarke, 2004b, p. 4). Either way, Moore's reputation for previous films, books and TV journalism with a difference, and his use of the web (including for DVD and video marketing), provided a launching pad for the distribution of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The ability to combine independent production with mainstream festival exposure and theatrical exhibition opens up distribution outside television with its constraints on news and political journalism. This is reflected in the comments of Frazier Moore:

Moore is a committed outsider with a scruffy look and a liberal agenda. Long ago he staked his claim as a reporter-provocateur well apart from the manicured journalistic mainstream. (Moore, F., 2004, p. 247)

Many commentators see the film as raising popular consciousness, providing real news through the cinema, while holding a mirror to the mass media's uncritical coverage of the Bush administration that beguiled many members of the public about the need for war (Pitt, 2004).

The film is organised around a series of events that begins with Bush's narrow victory over Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election. It covers Bush's reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attack, the US intervention in Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq. The film contrasts the pursuit of power and profit by government and corporations with images of those who suffer as a result. In the final stages of the film, Moore confronts various Congressmen on the street with the request that they send their own 'kids' to Iraq. The film's general argument is that the Bush administration has exiled truth from politics, as reflected in the lie used to justify America's invasion of Iraq, that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction.

Several writers have argued that claims made in the film are deceptive and have offered counter-claims of their own. Christopher Hitchens contests the claims (among others) that the bin Laden family 'had a close if convoluted business relationship with the Bush family, through the Carlyle Group'; that 'Saudi capital in general is a very large element of foreign investment in the United States'; and that the Bush Administration 'sent far too few ground troops to Afghanistan and thus allowed far too many Taliban and as Qaeda members to escape' (Hitchens, 2004, p. 205). He argues that such 'discrepant scatter shots do not cohere at any point' (p. 205). It is not clear how the notion that the Saudis manipulate US policy gels with the fact that, as 'patrons of the Taliban regime', they 'opposed Bush's removal of it' (p. 205). Hitchens sees this pattern of contradictions as typical of the filmmaker's strategy. The inconsistencies are a problem of form as well as content. Hitchens notes 'the rapid-fire way in which Moore's direction eases the audience hastily past the contradictions' (p. 205). He acknowledges that a documentary must have a 'point of view and that it must impose a narrative line'. However, he insists, if as a filmmaker you use evidence indiscriminately to support a narrative without caring if one thing contradicts another, alter the meaning of what others say by the way you quote them, and so 'give no chance to those who might differ', then '*you have betrayed your craft*' (p. 215, Hitchens' emphasis). These technical problems in the film's construction are thus also ethical flaws in the filmmaker's relation with his subjects and audience.

David Hardy and Jason Clarke (2004b, p. 128) argue that the film works by 'decontextualisation and recontextualisation', a procedure used in propaganda, through which images and sounds are detached from their original context and placed in 'a new and invented context'. David Kopel argues that *Fahrenheit 9/11* uses sensitive footage without the consent of the individuals or their families from whom permission ought to have been obtained (Kopel, 2004, p. 163). Some critics argue that, as well as twisting the words of powerful figures, the film exploits the suffering of people who are represented as powerless, and with whom Moore appears to empathise (Hitchens, 2004, p. 215). These criticisms represent the view that by using unethical, propagandistic techniques, the film encourages emotive responses and discourages rational consideration of events and their causes. From this perspective, Moore's media practice damages the cause of democratic inquiry that it purports to serve.

Acknowledging such criticisms, it is important to note justifications that can be made for the film. First, it is arguable that, under certain conditions, public figures are 'fair game' and it is acceptable to use apparently unfair tactics if it is necessary to expose the conduct of those who misuse their power. This argument could apply in the present case on the grounds that, if such people are not held accountable within government or by the mainstream media that should play a watchdog role in civil society, then it is legitimate for an independent filmmaker to subject them to intense scrutiny.

However, if this justifies putting public figures under pressure, and bringing 'private' or family matters into the open because they affect the conduct of public affairs, it does not justify the arbitrary recontextualisation of evidence.

Second, one could argue that it is necessary to turn the tables on the mainstream media. If independent media are to be used as a means of empowerment against the vested interests of dominant media, the practitioners are entitled to some 'poetic licence'. It is hypocritical, on this view, to accuse Moore of transgressing the conventions of rational, democratic discourse, when the mainstream media have already sold out. This view is expressed in a review by Linda McQuaig. In response to an accusation quoted from another commentator, Andrew Sullivan, that *Fahrenheit 9/11* is 'deeply corrosive of the possibility of real debate and reason in our culture', McQuaig (2004, p. 240) says: 'Hell, the media shut down real debate long ago'. The following example illustrates how this argument could apply to *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Early in the film, the time sequence is manipulated to suggest that the FOX Channel changed the national story about who was winning the presidential election. Kopel (2004, pp. 156-158) contends in reality FOX retracted its announcement, that Gore had won, four hours *after* other networks did so. However, this manipulation of temporal relations could be justified as representing the bias of dominant media figuratively, so that it is consistent with the spirit of democratic vigilance. This justification is consistent with the film's criticism of the news media for (in the words of one critic) 'allowing themselves to be "embedded" by the administration and spoonfed jingoistic war news' (Hamill, 2004, p. 230). Giving the lie to such compromised positions, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is thus seen as striking a democratic blow for free speech.

Third, the production approach that goes with this notion of empowerment could be justified as iconoclasm in the face of journalistic codes of ethics. These codes, it could be argued, function ideologically to create the appearance of objectivity and balance in the media, which represent hidden biases. It can be seen as progressive to disrupt conventional expectations of journalistic or documentary realism, because objectivity is a myth that serves dominant political interests. This notion has been taken up by advocates of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, including Frazier Moore, who argues that the film provides 'a bracing alternative to the claims for objectivity that reign at TV news outlets': 'These Big Media news providers have served as Bush administration facilitators ever since his disputed election, declares Moore, a little guy whose message is unmistakably his own' (Moore, F. 2004, p. 247). In this view, the ethos of the filmmaker is one of fidelity to an uncompromising vision, rather than conformity with stock media conventions.

These rationales suggest that one cannot understand the persuasive appeal of a film like *Fahrenheit 9/11* just in terms of the validity of particular claims that it makes. Even if critics produce convincing counter-factual arguments, the film remains compelling for many viewers and commentators. To an extent this might be expected, because the film is highly polemical, as if Moore is intent on provoking some kind of response, including disagreement,

in preference to passive consumption of media messages. However, the question remains whether, to recall Hitchens' remark cited above, the film gives viewers a chance to differ.

To anticipate the argument made through the examples that follow, the persuasive appeal or, in rhetorical terms, the ethos of *Fahrenheit 9/11* depends on a complex appropriation of documentary forms, not solely on the validity of the individual claims that it makes as it arranges images, sounds and evidence (see Nichols, 1991, pp. 76-101, for a more general account of rhetorical appeals including logical, emotional and ethical proofs in documentary). This appropriation promotes a strong sense of authorial statement, while reducing the ability of the borrowed forms to gain a purchase on political realities.

The film's opening sequence uses two main generic conventions, poetic mediation and compilation. Over images of fireworks and Al Gore cheering in front of a 'Florida Victory' sign, the narrator, Moore, asks: 'Was it all just a dream?' Extracts of news clips follow, with the narrator implying that, as mentioned above, FOX News Channel called the election in favour of Bush and the other networks followed suit. The poetic effect is created not only by the metaphor of the dream of victory – and belief in the democratic process – being broken by Bush, as the usurper of power. It is achieved also by montage that juxtaposes shots to highlight symbolic contrasts and associations (hope fading to acquiescence, inclusive shots of Gore's 'family' of celebrities versus Bush's family of conspirators framed across different times and places), without showing events in strict chronological order.

Compilation is the generic term used for the documentary assembly of audiovisual material from previously produced films or television programs, possibly incorporating other sources such as photographs (Fell, 1979, p. 312). It relies on narration to make links between diverse images and voices and provide continuity. Compilation techniques are used in this sequence to combine footage from news and other sources covering the dispute over the Florida outcome, the joint sitting of Congress, Bush's inauguration and his first eight months in office. The images are unified by Moore's narration. When spoken in counterpoint to the images, the narration undercuts the statements and actions of Bush and his associates. Just after images of Bush playing golf and fishing, and over an image of him sawing a tree on his ranch, Moore says: 'It was not surprising that Mr. Bush needed some time off. Being president is a lot of work'. However, critics suggest that the coherence depends on misrepresentation and decontextualisation. Moore says that Katherine Harris was Bush's campaign 'chairman' and also 'the vote counting' woman', as if to imply collusion. Kopel (2004, p. 158) points out that Harris was Bush's 'co-chair', that 'counting in Florida is performed by the electoral commissioners' in each county, and Harris only certified 'the reported vote', in her capacity as Florida Secretary of State. Moore tells us that the Supreme Court dealing with the electoral recount issue was made up of 'daddy's friends' who Bush can make sure 'vote the right way'. Moments later, he says that after the election Bush 'couldn't get his judges appointed'. These

statements may seem consistent if the implication is taken that Bush could successfully exert personal influence over the Florida court but that the political process and public opinion stopped him from getting his way later in the matter of judicial appointment to the United States Supreme Court. However, this argument requires us to accept in the first place that the Florida judges decided a legal question on (at best) subjective grounds. To differ here would be to ask on what basis one can say that they did not follow legal reasoning and due process, a question in which Moore shows no sign of interest.

Recalling the defences against charges of misrepresentation, it could be argued that the 'doctoring' of the compilation is justified by the film's search for the truth behind Bush's actions and the smokescreen provided by the mainstream news media. Similarly, it could be suggested that the changes to the sequence of actual events in the opening segment is justified because the editing is imaginatively motivated, and its purpose is to evoke the experience of alienation caused by the betrayal of the democratic process. Contending that the film alters facts, statements and relations between events thus only gains a limited critical purchase on the film. The opening sequence can be found compelling, independently of the need to develop a conventional argument in which claims are supported by evidence. To deal with this point, it is necessary to look more closely at the process of compilation.

As in documentary compilation more generally, the narration anchors the meaning of images taken from different contexts. But in this sequence it does so by continually shifting ground, in order to play off the political values identified with Bush against higher political values. Consider the following passage. Moore asks how 'does someone like Bush get away with something like this'. So far in the film, 'something like this' is only Moore's point that Bush's cousin was at the FOX decision desk and the news channels changed their call on who was winning Florida. But because it is followed by fleeting references to the recount and the court process, the question works metonymically, without empirical evidence, to suggest a deeper manipulation of the electoral process itself. Moore answers the question with cryptic comments such as the following: 'even if numerous independent investigations prove that Gore got the most votes ... [i]t won't matter, just as long as your daddy's friends on the Supreme Court vote the right way'. This part of the narration is spoken against cutaways including images of Bush laughing and James Baker (former Secretary of State) saying that 'I think all this talk about legitimacy is way overblown'. Rather than admit any disciplinary method that might clarify the nature of legitimacy, or accountability, in the legal and political sphere, the sequence works by imputing bad faith to, at one moment, the Supreme Court judges and, at another, the Florida Secretary of State for her conduct in office ('make sure ... that her state has hired a company that's gonna knock voters off the rolls who aren't likely to vote for you – you can usually tell the by the colour of their skin'). The meaning of the passage is not guaranteed just by the alteration of

particular facts or statements. The film's sense-making process is productive in a different way. Moore's use of the compilation method transforms the elements of the political situation into the material of an aesthetic process, a dialectical play between thematic opposites. The present passage takes those elements as the means to create an irresolvable tension between formal legitimacy – Bush manipulates the process to win power and the technicalities imposed by unelected authorities help him to 'get away with it' – and moral legitimacy – the will of the people is thus denied.

The same aesthetic process occurs in the scene of the Joint Session of Congress to certify the election results, in which several Congressmen and Congresswomen present objections to those results. Initially, Gore is identified with the principle of moral legitimacy, as the rightful winner denied victory on technicalities. This impression is reinforced as the film quotes his acceptance of the rules from his concession speech: 'While I strongly disagree with the court's decision, I accept it'. In their original context, Gore's words could signify the need to recognise the legal judgment as binding, when such a mechanism is required to break a deadlock in the political process. In the film, however, the fragment of speech is elevated into an expression of moral conscience, counter-posed to the bureaucratic procedures that thwart the popular will. Gore's acceptance of the rules, as he presides over the Joint Session, is seen in the same dialectical terms. It is a sign of his moral authority – he has the graciousness to carry out his duty and respect the system – but it also compounds the failure of the system, now in relation not to himself but to the African-American Congresswomen and Congressmen whose objections of disenfranchisement he rules out predictably on a technicality. The point is not whether the disenfranchisement could be verified through the relevant procedures of law and government, but that the different events and characters become so many pretexts for the film's dialectical play with the fragments of discourse taken from other media representations and different institutional contexts.

The narrative represents the causal links between events within the terms of this dialectical play between power and ethics, politics and moral community, and similar antitheses. In the process, Bush is characterised in the same aesthetic terms. His motives and actions are perceived as cut off from reason at one moment, from moral feeling at another. The effect of this psychological narrative mode is to make politics intelligible as the tragedy-comedy of his hubris and moral failing.

This psychological narrative continues in the second segment selected, which tells of Bush's visit to an elementary school on the morning of the 9/11 attack. According to the narration, when Bush was told that the first plane had hit the World Trade Centre, 'he decided to go ahead with his photo opportunity'. When the second plane hit, Bush's chief of staff entered the classroom and told him 'the nation is under attack', yet Bush 'just sat there and continued to read *My Pet Goat* with the children'. A series of shots follows, in which Bush remains seated, looks at his book and nods to his aides off-screen. Text on screen indicates that seven minutes elapse in real

time. Then the narrator asks a series of questions including the following, synchronised with cutaways to drive the point home:

As Bush sat in the Florida classroom, was he wondering if maybe he should have shown up to work more often? Should he have held at least one meeting since taking office to discuss the threat of terrorism with his head of counterterrorism? ... Was he thinking: "I've been hanging out with the wrong crowd? Which one of them screwed me?"

Was it the guy my daddy's friends delivered a lot of weapons to? (*shot of Donald Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein in 1983*)

Was it that group of religious fundamentalists who visited my state when I was governor? (*Taliban leaders in Texas*)

Or was it the Saudis? (*Bush with Saudi prince*) Damn, it was them. (*Osama bin Laden shooting gun*)

I think I better blame it on this guy. (*Saddam Hussein dancing*)  
(Moore, M. 2004, pp. 19-20)

The impression is that Bush has been 'sprung', caught out by the consequences of his actions, in a position where his aides cannot tell him what to say. Moore draws on compilation and observational conventions. The images taken from actuality footage are edited in such a way as to create an effect of direct observation. Moore has implied the presence of the camera with his reference to the 'photo shoot opportunity', but creates an impression of his own 'fly-on-the-wall' access to the event by cutting out narration during the images with text showing the time, and allowing these images to run much longer than most other shots in the film. By laying the questions over images that frame Bush's facial expressions, the film creates an effect comparable to interior monologue.

Kopel (2004, pp. 165-166) cites a press account indicating that Bush acted the way he did knowing that he was on camera, and having been told by his Press Secretary not to do anything yet:

[I]t would be reasonable to expect that if [the President] had suddenly sped out of the room, his hasty movement would have been replayed incessantly on television; leaving the room quickly might have exacerbated the national mood of panic, even if Bush had excused himself calmly. (Kopel, 2004, p. 166)

The impression that the film is just studying events in a way that lets the yield their own meaning (a notion derived from acquaintance with *cinéma vérité*) is assisted by the omission of such information. However, the questions direct the reading of the images in a very specific way. They are more than speculations, because the cutaways to earlier events provide cumulative narrative proofs of the alleged consequences of Bush's previous actions and inaction. Observational documentary typically allows some ambiguity or room for interpretation even though it imposes a narrative or thematic order on its

material. However, the narration in this segment psychologises events and their explanations so thoroughly that it radically delimits the kind of meaning that the images can have, even though its own interpretation is tendentious. The imputed realisation that 'it was them', the Saudis, supposedly leads to Bush's decision to blame Saddam Hussein, which the film implies is desperate self-exculpation. The stress on psychological explanation is reinforced by the claims already made that the Bush administration had helped members of the bin Laden family to leave the United States straight after 9/11, and had not pursued the Saudi connection to the attack.

The psychological narrative thus makes the 'seven minute' incident seem a major event, both to show the supposed motivation for war and incriminate Bush. However, it also displaces other methods of talking about the causes of terrorism, the administration's response, and the reasons for, and against, the Iraq war. It is pertinent to note Hitchens' remark that Moore's 'real pitch is not to any audience member with a serious interest in foreign policy' (Hitchens, 2004, p. 212). In alternative narratives, the 'seven minutes' would not necessarily count as a pivotal event or moment of revelation. To start with, a more accurate account of the change in Bush's thinking might deal with his transition from a more or less 'realist' position on foreign policy during the presidential election campaign to one arguably influenced by neo-conservatism, a change that presumably took a little longer than seven minutes. To contribute to the debate on the Iraq war, terrorism and state security, calls for some recognition of the complexity of the issues (Gaita, (Ed.), 2003; Rosen (Ed.) 2005). The debate involves such concerns as whether, as the only post-Cold-War superpower, the United States can afford to adopt an isolationist foreign policy (Lewis, 2003, pp. 117-140); whether and when it should exercise 'soft' rather than 'hard' power to pursue its interests (Nye, 2003); and to what extent humanitarian concerns should inform its foreign policy (Ignatieff, 2003). Moore's satire is indifferent to such concerns. Nevertheless, as Hitchens argues, Moore appeals to the 'provincial isolationist', in refusing to acknowledge the problems of Saddam Hussein's regime (Hitchens, 2004, p. 212). Saddam appears only as an incidental character useful to prove the illicit use of power associated with the Bush dynasty, as the 'guy' to whom Bush's 'daddy delivered a lot of weapons'. The manipulation of documentary forms (compilation and observation) allows easy denunciations. But more than that, it reduces the possibilities of debate to a form of aesthetic play, in which every action and statement of the political actors it targets can be re-scripted as the pathological pursuit of power devoid of moral judgment.

The last segment to discuss is from the section on the beginning of the war. News clips of warheads being loaded onto a ship are alternated with a studio countdown to Bush's TV address to the nation. Images of Baghdad follow, with children playing, a wedding and people laughing. The idyll is shattered by the American bombings. Moore says sombrely in the narration: On March 19, 2003, George W. Bush and the United States military invaded the sovereign nation of Iraq – a nation that had never attacked

the United States. A nation that had never threatened to attack the United States. A nation that had never murdered a single American citizen.

Hitchens (2004, p. 209) has pointed out the 'astonishing falsifications' in these claims, and Moore's silence on 'the thirty-year record of Baathist war crimes and repression and aggression'. But again what carries the film through the contradictions is an aesthetic process of composition, impelled by indifference to political realities except insofar as they can be 'made over' dialectically. At this point, Moore takes up the documentary form of exposition. He moves from narration of particular events into a little treatise on sovereignty. Expository narration in political or social documentaries typically relies on some intellectual method or disciplinary approach (historical, sociological, anthropological) to analyse events. Moore goes through the motions of knowledgeable exposition by invoking the idea of Iraq's 'sovereignty'. The logic is as follows. Iraq is (or was) a sovereign nation. Another nation should not therefore interfere in its affairs, although it is implied that it might have been just to do so if Iraq had started things. Since Iraq had not, the U.S. invasion was a naked act of aggression, breaching the principle of sovereignty on the dishonourable pretext of removing the threat posed by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. This claim depends on notions drawn in the vaguest terms from the intellectual field of statecraft and political science, particularly the 'political rationality' (Foucault, 1988) that the state's primary object is to protect its own security against forces of division from within (as unleashed in religious civil wars) and threats from outside. Somewhat in the dark, Moore invokes the notion of sovereignty only to abandon it as soon as it helps him fashion another principled denunciation. He thereby reduces practical political rationality to a clever conceit, played out in the arrangement of images and sounds. Moore idealises Iraq's sovereignty by not mentioning its brutal form of rule and by speaking not of a sovereign 'state', which might conjure up the conditions of Saddam's dictatorship, but in an anodyne way of a sovereign 'nation', which is identified more easily with the images of a happy community in Baghdad. Thus, despite appearances, in criticising Bush's actions the segment does not use methods that deal with the reality of international political problems, and through which radical differences could otherwise be argued out. The invasion of Iraq is only conceivable – and only matters – in aesthetic and dialectical terms, as the unleashing of an arbitrary and irrational will to power that has broken all ties with liberal conceptions of morality, justice and freedom even though it invokes these ideas for its ideological ends.

In the segments analysed, the film recontextualises and distorts many statements, gestures and action. However, its appeal is not reducible to that of propaganda, and is not necessarily overcome by counter-factual statements. Rather, the film's persuasive appeal depends on continually borrowing documentary forms – from poetic composition and compilation to observational and expository techniques – that enable it to engage

momentarily with political events, actors, discourses and problems, while at the same time it uses these forms as the means to achieve a higher aesthetic mode of speaking the truth of politics.

To conclude, for all its apparent independence in confronting political deception and dominant media practices, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is indebted to a familiar mode of politico-moral critique. The way in which it represents events is consistent with the practice that Carl Schmitt (1986) defined, early in the twentieth century, as political romanticism. For the present purpose, the key point to recall from Schmitt is that, once its gaze settles upon political events, political romanticism is indifferent to the particular situation, except insofar as it provides the 'occasion' for an aesthetic 'play of forms' (Schmitt, 1986, pp. 144-145). With reference to romantic poetry and associated print culture, Schmitt demonstrates that political romanticism is 'based on the practice of constantly escaping from one sphere into another ... and of blending ideas from different spheres' (p. 145), so as to produce a higher 'genial apprehension' of truth (p. 97). Reference points in political reality are only the occasion for the play on forms that makes possible a continual oscillation between antithetical terms. Political romanticism ends 'where political activity begins', so that its defining attitude is disillusionment ('Was it all just a dream?' Moore wonders) and passivity (pp. 116, 78, 160). The truth of political romanticism, therefore, does not stand or fall according to the coherence of its ideas or argument (Oakes, 1986, p. xxv). On the contrary, as Schmitt demonstrates, for the political romantic, it is not 'concrete reality and efficacy' (p. 96) that matter, but rather 'romantic productivity' (p. 93), the spinning of an aesthetic 'quasi argument' (p. 145) by which to transfigure the real. Moore may or may not be impressed by his entitlement to be seen as a reincarnation of this 'intellectual type' (p. 94), in celebrity form. Nonetheless, his ethical role as filmmaker in the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is embedded in this prestigious and now well-established cultural practice of aesthetic productivity. The film extends this practice into an audiovisual medium, and into the domain of documentary that it mines for its creative resources. It is an empowering use of the medium only in the sense that it offers a genial way to transcend the political problems of the day.

### References

- Fell, J. (1979). *A History of Film*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Wilson.
- Foucault, M. (1988). The political technology of individuals. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self* (pp. 145-162). London: Tavistock.
- Gaita, R. (Ed.) (2003). *Why the war was wrong*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company.
- Hamill, D. (2004). Moore's message delivered, big-time'. In Moore, M., *The official Fahrenheit 9/11 reader* (pp. 229-231). Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin.
- Hardy, D.T. & Clarke J. (Eds.) (2004a). *Michael Moore is a big fat stupid white man*. New York: ReganBooks. Hardback edition.

- Hardy, D.T. & Clarke J. (Eds.) (2004b). *Michael Moore is a big fat stupid white man*. New York: ReganBooks. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (paperback).
- Hitchens, C. (2004). Unfairhrenheit 9/11. In D.T. Hardy and J. Clarke (Eds.) (2004a), *Michael Moore is a big fat stupid white man* (pp. 203-217). New York: ReganBooks.
- Ignatieff, M. (2003). *Empire lite: Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*. London: Vintage.
- Kopel, David (2004). The fifty-nine deceits of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In Hardy, D.T. & Clarke J. (Eds.) (2004b). *Michael Moore is a big fat stupid white man* (pp. 155-192). New York: ReganBooks.
- Lewis, B. (2003). *The crisis of Islam: Holy war and unholy terror*. London: Phoenix.
- McQuaig, L. (2004). *Fahrenheit 9/11* places real issues in the spotlight. In Moore, M., *The official Fahrenheit 9/11 reader* (pp. 240-242). Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin.
- Moore, F. (2004). *Fahrenheit 9/11*: Luring TV viewers to the Theater for News'. In Moore, M (2004), *The official Fahrenheit 9/11 reader* (p. 246). Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin
- Moore, M. (2004). *The official Fahrenheit 9/11 reader*. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin.
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Bloomington University Press.
- Nye, J.S. (2003). *The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Oakes, G. (1986). Translator's introduction. In Schmitt, C., *Political romanticism* (pp. ix-xxxv). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pitt, W.R. (2004). Thank you, Michael Moore. In Moore, M., *The official Fahrenheit 9/11 reader* (pp. 231-235). Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin.
- Rosen, G. (Ed.) (2005). *The right war? The conservative debate on Iraq*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, C. (1986). *Political romanticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Originally published in German in 1919. Translated by Guy Oakes.
- Film**
- Fahrenheit 9/11* (USA) (2004). Written, produced and directed by Michael Moore. Hopscotch Films.