

Extracting the Michael

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Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* has attracted frenzied debate among right-wing, 'quality' liberal and radical and alternative media and critics alike—all trying to enlist the meanings mobilised by the film into their own discourses of politics, journalism, and the 'reality' of the world. Fair enough, as far as it goes. Somewhat surprisingly, given its enormous commercial success and an audience already many millions strong, its significance as a film has received much less attention—as a commodity circulating in a popular cultural environment which articulates with, but cannot be reduced to, current affairs and documentary genres. So, though it may be necessary to carefully scrutinise the levels of accuracy and logic and to judge the status of the information and arguments presented, analysis of *F911* so far has been reluctant to imagine what its impact might be on the attitudes of cinemagoers seeking spectacular entertainment, and what relevance this might have to its potential political resonance. From this angle, it may be impossible to disentangle the complicated presence of the director as author and film star, and his taking the piss out of power, from other substantive effects of the film. Nevertheless, what follows attempts to sketch out what would be needed to begin that task.

Reference to the song lyrics 'Won't Get Fooled Again' ends the film, with George W. Bush attempting a quotation and, as per, getting his lines wrong. Counterposed to a line from Orwell (1984)—"the war is meant to be continuous ... a war of the ruling group against its own subjects"—Moore aligns himself simultaneously with the US ruling elites and with the general populace ('us'). Both are counterposed to ordinary lower class Americans ('them') who, he asserts, join the armed forces to preserve freedom because 'we' ask them to. "Will they ever trust us again?" (my emphasis) is Moore's rhetorical question. The slippage of agency is curious given *F911*'s demonstration of all the different ways the Iraq war and its policy corollaries have damaged nearly everyone involved both at its sharp end and in the distant 'heartlands'. Meanwhile, as comprehensively and convincingly documented in the film (including with their royal Saudi and Bin Laden family business associates), the war's biggest beneficiaries have been the same US corporate profiteers who bankrolled the 2000 presidential election campaign.¹

This rather different kind of scandal is the film's starting point. Even here, it wasn't enough for the rabid neoconservative clique who engineered the Bush/Cheney victory to mobilise the usual panoply of seedy Republicans, fundamentalist Christians and other moral fascists against such an obviously pathetic yuppie pillock (Al Gore). To get their latest moronic puppet into the White House, they still needed media manipulation courtesy of Dubya's cousin at Rupert Murdoch's Fox News, blatant vote rigging in Florida presided over by his brother Governor Jeb Bush, and the final (and most revealing) farce of the Supreme Court and Senate lining up to slavishly protect 'the institutions of State' from any serious investigation. According to Moore's hype machine, *Fahrenheit 9/11* was intended to cut Bush's cowboy gang off at the pass in the next presidential elections in November. If successful, this will allow upper class Democrat John Kerry to pander to corporate interests instead, just like Clinton did, but presumably without being quite so brazen about it.²

Star Strangled Banners

Unfortunately, the fascination with figureheads and personalities is no aberration. Moore's efforts

in this direction in the past included the mantra of 'Tweedlebusch or Tweedlegore' in his active support for Ralph Nader (who seriously eroded the Democrat vote last time) and, apparently in all seriousness, trying to kickstart a campaign to persuade talk-show host Oprah Winfrey to run for president. On the other hand, this track record does indicate that *F911*'s patronising conclusion about lower class kids and their parents duped into enlisting then being betrayed by their leaders, is no accident. Presenting himself as so right(eous), in opposition to those who are both wrong and evil, leaves him no real alternative but to portray his audience as hapless marks at the mercy of power and needing enlightenment from his bluff and bluster. Through what is, in effect, his (unconscious) identification with the powerful, Moore blends strategies drawn from homegrown populist political traditions with the emotionally resonant narrative and structural devices of popular culture genres. As a music-hall master of ceremonies, carnival huckster or rabble-rousing demagogue, his underlying motivational pattern is to inflate and project his own ego through his work, resulting in a concealment of intellectual deficiency under a blanket of narcissism and paranoia, energised with appeals to sentiment focused on his self-deprecating 'ordinary guy' charisma.

It certainly works as entertainment, as testified by the record-breaking box office of *F911* particularly among working class audiences and in conservative mid-West and armed forces towns, who normally turn out for melodrama served up in standardised Hollywood dressings and who may shun worthy documentaries. Moore thus raises his stock in the media markets and boosts his personal star profile and mythology as a 'working class rebel'. From this angle, inspired parallels are drawn between the economic destruction of Western urban/industrial wastelands and the military havoc wreaked in Iraq, along with the depression, desperation and grief suffered by both sets of inhabitants. This is set against the sinister prowling of armed forces recruiters and the cynical dishonesty of their patter; reproduced and attenuated later in the abuse of Iraqi citizens by those recruited. On their return home in both physical and psychic torment, Iraq veterans then learn that their government is enthusiastically cutting back the already pitiful levels of medical and welfare aid due to them. It's not even deemed necessary to remind us of Vietnam.

Rarely are arguments like this put together so effectively on screen in front of such huge audiences. Better still, they are interspersed and augmented with a wide range of highly salient and suggestive information which, although already in the public realm and theoretically available to anyone with the resources required to collect it, is scrupulously suppressed, skated over, or (at best) detached from all context in mainstream current affairs reportage. So the press managed to spin into a semblance of coherence the thoroughly spurious and contradictory explanations and justifications over Iraq offered so hamfistedly by the government.³ If part of the project is to propel into a widespread consciousness elements of the kind of critique normally associated with meticulous scholars such as Noam Chomsky (whose readership is relatively tiny in comparison), then *F911* has to be judged a triumph.

Likewise, plenty of footage is uncovered demonstrating the utter irrelevance of political processes purporting to protect against executive excess. First the top judges and senators (Democrat and Republican alike) refused to invalidate Bush's election in the first place—better to disenfranchise a few thousand mainly poor Black

Florida voters (and that's just the ones known about) than question the integrity of the electoral system. Then the 2002/3 Patriot Acts legislated unheard-of degrees of surveillance and interference with 'civil rights', supposedly to facilitate anti-terrorist policing. Congress voted these bills through without anyone even reading them, but this was no regrettable oversight in a moment of panic. Instead we are assured by one put-upon Congressman that he and his colleagues never have time to examine what they vote on. The film's failure to consolidate and interpret these demonstrations of the meaninglessness of liberal democracy's institutions has to be its greatest missed opportunity. It mirrors the comparably craven disregard for all those routinely excluded from the flag-waving decency of white Middle America, as various non-white and muslim people suffer heightened harassment – unofficially from neighbourhood racism and as terrorist suspects for the official kind. Moore looks the other way because he daren't ask his main target audience any of these *really* searching questions.⁴

Less, Moore, Too Much

Note, though, that while characters, variables and phenomena in the political realm are the explicit nuts and bolts of the text, *F911* doesn't work as political analysis. Moore makes no pretence of providing any conclusions regarding the history and nature of the US state and the pivotal contemporary role of the media in its reproduction. Worse, those of a forensic disposition will be able to find many inconsistencies and dubious assertions in his innuendos. In those rational terms, what he often does is to collage verifiable information with found footage, in order to highlight correlations which are very pertinent to questions of various vested interests. Going over the top to insinuate direct causal relationships is mischievous, but doesn't necessarily intend to be taken so seriously.⁵ As part of the narrative, this kind of trick milks humour from our intuitive awareness of the decadence of power, which can then be mobilised as grist to the mill of outrage. As such, his material is well worth projecting into the public realm—whatever the framing—because there is just too much to be papered over. It defies easy answers; refuses pat clichés; shatters conformist homilies; and overflows any neat, naff attempts at conventional containment. The result is therefore intensely ambiguous, as with much of the director's previous work.⁶

Moore's tactic is to take an issue of contemporary concern and uncover 57 varieties of cans of worms in true muckraking gonzo journalism style and fashion. The material is then woven together with crescendos of hilarity, rage and horror, orchestrated by Moore the Magician into revelations of innocent individuals (and families) beset by the disgusting twin towers of organised money and power. The viciousness of the satire in the first half of *F911* is undoubtedly effective in reinforcing the class hatred necessary to anchor any clear-sighted rational response in passionate engagement. Here the film is content to allow this tide to flow and ebb around the only piece of restraint on show—the blank screen of September 11th signalled only by sound effects from Ground Zero. Once the focus shifts to the diverse personal tragedies of communities and lives shattered by the war on terror, however, satire turns to sancti-



mony. The energising momentum of laughter is lost, as is the increasingly threadbare plot. *Overkill* centres on the choice of a single family from Moore's home town as the prism through which to understand the effects of war. Lila Lipscomb from Flint, Michigan, whose son died in Iraq after she urged him to enlist, has to stand in for the global degradation of humanity that this chapter of US imperialism represents.⁷

Perhaps to many ordinary Americans this clinches his argument that Bush is a traitor, if feeling for the bereaved parent captures those who previously voted for him.⁸ But when it comes to the complexities of history and politics, and the collective reflection needed to work out what to do next, Moore always fails to deliver. Structural change never makes it onto his agenda, despite

being clearly implied by the sorry mess of corrupt incompetence throughout the ruling elites, state institutions and tame media in the past four years. Here, the Bush administration's foreign (and domestic) policy has amounted to war (full stop)—not on terrorism but employing it in Afghanistan, Iraq and the more or less low-intensity propaganda and repression aimed at opponents at home (also painted as un-American and thus, in effect, as 'foreigners') Furthermore this was always the neoconservatives' explicit agenda, starting from outright opposition to any kind of peace process in Palestine. But

without historical context in *F911*, this pattern is presented as somehow exceptional, rather than a particularly virulent example of business as usual.

The closing admonition to not be fooled again now sounds like a vain hope—simply the latest in a long line of failures of the popular will—which Moore can't acknowledge without threatening the putative efficacy of the decency of ordinary folk in a narrative trajectory which depends on its appeal to an acceptance of the nobility of the ideals and traditions of the American political system supposedly disrupted by the Bush clique. *F911*'s downhome moralising, cheap jibes, exploitation of sentiment, and even its casual xenophobia, can then be understood as symptomatic of Moore's failure of nerve. He cannot attack the myths of American 'freedom' and the history of this discourse in stitching together America's diverse constituencies into a patriotic unity—which is not only every bit as fraudulent as Bush et al's conduct but which has always underpinned the 'manufacture of consent'. It's a major part of the problem, rather than the reassuringly familiar wellspring of resistance that the film invokes.

The director imagines that, through its sheer rhetorical power, his cinematic rollercoaster can help transform the reactionary defensiveness of middle America into a movement for change. But on the face of it, and according to his PR, his desired outcome of voting out Bush would merely recuperate all of the energy generated back into the miserable electoral game, thereby re-legitimising what the film has already shown to be irredeemable. This does no justice to the visceral euphoria occasioned by the expert editing and structuring of images, sound (bites) and story arc in *F911* create the expectation of a satisfying climax—according to Hollywood conventions, for instance. Whereas the film ends with (in no particular rank order): an appeal to human decency; an assertion of that decency's gullibility; the stupidity and duplicity of leaders; and a faith in future, better leaders. Is Moore taking the piss, pissing in the wind, or just full of piss and wind?

The Power and the Vainglory

Many have concluded that *F911*'s inadequate ending therefore confirms the judgement that it is a bad film, despite their acknowledgement of its power. But although it's not difficult to show that the political analysis is unconvincing and the quality of the journalism questionable, these are hardly criteria of cinematic excellence. The reasons for its power thus seem more difficult to pin down.

Even cinema critics—who might be expected to appreciate the blockbuster provenance and deal with the effectivity of its fictional universe accordingly—found themselves suspending their professional judgement and watching instead an unusually long party political broadcast.⁹ There appears to have been a widespread cognitive dissonance arising from the mismatch between the denouement and what has gone before. Many viewers (present author included) reported reactions of raw but conflictual emotion on emerging from the cinema—simultaneous distress and exhilaration, for example—along with a thoroughgoing confusion as to what the film has done to us, and what it might mean.

In contemporary cinema, though, singular linear narratives have for some time been out of fashion. Since the 1970s the formal structures of postmodern art films have seeped into the mainstream, with alternative endings, unresolvable red herrings, and playing with time, memory and perspective virtually the norm.¹⁰ *F911* stirs up a whole mess of dormant and suppressed emotion, and rhetorically nails it onto the specific reality of this chapter of the New World Order via the cathartic power of cinematic audiovisual montage. No simple readings or conclusions are provided, actually, and the director as trickster almost delights in preventing these from arising. In responding to such experiences, the conflictual and contradictory elements of the audience's psychology and everyday understanding interact to some extent with those of the image stream. We tolerate, and even seek this out, at the multiplex. In other situations which seem to require it, we gear ourselves up to be serious, rational beings. Here, strenuous effort may be made to resolve such chaotic fracturing—whenever awareness of it can't be avoided—because it is so uncomfortable. Masquerading as documentary, *F911* simultaneously prompts both these orientations.

If such a juxtaposition of fantasy and current affairs seems outlandish,¹¹ it can be thought of in the context of the rise of many new visions of documentary in independent and alternative media. A growing awareness of the inadequacy of liberal notions of journalistic 'balance' has fostered dissatisfaction with the limited understanding possible of current affairs within this paradigm—given the stranglehold of commercial integration and monopolies of media programming.¹² Similarly, in the recent renaissance of cinema documentary, other filmmakers concentrate on a more careful balance of information and narrative, inviting viewers to contemplation rather than reaction.¹³ Those of the newer UK 'faux naïf' school place their subjective involvement in the discovery process and their personal social responses to their subjects more at centre stage. Nick Broomfield¹⁴ embarks on quests to understand controversial celebrities and events, encouraging interviewees to open up in response to his persona of a bumbling amateur investigator with an amiably naive liberal worldview.

Other such documentarists on television exercise their fashionable cynicism more openly in exoticising 'minority', 'weird' or 'subcultural' scenes, either from perspectives of superior knowledge and taste, or a more well-meaning secure upper class nerdy fascination.¹⁵ All the above maintain liberal detachment, so that the results amount to tourism through worlds which—however threatening—remain forever bracketed off; never really meaning much to them, let alone fundamentally affecting or changing anything. The gathering of information, and any consequent enlightenment, therefore merge in the amusement of the protagonist and the entertainment of the viewing audience—neither of whom are ultimately touched by the experience. Their fundamentally complacent premise and conclusion is that, in practice, alienation and dissociation in cynical stasis are the only achievable values.

Shock, Horror – News as Farce

But Moore, though he may be smug, is neither liberal nor detached, and his expertise lies in provocation rather than scrupulous exposition or the search for an all-embracing 'truth'. His method, using comedy conventions as a starting point, is to

directly implicate the anguish and pain that is a fundamental ingredient of his audience's own lives in illuminating and enlarging upon 'objective' situations about which we are usually only 'informed' by the cool authority of the news. Most of the debate about the value of *F911*, like views on the dwindling trust in mainstream current affairs on the part of the general public, or of tabloid power, assume that engaging the emotional response of the audience must be suspect, if not wholly negative—thus failing to appreciate our increasing orientation to the world through the lenses of our cultural literacy.

Before the last few decades of media diversification, remember, News was monolithic and monovocal—and generally understood as the singular voice of power. It could therefore be 'trusted' in that very specific and limited sense. Now the news anchor and star reporter stand in, but with the proliferation of images and gazes and postmodern splintering of our selves and societies we hear many versions and nuances of what used to be distilled into the one absolute word. The nature and modus operandi of propaganda have moved on, and the petty squabbling, internecine manoeuvring and decadent baseness of the ruling strata and those scrambling up the ladders of status are now visible for all to see. Overloads of trivia multiply the complexity of explanation—but then the world is complicated. The opportunities for satire are also vastly improved—through means which are always also inevitably partial, whether face to face, in local public fora and stagings, grass-roots publishing, or in making inroads into mainstream media in comics, animation, TV and film.

Comedy is potentially an extremely effective tool in savaging pretension and false authority.¹⁶ True, Moore flirts with the other end of the comic spectrum, displacing his audience's unacknowledged self-disgust onto shared objects of prejudice—where the balm of laughter converts sorrow into hatred. Neurotic pride and vanity prevent such performers from extracting the michael from themselves—a far more effective ploy. The honest pathos of one's own abjection generates genuine and conscious empathy—which, when handled with the requisite skill, facilitates analogy with the wider tragedies of the world. These too render us abject, but collectively so, and the puncturing by the satirist of the bad faith of the powerful takes the hilarity beyond catharsis. In the route from tame court jesters to carnivalesque subversives, and to the French revolutionary pamphleteers, for example, this becomes overtly political with an increased readiness to take action in the world—when it chimes with pre-existing tendencies for a wider clamour for change. But the comedy itself can't create or lead anything, so our only option is to laugh uneasily at (not with) Moore for his delusional grandeur.¹⁷

One example which transcends most of the aforementioned problems with Michel Moore's approach and that of the newer documentarists is Channel 4's Mark Thomas Comedy Product—whose title immediately signals a self-conscious acknowledgement of the limitations of cultural commodities. Nevertheless the structure of the programme takes us back to the intimacy of club stand-up routines, and the studio and television punters are always invited to laugh at as well as with the comedian. The quest for answers to admitted naivete and ignorance means that methods are developed in practice, and a range of pragmatic forms of action advised. The emphasis throughout is on collective work and discussion, with the front man a delegate rather than leader. Overall, a dynamic sense of change implicates the audience too, rather than retreating to the complacency of existing beliefs. No perfect solutions are ever offered as a sop to satisfy the passive recipients of uplifting performance.¹⁸

Beyond a Joke

To sum up, regarding *F911* as primarily a popular cultural product enables us to reverse the terms of debate about its qualities. The political intervention it proclaims is, in fact, part of its commercial promotion—not the other way round—and Michael Moore's primary motivation, in practice, is to enhance his position (in terms of both economic



and cultural capital, because these have become so closely entwined nowadays in the realms of public media). *F911*'s success has been engineered by a commercial strategy (or simulation) of 'guerilla' marketing using the convenient excuse of the political career of a more obviously tainted than usual US president. It is an example of the persuasive potential of media and popular culture genres having entered the body politic through their saturation of our daily lives, from infancy, in the discourses embodied in cultural commodities—just as in the past it made sense to analyse folklore, mythology and religion in terms of the limiting and limited narrative possibilities offered there.

At home in his high-profile environment, Michael Moore can neither be extracted from his unconscious alignment with (other) celebrities in the star system, nor from other planets in the political universe—any more than current affairs are usefully considered to be analogous to hard-nosed theoretical physics (chaos, charm and entropy and all). As an individual Moore is far from an intellect of genius, has any number of prominent and visible ideological and personal warts, and wouldn't pass muster in the real world as any kind of salesman let alone a politico (you'd be too busy laughing). But the egomania and drive needed to bring together large volumes of human and financial collateral in translating his vision onto celluloid probably also provide the entrepreneurial savvy to persuade investors to cough up. To them he's doubtless considered a safe bet, in the established cinema tradition of paranoid mavericks prone to hysterical posturing. Some of these, such as Oliver Stone, also consider their work as 'subversive'—and it may be so, though rarely in the ways they imagine.

On balance, despite its many shortcomings and even its frankly reactionary overtones, I, for one, am happy that *F911* is out there in the world and that so many millions of us are seeing it. Of course it's important to be clear about the film and its director—the cowardice as well as the bravery, clangers and bullseyes, clarity and befuddlement. Further, it's no bad thing to acknowledge that this is also a fair description of the human condition in general. In universalising the moral decency of common folk (Moore) and natural human common sense (Chomsky),¹⁹ we will always be found wanting. There's little point bemoaning the fact that we are human animals with hearts, guts and minds; or that it's a dirty world and we are in a mess. The mobilisation of emotion fosters an appreciation of the world and its people that both punctures the purity of power and avoids paralysis from imperfect knowledge.

The hints are also all there in *F911* that the imagined community of nation is the most profound con of the present era, with its mouldy cement of voting for leaders as liberal democracy's feet of clay. A less opaque perception is possible of the close-knit globalising networks of domination and suffering disappearing over the on-screen horizon—from the complementarity regimentation and abuse of underclass enlistees and Baghdad residents to the harassment of white US respectables and invisible internal 'others'. Few show signs of fighting back in the film, but the implication is that any or all might. So might the audience; and more belligerently than by meekly lining up to vote or paying to be thrilled. Out of pain can come laughter, and there are many kinds of both. One laughter, one pain; one love, one blood—these are unlikely slogans at hustings for the lesser corporate-military evil. But they might begin to make sense to those viewers of *F911* not prepared to sweep their gut reactions back under the carpet-bombing of presidential election news. Therefore our conclusions and interpretations can usefully converge around what active political use to make of all this—not trying to enforce as authoritative any of the many possible readings of what is, in the end, only a film.

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Notes

1. And although Moore himself might get even richer, thanks to the film, he is at least urging its internet pirating and distribution.
2. Cue a video outtake showing Bush addressing a fund-raiser gathering as "the haves and have-mores; I don't call you the elite, I call you my base".
3. Cue Secretary of State Colin Powell emphatically denying two months before September 11th that Saddam Hussein had any capacity for WMDs.
4. In his book *What Next: A Memoir Towards World Peace*, Serpent's Tail, 2003, Walter Mosley stresses that, from their centuries of hard experience of noble US humanism in action, many Black Americans weren't at all surprised that the country could be hated so much. Thus *F911* could easily have found resources for such discussion very close at hand.
5. Interesting critiques which accept the film in those terms can be found in: Todd Gitlin 'Michael Moore Alas', www.opendemocracy.net/themes/article-3-1988.jsp; and Robert Jensen 'Beyond F911', www.counterpunch.org/jensen07052004.html.
6. In television series such as *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*, bestselling books like *Downsize This!*, *Stupid White Men* and *Dude, Where's My Country?* and the films *Roger And Me*, 1989, and *Bowling For Columbine*, 1992.
7. She works as a employment counsellor to the jobless, so Moore's rare appearance on camera hounding national politicians—only one of whom has offspring on Iraq active service—ironises as it humanises.
8. The matching shots of a grieving Iraqi mother impotently railing at American barbarism, however, are just as likely to reinforce depressive apathy.
9. So, for example, Mark Kermode ('All Blunderbuss and Bile', *The Observer*, 11 July) mistakes his lack of engagement with Moore's vulgar exploitation of real grief and horror as based on Britishness; whereas B. Ruby Rich ('Mission Improbable', *Sight & Sound*, July, pp.14-16) is seduced by the Cannes Festival PR into discussing *F911*'s emotive power only in terms of swingometers.
10. See my 'Class-ifying Contemporary Cinema', *Variant* 10, 2000, pp.14-16, for further discussion.
11. Despite the title being borrowed from a Ray Bradbury science fiction novel.
12. Two forthcoming documentaries tackle the significance of these developments in the present context: the independently distributed critique of Fox News, *OutFoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, dir. Robert Greenwald (see article by Don Hazen, www.alternet.org/story/19199/); and *The Control Room* about Arabic cable channel Al Jazeera, to be broadcast on BBC2.
13. For example Errol Morris reveals the inevitable partiality of perspective of his subjects in their particular fields, using expressionistic visuals, filming styles and editing to emphasise gaps and uncertainties in the stories told—in, for example, *Gates of Heaven*, 1979, *The Thin Blue Line*, 1988 and *The Fog Of War*, 2003—the latter revealing the pomposity and shallow self-delusions of Vietnam war architect Robert McNamara.
14. E.g. in documentaries about Thatcher and South African fascist Eugene Terreblanche, two about serial killer Aileen Wuornos, and *Biggie & Tupac*, 2001.
15. E.g. Jon Ronson and Louis Theroux respectively.
16. Despite most 'alternative' comedians preferring to assert cool distinction by sneering at the cretinism of ordinary people.
17. And at others who reveal their (stars and) stripes in thrall to leadership cults—such as the *Socialist Worker* review calling on Moore to stand for office. For a corrective, see the No Sweat campaign's more prosaic take on *F911* (www.nosweat.org.uk).
18. Clearly inspired by Michael Moore's TV work, disappointing tendencies sometimes cross over too, such as occasional hints of little Englandism—but not too often. Respectability is decisively rejected in Mark Thomas' insistence on retaining his own effing and blinding vernacular—which works for me, even if ensuring the show's relegation to a minority schedule slot.
19. Attributions which also seem to be transhistorical in their mythical persistence.