

MICHAEL MOORE AND HIS FICTITIOUS NON-FICTION

Publically, Michael Moore has heralded the importance of non-fiction, but Moore's advocacy through his spoken statements, written words, and film documentaries is often based on conjecture. Though Michael Moore uses data and facts in each of his arguments, the overarching premise of each argument is inherently fictitious, as Moore's arguments are based on Moore's assumption that his personal appraisal of a situation is the truth.

Spoken Statements

At the 2003 Oscars, after *Bowling for Columbine* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, Michael Moore gave the following speech:

"On behalf of our producers Kathleen Glynn and Michael Donovan (from Canada), I would like to thank the Academy for this award. I have invited the other Documentary nominees on stage with me. They are here in solidarity because we like non-fiction. We like non-fiction because we live in fictitious times. We live in a time where fictitious election results give us a fictitious president. We are now fighting a war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or the fictitious 'Orange Alerts,' we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you. And, whenever you've got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up."

Moore's speech incited audible boos from the crowd, and sparked a notable controversy throughout the nation in the weeks that followed.

Months later, Moore appeared on David Letterman to promote *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a movie detailing Moore's views on President Bush and the war. During the interview, Letterman brought up Moore's infamous Academy Award speech. In response, Moore revealed, "What I said was we were being led to war for fictitious reasons and, uh, I didn't really know if that was true at the time. It was only the fifth day of the war."

If Moore didn't have a factual basis for his claims about the "fictitious war," why did he make such an inflammatory statement in such a public forum? The very definition of fiction is "an assumption of a possibility as a fact irrespective of the question of its truth" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Immediately after touting his love of non-fiction, Moore hypocritically made allegations he could not support with evidence—Moore, himself, made fictitious statements.

Written Words

In a letter to his fans, published two weeks after the 2003 Academy Awards Ceremony, Moore once again makes fictitious claims as he boasts about his "Oscar 'backlash.'" According to Moore, his controversial comments had the following effects:

- Theater attendance at *Bowling for Columbine* went up 110% the day after the Academy Awards; and the box office gross for the film was up by 73% the following weekend
- The number of theaters showing *Bowling for Columbine* increased
- Moore's book, Stupid White Men, moved back up to #1 on the New York Times bestseller list
- Moore's website received record numbers of hits (10-20 million per day)
- Within two days of the Oscars, more people had pre-ordered the video for "Bowling for Columbine" on Amazon.com than the Oscar winner for Best Picture, "Chicago"

Moore's point in mentioning all these successes is not only to urge fellow dissenters to speak out politically, but also to vindicate his much-criticized statements at the Oscars. Moore argues that the reason his work was so successful in the two weeks following his win at the Academy Awards is that the vast majority of the American public supports Moore's point of view, and is supporting Moore's work as a sign of solidarity against President Bush and his wartime actions. Moore writes, "Well, the good news—if there can be any good news this week—is that not only have neither I nor others been silenced, we have been joined by millions of Americans who think the same way we do." Moore's assertions regarding the reasons for his success are flawed. There is, without a doubt, a correlation between Moore's caustic speech and the consumer responses that ensued. However, Moore erroneously assumes that the nation's agreement with the content of the speech was the causative factor in Moore's successes. In fact, there are many confounding causative factors.

One factor that likely played a part in Moore's success following his speech at the Oscars is merely that *Bowling for Columbine* won a prestigious award at a well-publicized and highly-regarded awards ceremony that was broadcast on national network television. It is common for a film, especially a documentary, to see increased box office revenues after winning an Academy Award. The 2010 Oscar winner for Best Documentary Feature, *The Cove*, saw an increase of 382% the day after the Oscars, and an increase of 855% the following weekend. Louie Psihoyos and Fisher Stevens, directors of *The Cove*, did not give a heated political commentary in their acceptance speech, so it follows that the swell in box office popularity of *The Cove* in the weeks following the Oscars was not due to the political content of Psihoyos' and Stevens' speeches, but rather a result of increased awareness and interest in the documentary because the film won an Academy Award. Like *Bowling for Columbine*, *The Cove* enjoyed an increase in the number of theaters showing the film after its Oscar win (BoxOfficeMojo).

The "Banned in Boston" principle refers to the fact that when a piece of literature is challenged or censored, the book's popularity skyrockets, and sales increase exponentially. The "Banned in Boston" phenomenon is likely a result two major factors: publicity and human nature. As the maxim goes, "there is no such thing as bad publicity," and when a book is challenged and/or removed from a library, it receives a lot of press, thereby increasing recognition of the book and its author. Additionally, it is a fact of human nature that people tend to be drawn to that which is risqué or taboo. This combination of factors is the reason that many authors see dramatic increases in sales after one or more of their books is challenged (Karolidis, Burress & Kean,

2001). In a 1920s article for *The New Yorker* titled “How to be Obscene,” author Upton Sinclair writes, “then some good angel puts it into the head of a Boston preacher to read your book and take it to the Boston police, and the police go and arrest a bookclerk for selling your book, which is obscene. Instantly the press agencies flash the name of your book to every town and village in the United States, and your publishers get orders by telegraph from Podunk and Kalamazoo. The literary editors grab the book out of the pile they had set aside to be turned over to the second-hand dealers. The printers of your book have to telegraph to the mill for a carload of paper for a new edition, and the royalties from the first three days’ sales pay your expenses while you travel from California to Boston, to enter a protest against the action of the censor, and ensure the sale of the new edition before it has gone to press.” Though Sinclair wrote this commentary several decades ago, his words ring true in the 21st century.

The “Banned in Boston” phenomenon may, in part, be responsible for the increase in Moore’s book and movie sales immediately following his controversial speech at the Academy Awards. Moore was widely criticized by other public figures and in mainstream media outlets. This criticism created publicity and distinguished Moore as a “radical rebel” of sorts, piquing the human curiosity for that which he sensationalized.

Though it is plausible that some of Moore’s success following the Oscars was due to support from fellow dissenters, it is likely that the majority of Moore’s success was a direct result of the fact that his film won a major award and that Moore gained notoriety from his controversial acceptance speech. In his letter to his fans, Moore ignores confounding causative factors that

must be taken into account to accurately assess the truth, choosing instead to assert his presumptions as fact rather than mere possibility.

Documentary Films

After receiving a barrage of right-wing flack for his movies, Michael Moore decided to offer a \$10,000 reward to the first person who could find a “factual lie” in each of his movies since *Fahrenheit 9/11*. So far no one has found any inaccuracies. Though each individual fact Moore uses is correct, the construction of Moore’s arguments are flawed, circumspect, and manipulated.

In a 1989 interview, Harlan Jacobson confronted Michael Moore about deceptive chronological inaccuracies in Moore’s debut documentary, *Roger & Me*. Jacobson asserts, “Moore created the impression of a direct sequence of events that didn’t happen in Flint in the one-to-one causal fashion his documentary implies.” For example, in *Roger & Me*, Moore attempts to show how Flint, Michigan tried (and failed) to rebound from the large-scale GM layoffs in the late 1980s. Moore cites the construction of the Downtown Flint Hyatt Regency, AutoWorld museum, and Water Street Pavilion Mall as a project aimed at rebuilding Flint’s financial infrastructure through tourism revenue. The project was an abysmal failure. What Moore neglects to mention is that all three of these projects were discussed and designed during the 1970s, more than a decade before the GM layoffs. In fact, before the GM layoffs took place, all three projects had already failed. Neither the conception nor the failure of these projects was due to the GM plant closings as Moore leads viewers to believe in *Roger & Me*.

In responding to Jacobson's claim regarding *Roger & Me's* misleading sequencing, Moore complains "You are trying to hold me to a different standard than you would another film...as if I were writing some kind of college essay.." Jacobson then said of Moore's work, "It's not in any category I know as fiction." Moore answered, "It's not fiction...it's a documentary told with a narrative style...The reason why people don't watch documentaries is they are so bogged down with 'Now in 1980...then in '82 five thousand were called back...in'84 ten thousand were laid off...but then in '86...' If you want to tell the Flint story, there's the Flint story." Judging from this response, it seems as though Moore believes that in his films the ends justify the means—perhaps a viewer does not have a clear and complete understanding of the subject matter, but if the viewer sees Michael Moore's interpretation of "the story" of an issue, Moore counts his documentary as both successful and educational. The problem, of course, is that Moore's view of each particular "story" is biased Moore presents information in a way that often takes events out of context (and, in the case of *Roger & Me*, out of sequence) in order to corroborate and fortify his opinion. Viewers who take Moore's argument at face value are duped into thinking that Moore's films are works of pure non-fiction, and Moore's rhetoric lacks factual citations to provide the contextual accuracy that would afford viewers the opportunity to critically evaluate Moore's claims.

Conclusions

In his 1989 interview with Michael Moore, Jacobson asks, "Do you think of [*Roger & Me*] as a documentary?" Moore says, "No, I think of it as a movie, an entertaining movie...It's an

entertaining movie that hopefully will get people to think a little bit about what is going on.”

Moore’s work is, indeed, more entertaining than the stereotypical documentary. Moore has reached a level of widespread popularity and name recognition that few documentary filmmakers attain. He has worked diligently to create documentaries that are accessible and interesting to the American population as a whole, and he has succeeded. However, those who choose to watch Michael Moore’s films, listen to him speak, or read his written work should be wary of Michael Moore’s tendency toward fiction. Moore often poses possibility as a fact irrespective of the question of its truth.

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