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Expository Writing
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September 22, 2003

In the world of filmmaking, when people hear the word “documentary” they assume that what they are witnessing is a direct representation of fact and rarely question what they are viewing. Generally, when a documentary is made, the film is supposed to take an objective standpoint and let the viewer analyze what they have seen. After viewing the film Bowling for Columbine by filmmaker Michael Moore, many emotions ran through my mind. At first I felt depressed and embarrassed that America could let the important issue of gun control get so chaotic. Later, I thought more about how Moore skewed the film so I could feel his intended thoughts. Considering that the film is classified as a “documentary,” it was actually less of a document and more of a visual essay. So I came to believe that Moore made an important film with overt bias but not a valid documentary.

“The heart of the matter for someone doing documentary work is the pursuit of what James Agee called ‘human actuality’—rendering and representing for others what has been witnessed, heard, overheard, or sensed. Fact is ‘the quality of being actual,’ hence Agee’s concern with actuality” (Coles, 176). Just like any photograph, book, magazine article or any other item of non-fiction media, films will always be created with a bias. Many influences make it impossible to accurately depict reality including perception and a persona. “In shaping an article or a book, the writer can add factors and variables in two directions: social and cultural and historical on the one hand, individual or idiosyncratic on the other” (Coles, 177). In this particular film, Moore uses a social or “long” filter to make a powerful statement about gun control with a grand social

standpoint. In the opening scene of the film, Moore goes to a bank at which they give you a gun if you open a bank account. At the end of the scene, Moore walks out of the bank with a gun that appears to have been given to him right away. What Moore didn't tell you is that the scene was actually shot in two different takes: one in which he opens up a bank account and then another two weeks later in which he receives his rifle. With use of modern editing software, a filmmaker can easily combine the two separate scenes into one so it looks as if everything occurred on the same day. Many of the powerful scenes in this film could have been altered completely through purposeful editing in order to prove the filmmaker's own point. In the very last (and most powerful) scene, an interview with the president of the National Rifle Association, Charlton Heston, Moore drills him about various problems with the right to bear arms. After many questions, which Heston never fully answers, he walks away in anger. Since only Moore and his camera crew were present, it is hard to tell if what we saw in the film was the full conversation. Moore could have easily edited out an important comment that Heston said or something of that nature, but we will never know, because Moore as the editor, has the ability to morph his thoughts into the film altering what the viewer sees. Moore doesn't want the viewer to think about anything pro-gun; he wants the audience only to see and hear what he feels will support his point of view. Therefore, he edits his film accordingly.

If you take a step back and accept that Bowling for Columbine has a long filter, the question of subjective reality appears to be more important. If Moore were to have used a "short filter" on this project, the focus would not have been on gun control in the United States, but possibly on a student from Columbine High School or on Charlton

Heston himself. Yes, Moore filmed real people in the real world, but was every situation truthful? It is impossible for anything that is documented to be fully truthful, considering that people see the world in different ways. “All documentation...is put together by a particular mind whose capacities, interests, values, conjectures, suppositions and presuppositions, whose memories, and, not least, whose talents will come to bear directly or indirectly on what is, finally presented to the world in the form of words, pictures, or even music or artifacts of one kind or another” (Coles, 177). For example, when the two airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City, millions of people saw it happen and there is no dispute that two planes hit this building, but there is a distinction between the ways people saw it occur. In the same mindset, Moore’s film cannot be considered total reality because you can never fully record reality. Moore’s film isn’t fiction; it just isn’t the full truth. When Moore adds depressing music or militaristic sounds over certain images, he is trying to evoke emotions in the viewer on an almost subconscious level so that the viewer is more taken aback or touched. In the scene in which Moore shows the footage from the cafeteria in Columbine High School, there is a very sad guitar song playing over the sound of the 911 call. The music enhances the scene to make it feel tragic and horrifying. This alteration of the image distorts the reality of the piece.

Another trouble with creating reality on film is the effect of holding a camera in someone’s face. It is human nature to act one way alone and another when with other people. If you add a camera to the situation it makes it impossible to ever really know if the person being filmed is being their true self.

When looking at some of the photographs by Walker Evans in Coles' essay, you can see the over-dramatic "filtering" adds to his photographs. One example is the photograph "Famous Man," which entails a scruffy man in overalls giving a very depressing gaze. "The viewer is given no room to wander, to be distracted. This eye to eye-to-eye engagement, a contrast to other possibilities available to Evan's of the same man sitting at the same time in the position" (Coles, 197). Evans will crop out certain elements of his photographs so the viewer only sees the sad faces or whatever it is he is trying to prove. In the complete photograph there is a girl sitting next to him with a more optimistic look, but Evan's chooses to remove/crop her from the work to make a more melancholy photograph. That same type of filtering is evident is in Moore's filmmaking, as Moore will edit and manipulate an interview or story so that it will best suit his motive.

When I was watching Bowling for Columbine I was so entertained and able to clearly connect with Moore's standpoint that afterwards I realized that Moore had used his filter in such a convincing way that I truly believed the majority of what he stated. In the film, Moore criticizes the right wings use of propaganda through inter-cut footage of Heston's NRA rallies. But in overview Moore used the same form of propaganda by forcing his own words on to the screen but on the other side of the political spectrum.

No matter what Moore's filter was or how it was used in the film, Bowling for Columbine is a gripping portrayal of the problem America is currently facing with gun control. When Moore shows the footage of the two teenage assassins in Columbine High School it is horrific and moving. Even though Moore's opinion is completely slanted and not objective that it sends a clear message that the United States has a serious problem with gun violence and there needs to be some kind of intervention. Moore's over

powering interviews and excessively dramatic elements slant the movie from a real documentary to a form of entertainment. Throughout the film, the intense emotions the filmmaker creates are biased toward the liberal standpoint and ignore the central focus of the film. At times, Moore goes off on tangents about racism, the media, and world issues that do not concentrate on the issue of gun control in the United States. By viewing Bowling for Columbine, one could easily be swayed by Moore's opinions and forget that this film too is just an opinion. To fully appreciate the film for its positive and negative characteristics, one must analyze Moore's purpose and audience. Since he used a long social filter on a film about gun control in the United States, his purpose was to convince Americans that we need to pay more attention to this issue. If his intentions were to tell a story about one person affected by poor gun control, the film would have been skewed using a short filter, meaning that Moore's intentions were to display gun control as a whole societal problem and not an individual matter.

Despite Moore's lack of creating an objective documentary, Bowling for Columbine is a skewed visual essay that is unconventional and entertaining. Part of the problem with calling Moore's film a documentary is that the film is written, directed, produced and narrated by Moore so there is no escape from his mentality in his work. Regardless of whether you are a liberal or a conservative, Bowling for Columbine at the minimum is entertaining and humorous at times. For the film to be considered a valid documentary, it would have needed less of an opinion and more of a neutral standpoint. To attempt to make a perfect documentary would be near impossible but at least Moore made an entertaining attempt.