Review of Michael Moore's film **"*Fahrenheit 9-11*",** 2004.

By David Curtis Wright and Aaron J. Sorensen

Virtually everyone with their fingers on the pulse of North American politics now knows who Michael Moore is. He is the roly-poly populist gadfly of the American left, the scrappy Upper Midwestern everyman with the scraggly beard and scruffy baseball cap, the doughty filmmaker warrior whose sword is his microphone, whose buckler is his video camera, and whose guerilla tactics and take-no-prisoners documentary style provoke wild huzzas from his friends and frenetic howls of protest from his enemies. Liberal women want him; conservative "stupid white men" fear him.

Like a sort of American counterpart to Mary Walsh, Moore waits in ambush and then pounces on unsuspecting politicos and plutocrats of the American power élite, zooming in on them with in-your-face camera shots and peppering them with pesky, baiting questions. (Michael of course does it with more ferocious sincerity and less comic verve than Mary.) This is vintage Moore, as viewers of his previous films "Roger and Me" and "Bowling for Columbine" already know.

Moore's latest offering, "Fahrenheit 9/11," won the coveted Palme d'Or or best film award and a twenty-minute standing ovation at the Cannes Film Festival in May of this year, an exceedingly rare honour for a documentary. Of course, it would not have garnered such international plaudits in less extraordinary times. 2004 is, after all, the year after the start of the war in Iraq and an election year in the U.S. The film is redolent with the acrid smoke and seared by the scorching heat of American presidential politics. Its very title,

aside from being an obvious allusive echo of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* (the temperature at which paper burns in an unthinking, book-burning society in the future), is a hint that the film indeed generates more heat than light. Roughly the first half of "Fahrenheit" is an amateurish pastiche of one-line zingers, cutesy innuendo, and McCarthy-esque guilt-by-association (or guilt-by-relation) casuistry. Among the film's notable particulars are facial close-ups that attempt to make George W. Bush look about as intelligent as a lobotomized orangutan, juvenile vilifications of the Halliburton company and the Carlyle Group, and extensive coverage of the cozey ties, real or imagined, between the Bush political dynasty in America and the Saud royal family in Saudi Arabia. (According to Moore, the Bush-Saud nexus was and is so tight that several members of Osama bin Laden's extended family were spirited out of America during the immediate aftermath of September 11, when no other members of the American public, including even Daddy Bush himself, were allowed to fly.)

Although Moore's chutzpah and antics in the film do tend to tickle a funny bone at first, with more reflection and a second viewing they emerge as childish, unimaginative, and solipsistic. The biggest hero in the film is Moore himself! His rental of an ice cream truck to drive him around Capitol Hill while he reads an act of Congress over the truck's loudspeakers is a case in point. It's an amusing stunt, to be sure, but behind its puckish humour lurks a seriously aggrandized and heroic self-image: Moore is one of the few good and sane man in Washington, and in his film he is all alone in his efforts to save America. In Moore's world, or at least Moore's Washington, the White House is occupied by nincompoops, and the Congress shows precious few signs of conscionable, intelligent life. It's him against the world; Moore is his own superhero. And like comic book superheroes,

Moore is a true "anti" figure. He's abundantly clear about what he opposes but vague about what he proposes; he's all about what he hates, not what he loves.

Moore's art more closely resembles propagandizing and digital editing than substantive filmmaking. In some ways it is patently obvious how this film was made. Most of its footage is out-takes and B-roll television stock not used in the context in which it was captured. After compiling hundreds of hours of footage of the Bush administration, Moore and his editors sat down with non-linear editing devices and systematically cut away all the bits that would make the president of the United States look human. They retained only a few carefully selected visual micro-clips and composed them to make President Bush appear at once foolish, incompetent, and wicked. Then they enhanced their effects by applying digital filters to render the images of the man especially unappealing. (This is only slightly more artful than the black-and-white footage still used today by telephone-order advertisers on cable television in an effort to make using products other than their own appear especially cumbersome and inconvenient.) Add some silly '80s pop music and amateurish home video for good measure, and who couldn't be made to look like an ass?

It would be wrong to call "Fahrenheit 9/11" a conspiracy theory film; its manifold contentions and random couplings of cause and effect are too sloppy and variegated to comprise any single coherent theory. Instead, the film seeks to leave its audience with a vaguely nauseated sense of suspicion and frustration against the apparent connivances, callousness, and flippancy of the Bush administration. That "Fahrenheit" is political propaganda, pure and simple, is of course a jejune observation. What is remarkable about the film is that people are actually paying money, and lots of it, to see a two-hour political attack ad. But propaganda for a price is still propaganda, and like most propaganda it will

appeal to two types of people: the uninformed and the already convinced.

Any competent and conscientious social scientist of whatever political persuasion who sees the film will almost certainly weigh it in the balance and find it wanting, at least as far as disciplined epistemology is concerned. Reasonable liberals will most likely conclude that Moore is infuriating the right people but for the wrong (or at least questionable) reasons. Conversely, all but the most humourless and doctrinaire of conservatives will likely come away from the film with at least some grudging admiration for Moore's folksy panache and innovative style. (During the film, they might even occasionally find smiles faintly, tentatively tugging at the corners of their mouths.)

There are few if any egregious errors of fact in "Fahrenheit 9/11," as Moore's web site robustly insists and as the impressive coterie of "fact checkers" credited at the end of the film would seem to indicate. Even so, individual facts are curious things that can be cobbled up into groups or marshaled into formations that bear little semblance to reality. Put another way, facts are like individual beads: you can string them in orderly patterns to form a coherent and aesthetically pleasing necklace, or you can arrange a few of them in order and more or less randomly string up the rest into a sloppy and kitschy necklace of cause and effect that makes Ann Medina's History Channel bling bling look classy by comparison. The necklace Moore wears in "Fahrenheit" is pretty much of the latter variety; the distinction between causation and correlation, along with the subtleties of context and counterpoint, seem largely to have escaped him.

Perhaps Moore has little patience for such pointy-headed academic considerations. And indeed, how academic and coldly analytical should a film about a highly divisive and polarizing war be? While his film largely fails to appeal to the mind, it does succeed in

places in speaking directly and forcefully to the heart. Whether or not Moore really grew up in the hardscrabble inner city milieu of Flint, Michigan, he is sincerely enraged that the poor and underprivileged socioeconomic strata of the United States bear a disproportionate share of the Iraq war's casualties and burdens.

There is troubling footage of American military personnel in Iraq dazed by the spectacular violence of the war and bewildered by its seeming purposelessness. Equally disquieting are interviews with troglodytes who view the war as the ultimate adrenaline rush and who ride into battle in their tanks with the white rap group Bloodhound Gang's nefarious "Burn, Motherf****r, Burn" blaring in their headsets.

The most poignant moment of the film, one that nearly unhinged one of these reviewers (Wright) when he first saw it, occurs towards the end when bereaved mother Lila Lipscomb, making her way through Lafayette Park across from the White House, is suddenly overcome with grief over the combat death of her son in Karballah and sobs so convulsively that she can hardly walk or even stand. Such scenes are electrifying. Perhaps the Lipscomb family will eventually view their son's sacrifice as more important and meaningful than Moore's film. Perhaps they will one day regret their participation in Moore's film or come to regard his footage of their intensely emotional moments as exploitive or manipulative. But their emotion itself is raw and genuine. There can be precious little spin or cynical commentary on the unalloyed grief of parents devastated by the loss of their son and sickened by their confusion over what the war in Iraq is all about anyway.

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