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Film Review

Fahreneit 9/11 by Michael Moore

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Fahrenheit 9/11 (USA 2004) is, beyond doubt, the most successful documentary of all times. It is Michael Moore`s personal triumph to have brought his film to big multiplex cinemas. In this manner, Moore has even outdone himself and the much-debated *Bowling for Columbine* (USA 2001) which, at the time being, was regarded as an outstanding commercial success. For many Americans Moore has become "The Titan from Michigan" who has challenged American media and the American press in particular which, according to Moore, has simply stopped functioning as an independent institution.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is, quite obviously, part of Moore`s personal crusade against the Bush family. It is his attempt to influence the elections in November 2004. It is surprising, though, to what extent the film relies on facts that have already been well-documented. The film points out that Bush came to power through manipulation; that his politics after September 11 have been highly repressive; that his family had dubious ties with some Saudis and the Bin-Laden-clan and that he provoked the war on Iraq by manipulating facts. From a European perspective, these "revelations" contain nothing new. The question needs to be raised, therefore, *why* the film has become so successful. It seems to me that there are quite a number of reasons.

First of all, it has to be pointed out that Disney's refusal to show the film through their network has grossly helped to promote the movie. *Fahrenheit 9/11* became the film "you're not supposed to watch." Secondly, Moore`s constant attacks on the American press and his ability to turn his entire persona into one big media event have also helped to increase the movie's reputation of being somehow "subversive" and a "must be seen". Thirdly, the decision to give the film an "R" rating (which means that, in America, people under 17 are not allowed to watch it) has also stimulated interest in

the movie; many people in America regarded the rating as indirect censorship.

But there are other reasons.

Mike Davis has pointed out that the film does indeed contain a number of scenes American audiences have never been allowed to see.[1] His review reflects the awe and shock of a citizen who has never been exposed to the images of mutilated Iraqi children (after an American bomb attack) or to close-ups of people from New York who see the twin towers collapse. Davis concedes that he has 200 cable channels at home and that none of them ever show images like that. Apparently American media don't even present the coffins of dead American soldiers; the Bush administration has labelled images like that as "unpatriotic." In this manner Davis points to a totally desolate media situation in America that, inevitably, makes Michael Moore appear as a "Man of Truth."

Moore interviews embittered and disillusioned American soldiers in a desolate military hospital. Some of them utter their fear "to have lost their souls in the war." He presents his audiences with the uncensored grief of American mothers who have lost their sons in Iraq, thus reminding us of the very basic truth that it is always the simple people who suffer the most in a war. Some critics have tried to dismiss Moore`s approach as "cheap emotionalism." To me it seems that Moore shows what Americans are not allowed to see because the images in question somehow undermine a secret ban imposed on the media. In that respect, Michael Moore is both an established authority and a rebel; he attacks the system from *within* by turning multiplex cinemas into channels of dissent.

It would be unfair to maintain, though, that *Fahrenheit 9/11* is political education for Americans only. The film is much more than a big media event. We shouldn't forget that the movie has been awarded the Golden Palm at the Cannes film festival; Ouentin Tarantino (acting chairperson of the jury) has argued that the film won not because of its political content but because of its quality. According to Tarantino and most of the other jury members, it was simply the best film of the festival.

Indeed, *Fahrenheit 9/11* contains a lot of stunning material that, as far as I know, has never been seen before. The most striking scenes show George Bush reading to children in a kindergarten in Florida on September 11. When Bush receives the news of the attacks on the twin towers, the camera mercilessly records his empty glance. After a moment of recollection, Bush

[1] Mike Davis: "Die Feldzüge des Proleten" *Die Zeit 31* (22.7.2004), p.29.

simply continues reading. He is a president with a book – but without a script for the unprepared.

Other images show John Ashcroft singing a self-composed patriotic hymn called "Let the eagle fly" (highly pathetic) or George Bush talking to the powerful elite from Northern America at a gala dinner. Moore presents us with some of the most honest lines Bush has ever uttered. "Some call you the elite!" (says the president)." I call you my basis!"

The film also contains some fine examples of agitprop tactics that are typical of Moore`s style. We see him reading the Patriot Act from a loudspeaker of a small van (claiming that very few people in America actually know what that Act says). The most revealing moment of the entire film comes when Moore asks members of Congress why they did not send their sons to Iraq. Following in the footsteps of the "muckraking" journalists from the 1920s, Moore points to the total failure of the country's political elite; he proves that the war is fought by America's poor people.

In a fine example of investigative journalism Moore uncovers how the CIA has infiltrated harmless pacifist groups in California. He also shows the FBI interrogating a pensioner who is supposed to have called Bush "an asshole." Again and again Moore points to a loss of democracy and a loss of freedom in America, thus establishing himself as the spokesperson of a "counter-public" or new enlightenment.

Simultaneously, Moore has created a documentary style of his own. He does not try to present reality from different angles; in this manner, his films present a striking deviation from a tradition that is automatically linked with names such as Marcel Ophüls or Frederic Wiseman. Michael Barker, Sony's co-president, has argued that it is exactly Moore`s departure from the notion that documentaries should reflect reality in its contradictory complexity that has made *Fahrenheit 9/11* so successful.[2] Moore`s films resemble political crusades against the establishment; apparent aesthetic flaws (the cuts are always rough and the narrative links very weak) seem to disappear behind a vision of film as a means of changing society. All in all, Moore can be credited for having established a new agitprop type of documentary that combines satire, facts and polemics.

It seems that, in Morgan Spurlock, Moore has found a director following in his footsteps. Spurlock's documentary *Super Size Me* from 2004 (a film about the damaging effects of hamburgers) owes a lot to him.

[2] In Davis, p.29.