

Bowling For Columbine

Bowling For Columbine was written, produced and directed by the American satirist and filmmaker Michael Moore following on the events of April 20th 1999, when two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, went on a killing spree, shooting to death twelve of their classmates and a teacher and injuring many others before killing themselves. This feature-length documentary, which has received numerous awards, including the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature and the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2003, is a wide-ranging and provocative investigation into the possible causes of such tragedies.

'Are we a nation of gun nuts or are we just nuts?'

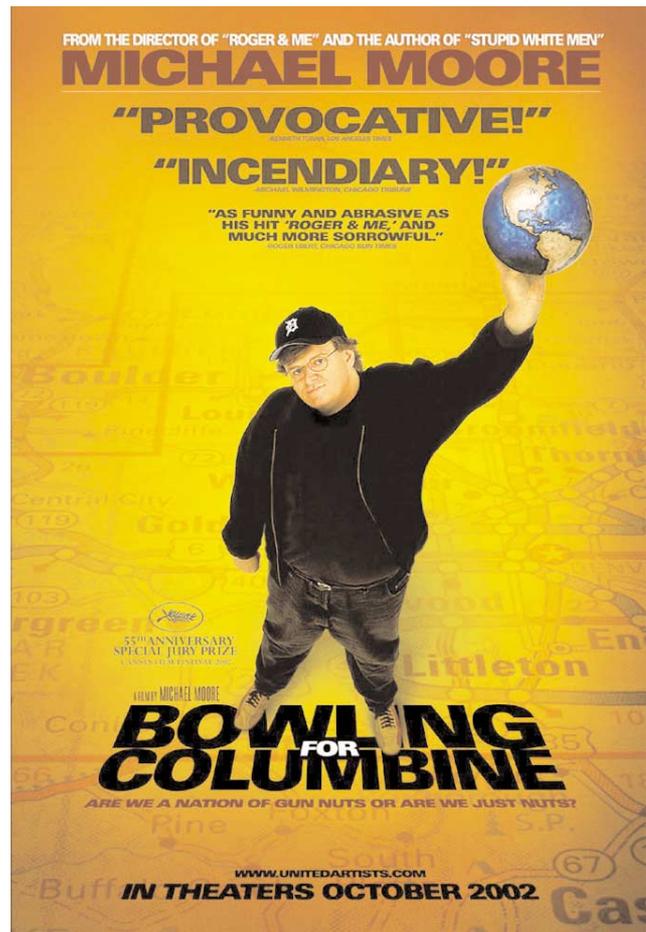
Michael Moore

'Michael Moore's controversial documentary about gun control in America is at once horrifying and hilarious. He asks big, probing questions about the world's sole superpower, questions that are seldom raised on so public a stage.'

Daily Telegraph

'Investigative filmmaker Michael Moore's heartfelt documentary – as entertaining as it is politically damning – looks deep into America's love affair with guns. A brave and important piece of filmmaking that dares to ask questions that many people would prefer remain unsaid. This isn't just about guns: it's about the psychology of a nation whose every move has global implications.'

Empire Magazine



'Bowling for Columbine ... is extremely serious without being solemn, passionate in a deliberately laid-back fashion ... Moore is a radical journalist in the American muckraking tradition whose weapons are satire, send-up and confrontation.'

The Observer

'This is a big, brawling mix of ideas and interviews, with wacky clips, spoofs and pastiches, some devastatingly funny and pertinent, some of them pretty lame'

The Guardian



TASK

If you haven't yet seen *Bowling For Columbine* what do the quotes on page 1 suggest about the film's purpose, techniques, narrative structure and mode of address?



Types of Documentary



TASK

Brainstorm all the documentaries you may have watched, from formatted television programmes such as *Tonight with Trevor MacDonald* to individual films such as *Bowling For Columbine*. Once you have done that, try to match them up in terms of their similarities and differences. You should start observing that there are a wide variety of documentary formats and styles.

Documentary Modes

The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson was first to use the term 'documentary' for a number of films, which featured 'real' people and places. Robert Flaherty's films *Nanook of the North* (the Inuit of northern Canada), *Moana* (a Polynesian family) and *Man of Aran* (a fishing community off the west coast of Ireland), all of which depicted marginal and fast disappearing cultures, are early examples of the form. In a famous phrase Grierson defined documentary as the 'creative treatment of actuality'. While documentaries deal with different areas of 'actuality' or 'real life', their 'creative treatment' of the subject matter has varied enormously.

Documentary filmmakers have developed a range of modes of shaping and presenting their material. The table on page 3 shows some of the more common forms found in documentary films. It is worth noting that television continues to develop new variants of non-fiction programmes - from reality TV shows such as *Big Brother* to 'docusoaps' like *Vets in Practice*.

Documentary Mode	Key Features	Examples
Expository	The purpose is to inform and educate the audience about a subject. Screened material can include original and archive footage. Camera and crew are normally invisible to the audience. The material is tightly scripted and often accompanied by a voice-over narration – delivered either by an expert or an actor. ‘The authority of narration is such that it anchors the meaning of expository documentaries.’ (Kilborn and Izod)	<i>Natural history programmes</i>
Observational	Since the 1960s lightweight film and, later, video cameras have enabled filmmakers to record people in their natural environment with a minimum of fuss. This approach aims for a greater degree of naturalness. Again, camera and crew take a back seat.	<i>Etre et Avoir</i>
Fly-on-the-wall	An extension of the observational mode, fly-on-the-wall approaches aim to blend into the background as the subjects go about their daily business. Filming might continue over a considerable period of time – six months, say. In a sense the aim is to give the audience unmediated access to the world.	<i>The Family</i>
Interactive/Reflexive	In this mode the filmmakers’ presence is fully acknowledged, even emphasised. By contrast with the above the filmmaker is both author and character in his or her movie, often appearing in shot and interacting with other people in the film or television programme. The film might offer surprises, play with conventions, and aim to provoke reactions from subjects and audiences alike. The filmmaker may or may not take sides if there is conflict.	<i>Roger and Me, Biggie and Tupac</i>
Poetic/avant garde	In this instance the emphasis is on creativity as the filmmaker explores, for example, the beauty in the everyday.	<i>Night Mail, Lido</i>
Drama documentary	In the absence of archive material or access to witnesses, the filmmaker might stage dramatic reconstruction of events.	<i>Who Bombed Birmingham? Hillsborough</i>
Mockumentary	Fictional films which parody the forms and conventions of documentary, often for humorous effect.	<i>This is Spinal Tap, Best in Show, Blair Witch Project, The Office</i>
Personal	These ‘films’ are often shot on video and generally feature the maker addressing the camera directly, expounding or sharing his or her views with the viewer.	<i>Video Nation</i>



TASK

It is rare for a documentary film to make use of only one mode. In *Bowling For Columbine*, Moore employs a number of approaches. Indicate which ones you can identify and discuss their likely purpose and what effects they create.

Documentary mode	Sequence/scene	Purpose and Effect

Point of View

'Art is not a mirror that reflects the historical struggle, but a weapon of that struggle.'

Dziga Vertov

At first glance one can often assume that the functions of documentaries is to offer a fair, balanced and neutral account of an issue or subject. They are dealing with 'reality', after all. However, arriving at a consensus, particularly over controversial issues such as gun control is extremely difficult.



TASK

Watch the opening sequence of *Bowling For Columbine* up to and including the credits.

The film begins with archive footage of an NRA (National Rifle Association) advert followed by shots of Americans going about their normal, everyday business on April 20, 1999.

- Are there any surprises? Are there uses of humour?
- How do the voice-over narration and accompanying music anchor the meaning of the pictures?
- Why do you think Moore chooses to feature himself so prominently in the Michigan bank scene? What is the effect?
- Do you detect a point of view and, if so, what is it?

Editing

'Materials that might seem politically neutral can acquire ideological significance when the footage is reedited expressively.'

Louis Gianetti



TASK

Watch the sequence that begins with the montage of sound bytes condemning Marilyn Manson and finishes at the end of his interview (scene 7 on the DVD).

This sequence begins with the inter-cutting of comments from unnamed politicians and members of the 'religious right' with an interview with the singer.

How is each side of the argument presented here? Consider, for example, the editing, role of the voice-over commentary, and the relationship between Moore and Manson.

Violence in the Media

'I'm a poster boy for fear.' Marilyn Manson

Immediately following the Columbine shootings many commentators were keen to explore the link between screen violence and violence in society, particularly amongst children and teenagers. Similar discussions took place in Britain following the murder of toddler Jamie Bulger by two young boys in 1993. At the subsequent trial the judge speculated that the children's access to violent horror films might have been a factor in their murder of the toddler.



TASK

Consider the arguments in the film about the effects of violent films and their audience. Which of the arguments do you find most plausible?

TASK

A number of the speakers suggest alternative causes for the amount of violence in American society. A number of them are listed below. Give each of them a number in terms of their order of importance. You may add one or two factors of your own should you wish. Once you have completed the activity you ought to be prepared to give reasons for your weightings.

Factor	Weighting 1=high 10=low
Poverty	
Parental neglect/abuse	
Personality of individual	
Social inequality	
Peer pressure	
Boredom	
Media violence	
Macho culture	
Racism	
Easy access to weapons	

Bibliography

Branston, C and Stafford, R - The Media Student's Book

Gianetti, L - Understanding Movies

Kilborn, R and Izod, J - An Introduction to Television Documentary

Dugdale, H - Stranger than Fiction: an Interview with Nick Broomfield in Media Magazine, issue 5

Rayner, P - Media Studies: the Essential Introduction

Filmography

If you enjoyed watching *Bowling for Columbine* and would like to watch other feature-length documentaries try to see the following:

Roger and Me

Michael Moore attempts to catch up with Roger Smith, CEO of General Motors, to ask him why his company has destroyed thousands of jobs by closing its manufacturing plant in Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan.

Biggie and Tupac

British filmmaker Nick Broomfield tries to uncover the truth behind the shootings of the two rappers.

Kurt and Courtney

Broomfield investigates the circumstances surrounding the death of the Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain. Is there something that his wife Courtney Love has to hide?

Etre et Avoir

In a direct contrast to the authorial style of Moore and Broomfield, *Etre et Avoir*, set in a rural school in France, is a humane observational documentary which gives its young the starring roles.

In this World

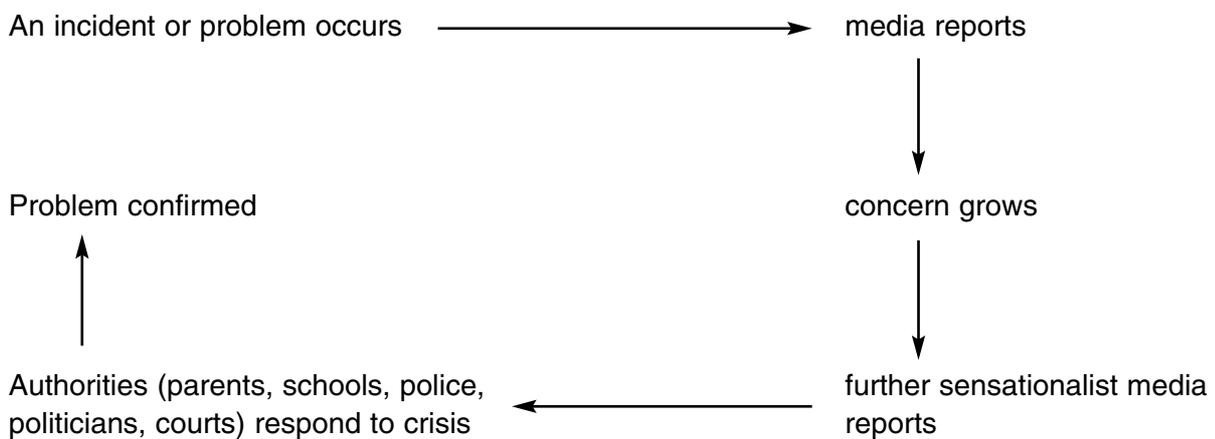
Michael Winterton's drama documentary reveals the plight of asylum seekers making a hazardous journey to the UK.

Extension Task

The widespread overreactions to children's misbehaviour and the demonisation of the singer Marilyn Manson in the immediate aftermath of the Columbine massacre seem to bear the hallmarks of a 'moral panic'. The term was coined by the sociologist Stanley Cohen in his study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* that examined media coverage of the mod and rocker 'riots' in the 1960s. Using the diagram below as a template trace the process post-Columbine to see if it could usefully be described as a moral panic.



THE ARCHETYPAL MORAL PANIC



In recent decades Britain has witnessed panics over dangerous dogs, alcopops, ecstasy and now, arguably, asylum seekers.



Written by Tom Brownlee

© Film Education 2003

images © 2002 MGM