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The Rhetoric of Humour and Irony in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 11/9*

ABSTRAKT

Retoryka humoru i ironii w *Zabawach z Bronią* oraz *Fahrenheit 11/9* Michaela Moore'a

Celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie humoru i ironii jako narzędzia perswazji. Owa analiza poparta będzie obserwacjami dwóch filmów dokumentalnych Michaela Moore'a. Poprzez szczegółową i dogłębną analizę filmów *Zabawy z Bronią* oraz *Fahrenheit 11/9* autorka artykułu ukazuje szerokie starania reżysera, aby wpłynąć na widzów. W tym celu stosuje on retoryczne metody perswazji, w tym metody Arystotelesa, w połączeniu z humorem i ironią, wspomagając się również teoriami innych naukowców. W konsekwencji artykuł ujawnia intencje reżysera, który dąży do poparcia przez widzów jego własnych opinii na temat omawianych kwestii politycznych. Ten wniosek ukazuje omawiane filmy jako formę propagandy, szczególnie widoczną w narzędziach perswazji, którymi są głównie humor oraz ironia.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: humor, ironia, Michael Moore, *Zabawy z Bronią*, *Fahrenheit 11/9*

Introduction

David Blakesley, in his analysis of film theory, describes rhetoric as “a terministic screen for the analysis and interpretation of film”². Rhetoric in film studies has been thoroughly investigated, especially for its diverse use by filmmakers. Blakesley states that the rhetorical methods used in films constitute their “power and value”, their main goal being to reach a number of audiences through images and speech. The other purpose is to expose the viewers to a specific set of beliefs, and, by skilful

¹ Data złożenia tekstu do Redakcji „MiS”: 19.06.2020 r.; data zatwierdzenia tekstu do druku: 30.06.2020 r.

² D. Blakesley, *Perspectives on Film and Film Theory as Rhetoric*, [in:] *The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film*, David Blakesley (ed.), Southern Illinois University, Carbondale 2003, p.1.

organisation and implementation of persuasive techniques, to hammer the viewer's beliefs into those suggested by the filmmaker on screen³. The films of Michael Moore are organised in a similar way, and apart from the mere use of visuals and speech, his films are abundant in humorous images and comments that function as a rhetorical device after Aristotle's modes of persuasion, which include "ethos, pathos, logos and kairos (personality, emotions, rationality and context)"⁴. Moreover, Moore implements various instances of rhetorical irony, which combine with other entertaining methods used by the filmmaker in order to persuade his audiences. *Bowling for Columbine*, one of Moore's most successful productions, makes use of these techniques as a means to address United States gun laws. *Fahrenheit 11/9*, on the other hand, does so in relation to the politics of Donald Trump. These points make the films important for the studies of rhetoric. Through their analysis based on theories postulated by David Blakesley as well as the thoughts on Aristotle's modes of persuasion and Roland Barthes, this paper examines Moore's rich use of humour and irony as a method of propaganda.

Rhetoric in Film

Blakesley states that the main goal of every filmmaker, in this case a documentary producer, is to present a film that highlights a specific set of beliefs. Every film has a "dominant ideology" that needs to be discovered and accurately presented by the director⁵. A film with a strong ideology may have an immense impact on society:

As cultural expression, films reveal not only the predisposition of filmmakers but they also serve ideological functions in the broader culture (as critique, as hegemonic force, as symptomatic) that can be analyzed as having a rhetorical function, especially to the extent that rhetoric serves as the means of initiating cultural critique and stabilizing cultural pieties"⁶.

The "hegemonic force" mentioned by Blakesley may refer to a method of propaganda in which a filmmaker attempts to recruit his audience to his circle of beliefs, creating a system in which everyone thinks exactly what the director wants them to. The above mentioned "discovery" of a film's ideology is successful when viewers are actively involved in the process of film interpretation. Blakesley enumerates another process that constitutes the full understanding of film theory, which he terms "film identification"⁷. As far as film identification is concerned,

³ *Ibidem*, p.1-5

⁴ Qtd. in S. Sherwood, "Intersection of Wit and Rhetoric: Humour as a Rhetorical Enterprise". *PROTEUS: A Journal of Ideas-Humor and Culture*, no. 29, p. 45-52, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/95025858/intersections-wit-rhetoric-humor-as-rhetorical-enterprise>, (24.02.2019).

⁵ D. Blakesley, *Perspectives on Film...* op. cit, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.1-5.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p.1-8.

rhetoric lies in the strong involvement of the viewers. This participation consists of reacting to all of the rhetorical elements the filmmaker employs, such as visual and auditory effects, and narrative commentary. The visual dimensions of films, i.e., the images presented on screen, are those that initially capture the viewer's attention. Roland Barthes, in his essay "The Rhetoric of the Image", argues that a particular image has to be complemented by language in order for it to acquire true and more powerful meaning⁸. This is visible in documentaries in which an image is accompanied by a specific comment in order to have a rhetorical effect on the audience. Barthes states that an image conveys three different messages, and he describes these images through Saussure by implementing ideas of the signifier and signified: a literal message (what one sees on the screen) known as the signifier; and the more complex message, that gives a different and clearer message and understanding to the image itself when accompanied by language. The complex message is the signified of the image that, in Barthes's telling, evokes specific values for the viewer⁹.

In films, signifier/signified analyses are very useful. The rhetoric of the image on screen in a documentary lies in the skilful choice of images and commentary. The picture may convey a specific message, however when accompanied by commentary, it receives a different meaning and gives more meaning to the documentary's narrative. Blakesley argues that "film identification" is crucial but also dangerous, for it strives to make the viewers relate to the characters/people whose situation is described on screen. He states that film identification is: "the key term (and desire) in the total film narrative, which includes the spectator's subject position, as well as the film's attempt to articulate it"¹⁰. The spectator's identification constitutes strong involvement in the film's beliefs, which, in turn, creates a strong rhetorical influence on the viewers/audience, who become the "subjects" of the propagandist's endeavour, i.e. they become immensely involved in the film and treat it as a greatly reliable source.

Rhetoric of Humour and Irony

Aristotle claimed that humour depends on the skilful use of wit, termed as "ethos, pathos, logos and kairos." These modes of persuasion have an immense impact on the audience, especially on their "emotions, personality as well as rationality and situational context." If an audience questions their own beliefs in favour of those spoken by a rhetorician who implements humour in his speeches,

⁸ R. Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image", https://www.academia.edu/10725460/Barthes_Roland_-_Rhetoric_of_the_Image,1964, p. 152, (24.04.2019).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ D. Blakesley, *Perspectives on Film...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

the message is conveyed successfully¹¹. Michael Andrew Phillips-Anderson defines humour in two ways. He presents definitions of “risible humour” and “rhetorical humour”¹². Risible humour is the strategy of providing amusing and entertaining situations for the mere purpose of laughter and entertainment. Rhetorical humour is the art of presenting an amusing example (in this case, a situation or person depicted in film) not only for mere amusement, but for a more important purpose, which is to change the perception of certain phenomena. This is done, especially, by irony. Hence, its function is to create particular beliefs in the viewer, which are also held by the filmmaker. Humour as a rhetorical practice has been used throughout history. Politicians have frequently used this strategy to get the population on their side and make themselves more trustworthy. Phillips-Anderson enumerates many examples in which Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush used these practices to attract citizens’ attention¹³. The use of rhetorical humour, especially in documentary films, is unique. When individuals become bored by seriousness, humour and laughter “reawakens” their attention and focus¹⁴.

The use of irony in the study of rhetoric has led to many interesting findings. Wayne C. Booth states that when one speaks of irony “it at once becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he actually says”¹⁵. One can distinguish between “stable” and “unstable” irony. Stable irony is when the writer (in this case filmmaker) deliberately provides viewers with ironic comments and situations. He or she does so intentionally in order to bring about a certain outcome, whether it is to ridicule a particular individual or to shock the audience. Booth also claims that irony dramatises a particular situation described. He enumerates instances in which irony may be present. The first is hidden in the author’s/director’s voice. Tone of voice is crucial to the viewers, who undoubtedly catch ironic comments if they are attentive enough. The second “hint” of irony may be hidden in the title of a speech or film. Moreover, some historical facts may be detailed as a contrast to something else taking place, which may also indicate a use of irony by the filmmaker. Some facts may be confused or placed out of order, which may also indicate an ironic purpose. If a filmmaker uses popular expressions in his commentary, this may also indicate that his intentions are different from what he is stating. The most interesting type of irony is dramatic irony, which is successful

¹¹ Qtd. In S. Sherwood, “Intersection of Wit and Rhetoric: Humour as a Rhetorical Enterprise”. *PROTEUS: A Journal of Ideas—Humor and Culture*, nr 29, p. 45-52, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/95025858/intersections-wit-rhetoric-humor-as-rhetorical-enterprise>, (24.02.2019).

¹² M. A. Phillips-Anderson, “A Theory of Rhetorical Humor in American Political Discourse”, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maryland 2007, p. 1.

¹³ Op. cit, “A Theory of Rhetorical Humor in American Political Discourse”, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maryland 2007, p. 14-15.

¹⁴ Op. cit, “A Theory of Rhetorical Humor in American Political Discourse”, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maryland 2007, p. 33.

¹⁵ W. C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, University of Chicago Press, London 1975, p. 49.

when a filmmaker draws contrasts between what is stated and what is reality. This example of irony holds a strong rhetorical effect on the audience.¹⁶

Michael Moore and his approach to filmmaking.

Michael Moore was born on April 23, 1954, in the state of Michigan in the city of Flint. At age 18 he began his activist pursuits by joining the local school board and openly expressing his opinions on US economic policy. After leaving school, he started the *Flint Voice*, with which he was involved with for ten years. After moving to California and being fired as editor for the left-wing magazine, *Mother Jones*, Moore returned to Flint, where he began to document the lay-offs at the city's General Motors factories. In 1989, he released *Roger and Me*, which focused on Flint's struggle to cope with closing GM plants and the consequent high unemployment rates. The film made him well-known as a filmmaker and laid the foundation for other projects¹⁷. His next documentary, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), discussed gun laws in America and the shootings that occurred at the Columbine High School in Colorado. The film won him an Academy Award. In his acceptance speech, he openly criticised the President George W. Bush's foreign policy toward Iraq, stating that "We live in fictitious times. We live in a time where we have fictitious election results, that elect a fictitious president"¹⁸. Moore has also made *Sicko*, a film about the failures of US healthcare; *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which criticises the Bush administration and its reaction to the 9/11 attacks at World Trade Center¹⁹, and *Capitalism: A Love Story*, which criticises the capitalist system that the US government supports²⁰. His latest documentary, *Fahrenheit 11/9*, analyses the 2016 presidential election²¹.

Moore's documentaries are unique in their style of rhetorical strategies. They have been analysed frequently by film critics and experts in rhetoric. Moore attempts to make the audience aware of the dangers that are ahead when one lives

¹⁶ W. C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, University of Chicago Press, London 1975, pp. 53-63.

¹⁷ J. L. Borda, "Laughing Through our Tears: Rhetorical Tensions in *Roger and Me*", *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary*, T. W. Benson and B. J. Sneek (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 2015, pp. 24-27.

¹⁸ "Michel Moore wins an Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine*", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7Is43K6Irg>, (24.04.2019)

¹⁹ T. Rosteck and T. S. Frenz, "The Conversion of Lila Lipscomb in *Fahrenheit 9/11*". *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary*, T. W. Benson and B. J. Sneek (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 2015, p. 101.

²⁰ K. L. Phillips, "'I'm Sorry to See It Go': Nostalgic Rhetoric in Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story*", *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary*, T. W. Benson and B. J. Sneek (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 2015, p. 170.

²¹ "Michael Moore: American Filmmaker and Author", <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Michael-Moore>, (24.04.2019).

in a country with corrupt politicians²². The style of his films is said to be somewhat different from “classic” documentary productions, for the distinguished approaches to rhetoric. Apart from stating his opinion about various phenomena in the US, its people and social lives, Moore tends to highlight certain points using laughter. This approach, according to Leah Greenblatt, makes the films more enjoyable and entertaining to watch, and makes the audience more aware about specific facts²³. Louise Spence and Lucius Navarro claim that Moore’s casual appearance and remarks give him a position of “authority” that the audience absorbs²⁴. Misiak states that “All through his work in the cinematic field, the director attempts to instruct the American public. His movies are rooted in the tradition of reflexive documentary”²⁵. However, some critics and scholars found faults in the “reflexive” strategy used in Moore’s films, and claim that his rhetorical devices lead to confusion and discrepancies that, in turn, question the rhetorical strategies and their subsequent roles to be a dangerous tactic²⁶.

Humour and Irony in *Bowling for Columbine*

Bowling for Columbine describes and attempts to grasp the reasons behind violence in America, discussing gun laws and their implications. Moore presents the notorious shooting of 13 children by two teens at the Columbine High School²⁷. Terrence Martin states that the success of Moore’s film stems from his interviews with victims and officials, which create reflexive reactions in the viewers²⁸. Bernard Beck highlights Moore’s use of humour, interviews, and challenging questions, which contribute to interesting outcomes²⁹. Moreover, Moore’s films are understandable to a variety of viewers, making them successful in helping Americans grasp societal problems in a more consistent manner.

²² P. Bradshaw, “Fahrenheit 11/9 review: Michael Moore v Donald Trump = stalemate”, *The Guardian* 2018, n.pag, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/oct/17/fahrenheit-119-review-michael-moore-donald-trump-documentary> (24.04.2019).

²³ L. Greenblatt, “Fahrenheit 11/9”, *Entertainment Weekly* 2018, nr 1530, s. 34-39. <http://search-1ebSCOhost-1com-1qkvbx5pw04d1.han.uni.opole.pl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=131864828&lang=pl&site=ehost-live> (24.04.2019).

²⁴ L. Spence and V. Navarro, “Working-Class Hero: Michael Moore’s Authorial Voice and Persona”, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 2010, no. 43. 2, p. 368, onlinelibrary.wiley.com (24.04.2019).

²⁵ A. Misiak, “Not a Stupid White Man: “The Democratic Context of Michael Moore’s Documentaries”, *JPF&T- Journal of Popular Film and Television* 2010, nr33, p. 160.

²⁶ J. L. Borda, “Laughing Through our Tears: Rhetorical Tensions in *Roger and Me*”, *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary*, T. W. Benson and B. J. Snee (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 2015, pp. 24-30.

²⁷ R. Briley, “Bowling for Columbine (Film)”, *Journal of American History* 2003, no. 90, p. 1144.

²⁸ T. Martin J. Sr, “Bowling for Columbine”, *Library Journal* 2018, nr 143, s. 34–36. <http://search-1ebSCOhost-1com-1qkvbx5pw043b.han.uni.opole.pl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=131406884&lang=pl&site=ehost-live>

²⁹ B. Bernard, “Gulliver’s Travels: Michael Moore the Explorer in *Who to Invade Next*”, *Multicultural Perspectives* 2016, no. 18, p. 202-205.

From the start of *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore presents a hint of irony. Preceding the opening credits, a National Rifle Association (NRA) representative announces that "this" film has been produced by the NRA and invites the viewers to enjoy "their" film³⁰. Because it criticises the NRA, this ironic vignette ridicules the whole organisation. Moore also receives a free gun at a bank when he opens an account. One of the criticisms thrown at the film is the question of how Moore got the gun from the bank. Some claim that the guns were not stored in the bank itself, but somewhere else, and so Moore is criticised for walking out of a bank from which he had apparently received the rifle³¹.

By presenting and strongly ridiculing the bank in such a way, Moore shows the absurdity of a bank providing guns on their premises³². In another instance of irony, Moore presents a contrast. He shows some American gun club members who strongly support the NRA saying that the organisation protects people from getting hurt and contrasts this with domestic terrorists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols blowing up the Federal Building in Oklahoma in 1995. One notes that Moore takes events to his own advantage. He does not present the facts chronologically, creating his own "hegemonic frame"³³ which makes viewers more immersed in the film's message. Just as David Blakesley writes about films creating and thrusting their ideology upon their viewers, Moore's subjectivity and attempts to persuade audiences of his beliefs involve making them see only what he wants them to, omitting certain events to his own advantage³⁴.

What is more, Moore presents his viewers with the tragic events of the Columbine high school shooting. Again, he does so in an ironic way by showing a woman saying that Littleton, Colorado (the Columbine high school location), is a very safe place to live, and then dramatically contrasting her claims with the event of two teenage boys shooting at other high school pupils at Columbine. In an example of a dramatic irony, Moore uses actual camera footage of the events, including some victims' phone calls to the police. The example relates to Aristotle's modes of persuasion, creating a strong emotional reaction in viewers. Barthes's view that an image receives meaning though language is highlighted when the woman's comments increase the contrast. Moreover, Moore interviews a Lockheed Martin employee, who claims that he has no idea why those teenagers committed these crimes at the Columbine school. Moore then cuts to montage with Louis

³⁰ The National Rifle Association, a pro-gun organisation in the USA.

³¹ D. Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken 2010, p. 142.

³² *Bowling for Columbine*, Directed by Michael Moore. Beverly Hills, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, California 2002.

³³ M. Poindexter, "Art Objects: The Works of Michael Moore and Peter Watkins", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 2011, no. 39, p.1282.

³⁴ D. Cowles, "NOTEBOOK", *New Republic* 2003, no. 228, p. 8, <http://search-1ebascohost-1co-1qkvbx5pw043b.han.uni.opole.pl/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=9397148&lang=pl&site=ehost-live> (24.04.2019).

Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" playing in the background. In the foreground, viewers witness the deadly results of US foreign policy in countries such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Panama.

Moore also presents a brief satire of the United States' experience with guns: a cartoon entitled "A Brief History of the United States of America." The cartoon shows Americans becoming extremely distressed about their wellbeing and frightened of nearly everything and everyone, finding relief in their guns. This cartoonish representation of Americans is highlighted in the narrative:

Once upon a time there was a group called Pilgrims and they were afraid of being persecuted. So, they all got on a boat and sailed to the New World (...) as soon as they arrived, they were greeted by savages...and they got scared all over again...so they killed them all. Now, you'd think wiping out a race of people would calm them down...but no...instead, they started to get frightened of each other (...) they formed the Ku Klux Klan and in 1871 when the Klan became an illegal terrorist organisation, another organisation was founded—the National Rifle Association (...) It was a great year for America³⁵.

Moore likewise uses sarcasm in describing the producers of the American TV series *Cops*. When asked why they use the series to show, primarily, black people as criminals, rarely giving examples of white people committing crimes, the producer gets confused and does not know how to answer Moore's questions, frequently repeating himself.

In addition, Moore's contrast between America and Canada adds to the irony of the film. Interestingly, he highlights that just like Americans, Canadians have the same access to firearms and like to watch violent movies. Moore also highlights that a lot of Canadians do not lock their doors, stating that they are not afraid of being broken into. This is so because the crimes related to guns are very minute in Canada. Hence, Moore attempts to make a defining contrast, i.e. the individuals of the country and their behaviour towards firearms are what makes a country's gun crimes statistics high, not the guns themselves.

Moreover, the film presents to the viewers Richard Costello and Mark Taylor, teenage victims of the Columbine shooting, who after the massacre became disabled. The boys still have the bullets inside their bodies, which hampers their daily activities. Moore suggest that the boys accompany him to K-Mart (the company producing bullets; their bullets were bought and used by the perpetrators at the Columbine shooting). However, after addressing numerous requests to the company managers to stop selling the ammunition as it has drastic consequences, the outcome is quite disturbing. The PR consultant at K-Mart tells Moore and the boys that she will ask someone to come down and see them as they really care about this problem; however, no one wants to do so; their requests are ignored by

³⁵ Bowling for Columbine, Directed by Michael Moore. Beverly Hills, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, California 2002.

the company's representatives. Only when Moore and the boys got the press involved a couple of days later, did K-Mart agree not to sell hand-gun ammunition in their stores. This example shows the hypocrisy of the K-Mart merchandisers who do not seem to be very concerned about the consequences of their actions.

Bowling for Columbine's ironic and humorous additions create a documentary like few others. These techniques display the importance of rhetorical argument. Moore clearly knows how to grasp the audience's attention and ply them for his own ideas on political injustice.

Humour and Irony in *Fahrenheit 11/9*

Fahrenheit 11/9 was released in 2018. The documentary discusses the events preceding and following the 2016 presidential election. The film's title relates to Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, but marks the date, November 9, 2016, that Donald Trump won the presidency by the electoral college. *Fahrenheit 11/9* is a strong satire of Trump. It presents his political views, as well as the pursuits of his political associates³⁶. The film tries to answer the questions of how Trump became president and what consequences it will bring in the near future³⁷. Moore attempts to make the audience aware of the dangers that are ahead under such a government by revealing the underlying themes of politics, power, racism, capitalism, and injustice permeating Trump's presidency³⁸.

The film begins with the events of the presidential election, in which two candidates, Trump and Hilary Clinton, competed for victory. The initial polls suggested that Clinton would become the next president of the United States by winning the popular vote. Moore presents the overjoyed US citizens, who at first were of the belief that Clinton's Democratic Party would prevail. Their excited faces are presented across the screen while Rachel Platten's "Fight Song" plays in the background. This is another instance where Moore plays with irony and contrast. As the election concludes, Trump is seen to be in the lead, and he wins the presidential election with 306 electoral votes to Clinton's 232³⁹. The scene is presented with dramatic opera music in the background, in which Democrats cry and Republicans cheer their new president. Moore asks himself as well as the

³⁶ T. W. Benson and B. J. Snee, "Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary: Art, Argument, Affect", *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary*, T. W. Benson and Brian J. Snee (ed.), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 2015, pp.2-4.

³⁷ A. Lane and R. Brody, "Fahrenheit 11/9 and Colette". *The New Yorker* 2018, n.pag, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/the-vexing-analogies-of-fahrenheit-11-9> (24.04.2019).

³⁸ A. Misiak, "Not a Stupid White Man: "The Democratic Context of Michael Moore's Documentaries", *JPF&T—Journal of Popular Film and Television* 2010, no. 33, p. 160.

³⁹ "Reality Check: Who voted for Donald Trump?", <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37922587> (24.04.2019). "US Election 2016", <https://www.bbc.com/news/election/us2016> (24.04.2019).

viewers: “How the fuck did this happen?”⁴⁰ This use of informal language makes the viewers amused as well as more involved in the film itself. The remark, as Blakesley would comment, also establishes the narrator and his personality as “friendly.” Booth would note that the filmmaker’s ironical voice constitutes a strong effect on the audience, helping them decide whether the film is worth watching or not.

In the opening titles, Moore also shows the making of Donald Trump’s wax figure, a strong satire of the president’s character. The image is reminiscent of *Bowling for Columbine*’s NRA representative, while it suggests Trump is artificial and not fully human. Moore’s ridicule of Trump is evident in practically every instance that follows. He states that Trump paid people to support him in his fake presidential speech:

This idea was cooked up by Donald Trump when he found out that NBC was paying Gwen Stefani on *The Voice* more than they paid him to star on *The Apprentice*. He paid a bunch of extras 50 bucks a piece, to be his cheering supporters. He would prove to NBC that he was more popular than Gwen Stefani, and then they would give him more money. He would also show them how good he was at improv, with his fake presidential announcement⁴¹.

Here, the audience is left amused. During Trump’s fake presidential speech, Moore stresses how the candidate remarks, “I believe I am a very nice person” ironically contrasting this with reality. Trump then calls Mexicans “rapists, drug dealers, and criminals,” as his racist attitudes become even more visible. Moore shows him ordering a black man out of one of his rallies, telling him “Go home and get a job.” During another speech, Trump does not let any woman speak, ordering them to be removed from the hall, an instance that highlights his misogynistic tendencies. These are expressed many times earlier when Trump insulted both Clinton and a group of female journalists who wanted to ask him questions, interrupting them and refusing to answer. Moore, in one of his interviews with NBC news, states that Donald Trump will destroy the US political system, calling him a con-artist and manipulator⁴².

As *Fahrenheit 11/9* progresses, Moore then goes back to analyse the events of 2015 in Flint, Michigan, during which time the state was governed by Republican Nick Snyder (a “friend” of Trump’s). Moore also satirises Snyder in such a way:

⁴⁰ *Fahrenheit 11/9*, Directed by Michael Moore. Beverly Hills, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, California 2008.

⁴¹ Op cit. Directed by Michael Moore. Beverly Hills, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, California 2008.

⁴² N. Burleigh, “Michael Moore Explains How He Knew ‘Evil Genius’ Trump Would Win Presidency”, *Newsweek Magazine* 2003, n.pag, <https://www.newsweek.com/2018/09/28/michael-moore-donald-trump-fahrenheit-11-9-1113806.html> (24.04.2019).

He had no experience in public service, but he was very, very good...at woods ball, and he was very, very rich. He had been CEO of Gateway Computers—you remember, right? The piece of shit computer? And he told the voters of my state that he was going to run Michigan like a business (...)⁴³.

Snyder states that he “was hired to serve the citizens”. The irony of this statement is explained by Moore with the use of the following example. At the time, the residents of Flint had water provided from Lake Huron. Snyder decided to build another pipeline from that lake so that connected investors could gain a lot of profit, himself stating that it would improve the life of the Flint residents. In an example of dramatic irony, Moore shows how Snyder decided that during the construction period, residents of Flint would get their water from another source: the Flint River, with its heavily polluted water. The result was lead poisoning for much of the population. 10,000 children were affected and many people died of Legionnaires’ disease. The city government meanwhile falsified test results and parents started to receive false letters about their children’s purported “safety.”

To make matters worse, as Moore demonstrates, the local media broadcast false information about the water crisis, saying that “there is no problem with the drinking water of Flint”. Moore does not have to speak in those instances – the images of the dirty water in the residents’ houses themselves serve as a contrast to the government’s comments. During an interview with Moore, April Cook-Hawkings, one of the members of the Health Department in Flint, recounts how she was told to change the results of the children who had high levels of lead in their bodies:

I was the case manager here in Flint, Michigan. All of the results in regard to the blood levels, I inputted these numbers and made sure all of these numbers are correct. My supervisor asked if I would go in and help them out with the numbers and *not show certain things*. For someone who came in and tested high, the Health Department didn’t want that number to be shown. The normal number is 3.5, and anything over 3.5 is considered a high lead level⁴⁴.

She shows Moore the actual documents revealing the true results. Every child had lead in their bodies. Some children had levels reaching 6, 6.5, and even 14. “That means every child on this sheet of paper has an elevated level of lead?” asks Moore, “Yeah:”, Cook-Hawkings responds, “And I said ‘Let’s just call the parents and re-test’ and they said ‘No, we can’t do that. Just put them in as a 3.5’”⁴⁵. Here, the irony lies in the government’s claims to provide services, when in reality its main goal was to provide subsidies for connected businessmen.

It is also important to analyse the ending scene of the film, in which Moore highlights a different meaning of terrorism, which lies in an unjust ruling system and a leader that does not care about the citizen’s welfare. The irony of the film lies

⁴³ *Fahrenheit 11/9*, Directed by Michael Moore. Beverly Hills, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, California 2008.

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, Directed by Michael Moore. Beverly Hills, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, California 2008.

⁴⁵ *Fahrenheit 11/9*, Directed by Michael Moore. Beverly Hills, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc, California 2008.

in the fact that, just as Moore states, the electoral system as well as the constitution is not able to help its citizens, because in fact the people in power do not practise the just treatment of its citizens and care about their own gain. Only when this system is changed, Moore says, will America be able to improve.

While humour used as a rhetorical practice mostly comes from Moore, many ironic comments come from Trump as well as other politicians. Such juxtapositions ironically contrast themselves with actual behaviour, that is, the complete lack of interest in improving the lives of US citizens. This film is a strong rhetorical device in a way that the viewers, after being drawn into the images and comments presented by Moore, experience the play of Aristotle's modes of persuasion.

Conclusion

It can be posited that Michael Moore's films have become successful primarily through his uses of humour and irony as rhetorical techniques in order to attract audiences. Very skilfully, he draws on theories postulated by David Blakesley, creating a hegemonic system in his films. Moore asks viewers to question gun policy, the American way of life, and, most importantly, believe in the validity of his views. Moore has a gift when it comes to his voice: it is persuasive, not forcible, making the viewers sympathetic to him and the people shown as victims on the screen, embodying Barthes's theory that images cannot function effectively without the implementation of persuasive language. One can therefore conclude that, as far as documentaries are concerned, humour and irony, when used successfully, create a hegemonic "bubble" in which all of the members are persuaded to think not how they want to, but how they are told to. These rhetorical devices used by Moore are successful not merely through language implemented with humour and irony. It is also the careful "selection" of past and present events, when joined together to the filmmaker's liking, polished with humour and dramatic ironic commentary that makes his kind of rhetoric successful. Moore's success, then, lies in the creation of viewing hegemony, making his films an entertaining form of propaganda anchored in a strong form of persuasion.

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The Rhetoric of Humour and Irony in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 11/9*

Summary

This paper analyses the use of humour and irony as a rhetorical practice in two documentaries by Michael Moore. An analysis of *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 11/9* reveals the filmmaker's efforts to raise interest in political issues through the use of rhetorical devices such as Aristotle's modes of persuasion, humour and irony, as well the theories of Roland Barthes, David Blakesley, and other scholars. Documentary filmmakers often seek to change their viewers' beliefs through propagandistic methods. Humour and irony, this paper argues, are central to Moore's project.

Keywords: humour, irony, Michael Moore, *Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 11/9*