

# Triumph of the Swill

TED LAPKIN

**S**INCE *Fahrenheit 9/11* made its cinema debut, a diverse range of critics has ripped strips off this work of crude celluloid agitprop. From recovering Trotskyist Christopher Hitchens to dyed-in-the-wool conservative Andrew Bolt, pundits have pointed out the plethora of distortions and prevarications that pervade Michael Moore's film.

But, of all the dissimulations that those critics have documented, the most obnoxious was Moore's use and abuse of bereaved mother Lila Lipscomb. Ms Lipscomb is a working-class mother from the blue-collar town of Flint Michigan, whose eldest son was killed in Iraq. The death of her son served as the catalyst for her transformation from supporter of the war into anti-war activist.

Yet, opposition to the war is one thing, and active support for the Iraqi insurgents who are fighting American troops is something else. In a posting from 14 April 2004 on Michael Moore's 'official Website,' the film-maker ventures quite clearly into cheerleading territory:

The Iraqis who have risen up against the occupation are not 'insurgents' or 'terrorists' or 'The enemy'. They are the REVOLUTION, the Minutemen, and their numbers will grow—and they will win.

One is forced to wonder whether Lila Lipscomb would have given Michael Moore the time of day if she had known that the film-maker would hail as heroes the very people who had killed her son.

But, there are no such second thoughts about Michael Moore on the movie review programmes of our

two public broadcasters. In fact, both the ABC's 'At the Movies' and the SBS' 'Movie Show' gave *Fahrenheit 9/11* rave reviews. Nary can be heard a discouraging word about Michael Moore or the film on either of these publicly funded programmes. Both gave it the freest of four-star rides. Moore's numerous factual transgressions are summarily dismissed as 'some rather cheap shots early on'. What is portrayed as the occasional minor lapse is not allowed to interfere with the rousing vote of endorsement that both shows afford to Michael Moore and

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his film. The result is an exercise in fawning, uncritical assessment that appears to be motivated by an ideological affinity for Moore's point of view. Your tax dollars at work.

Nowhere to be seen on the Websites of either movie review programme, as an addendum, was any reference to the fact, which admittedly came to light after the reviews had been published, that the film-maker was accused of gross journalistic malfeasance by an American newspaper. It turns out that Moore had been looking for a newspaper headline that would support his contention that George

Bush stole the Presidential election of 2000. He found precisely such a headline, 'Latest Florida recount shows Gore won election' in the pages of a small daily paper in Bloomington, Illinois.

Well, not exactly. That headline originally appeared on the letters-to-the-editor section of the paper above a partisan anti-Bush missive from one of the newspaper's readers. But a letter-to-the-editor did not contain sufficient gravitas for Moore's tendentious purposes. So he superimposed that headline onto the front page of the Bloomington *Pantagraph*.

As one might imagine, the *Pantagraph's* editors were less than pleased with Michael Moore's sleight of hand. The 30 July 2004 edition of the paper declared 'Pantagraph to Moore: Headline use "misleading".' The lead editorial declared 'If he [Moore] wants to "edit" the *Pantagraph*, he should apply for a copy-editing job.' The paper also sent a legal letter to Michael Moore demanding an apology and compensation of \$1.

It is true that both 'At the Movies' and the 'Movie Show' reviewed *Fahrenheit 9/11* before the story of Moore's cut-and-paste job became public. But, one would think that such a serious case of journalistic malpractice would warrant some sort of addendum on their Websites, at the very least.

The critical faculties of reviewer Margaret Pomerantz, in particular, appear to be on permanent vacation where 9/11 is concerned. She ingenuously swallows the Michael Moore vision of the world, hook, line and sinker, declaring that the movie demolishes George Bush as a 'hedonistic buffoon'.

She then proceeds to parrot some of the many factual inaccuracies that pervade the film, such as Moore's contention that the war in Afghanistan was really about the building of a pipeline to benefit Bush's partners in crime at those evil oil companies. Pomerantz declares 'within a couple of months that pipeline deal is signed, and its sort of like "hang on a tick! Who's running this world?"'

This is a fine piece of conspiracy theorizing. The only problem is that it bears little resemblance to reality. Not only was the deal not signed, it never had anything to do with George Bush. The pipeline plan was promoted by the Clinton Administration, and the negotiations with the Taliban over a pipeline deal permanently collapsed in 1998.

Both Pomerantz and her fellow reviewer, David Stratton, blathered on about inherent inequity caused by the predominantly blue-collar composition of the United States armed forces. 'The have-nots in America are merely fodder for corporate greed', declared Pomerantz, while Stratton relates how 'scary' it was to see Marine recruiters doing their job.

This is nothing more than typical left-wing *avant-gardism* in the guise of a movie review. The subtext here is that the common people are too stupid to realize that they are being bamboozled by those evil capitalists. Only members of the enlightened Leftist elite can have any chance of piercing the veil of cultural hegemony foisted upon society by the pernicious practitioners of free market economics.

Pomerantz and Stratton have no respect for the autonomy and free will exercised by those who elect to enlist in the United States military. From the exalted vantage point of the ABC, American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are either poor saps, or the poor who join 'because they can't afford college in the United States'. They utterly dismiss the many who enlist because they

love the military and simply want to be soldiers.

While the review by Jamie Leonarder for the SBS 'Movie Show' is more abbreviated in length, it demonstrates the same fawning attitude towards Michael Moore and his movie. A mere three paragraphs long, it is replete with the same pejorative references to the 'Bush Dynasty' that abound in the review from its sister network, the ABC.

Leonarder praises Moore for uncovering the 'many unacknowledged questions of the Bush presidency'. By contrast, 'At the Movies' Stratton gives himself a bit more credit, congratulating Moore

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because 'he marshals the facts, all of which we already knew'.

Yet, none of the reviewers from either network, each of whom gave *9/11* at least a four-star rating, in any way addresses the *non sequitur* that lies at the heart of the movie. Throughout it, Moore argues, in essence, that the Bush Administration is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Saudi government. In one segment, Moore poses his thesis in particularly stark terms: 'Is it rude to suggest that when the Bush family wakes up in the morning they might be thinking about what's best for the Saudis instead of what's best for you?'

Yet, if Washington is really dancing to the tune played by the pup-

pet-meisters from Riyadh, why has so much US foreign policy been diametrically opposed to Saudi wishes? American support for Israel is anathema to the House of Saud, yet George Bush has been one of the best friends the Jewish state ever had in the White House. Moreover, the American invasion of Afghanistan and the liberation of Iraq went forward despite the vehement opposition of Saudi Arabia.

Michael Moore doesn't even attempt to explain the stark contradictions between his theses and real events on the ground. Like a bee in perennial search of nectar, he flits from one wild-eyed allegation to the next, leaving nothing in his wake but a few crumbs of pollen that almost uniformly fail to bear substantial fruit.

Pomerantz concludes her written review of *9/11* with the observation that 'you can't fail to be affected by its big picture portrait of a grand and smug betrayal'. Quite frankly, I'm far more affected by the betrayal of my tax dollars that have been used to subsidize such a travesty of critical judgement.

Writing in a similarly laudatory vein, Jamie Leonarder opines that, 'in its totality, *9/11* transcends its flaws to deliver one of the most insightful documentaries ever made'. Yet, the most insightful thing about *9/11* is the facility with which a clever film maker can prevaricate.

If this film makes Michael Moore worthy of inclusion in an artistic pantheon, the most appropriate is that inhabited by Leni Riefenstahl, whose *Triumph of the Will* was also initially acclaimed as a cinematic *tour de force*. One can only hope that, over time, viewers of *Fahrenheit 9/11* will consign Moore and his flick to the same category of infamy that befell both Riefenstahl and her work.

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