

# To what extent can Michael Moore be considered a documentarian?

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An Analysis of *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*

## Introduction

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This essay explores the question of how valid two of Michael Moore's most popular documentaries, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), are considering the conventions proposed by documentary film theory. This question has appeared as these films have been one of the most successful documentaries ever yet have also caused a controversy surrounding their validity as such.

With his films *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* Moore undoubtedly challenged the conventions of documentary film. No surprise did *Bowling for Columbine* win the Academy Award for best Documentary Feature while *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the highest grossing documentary ever. However, regardless of their success many perceive Moore's films as deceptive and strongly propagandist resulting in two polarizing views about whether his films are documentaries. George W. Bush's White House communications director Dan Barlett even went as far as describing *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a bad fiction movie. In the light of this controversy I have wondered what we can consider as truth in a society where fiction, propaganda and documentary increasingly seem barely separable. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to analyse the filmic elements in *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Bowling for Columbine* to receive a clearer picture of their validity while considering documentary film theory. This paper argues that Moore's performative documentary style and use of narrative structure deepen the audience's understanding of his subject matter and therefore increase the validity of his documentary films. However, the strong presence of ideology in conjunction with highly deceptive editing techniques limit the room for different perspectives and ultimately shift his films towards propaganda.

Before analysing Moore's films, I shall establish the definition of documentary film. John Grierson, one of the first and most influential documentary filmmakers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, defined documentary film as "creative treatment of actuality". Documentaries are not

reality itself but rather an artistic expression of human knowledge. They always encompass some manipulation due to the subjective standpoint of the filmmaker. Thus, it occurs that “no matter how passively an object is shot, it signifies the act of the recorder at work” (Taihei and Baskett, 52). Hence, documentaries can never be truly objective. They rather communicate the filmmaker’s argument using indexical images and primary evidence. For a documentary film to be valid, the artistic voice must act in equilibrium with the filmmaker, respecting facts and providing verifiable evidence; i.e. giving the viewer room for shaping his or her own opinion on the subject matter being addressed. Henceforth, it is crucial that the filmmaker is committed to revealing the truth as part of a moral obligation. The audience is expected “to be told things about the real world, things that are true” (Aufderheide, 3). The filmmaker’s commitment to revealing the truth through different perspectives is therefore a fundamental asset of a valid documentary film.

## Moore's Performative Documentary Style

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Documentary film can be categorized into six modes, the poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive and performative mode, introduced by the documentary film theorist Bill Nichols. They have developed into the foundation for classifying, conceptualizing and analysing various styles of documentary film. Moore's films *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* belong to the performative mode, which "emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own involvement with a subject, strives to heighten the audience's responsiveness to this involvement and rejects notions of objectivity in favour of evocation and affect" (Nichols, 32). To better understand this form, we can examine documentary film through the producer-process-product model (Ruby, 2). The documentary producer, the filmmaking process and the product - the documentary film - make up all aspects of a documentary film production. In many cases, however, a documentary film only provides insight into the product and keeps its audience away from the producer and process, leaving it with barely any background knowledge of the movie and its reasoning. This commonly observed pattern has historically resulted from the effort to establish an illusion of objectivity, such as in the observational form of the 1960s, which is marked by the filmmaker's unobtrusiveness. Hence, it has become an established notion that "to reveal the producer is thought to be narcissistic, overly personal and subjective" (Ruby, 3). Based on the definition of documentary film, objectivity nevertheless remains a mere impression due to the selective bias of shots and constant presence of the camera.

Frederick Wiseman's *Highschool* (1968) serves as a prime example of the observational mode featuring neither the visible involvement of the producer nor any explanation of the filmmaking process. In one of the first scenes Wiseman records a fight between a student and the student's PE teacher (Fig. 1). He records the scene with a lightweight 16 mm camera, a single handheld long-duration shot and occasionally zooms into the people's

faces. Such shots establish a close connection between the subject and the filmmaker, a characteristic of the observational form. However, the fact that people's behaviour changes when consciously exposed to a camera undermines truthful video reporting.



*Fig. 1: Intimate connection between filmmaker and subject marked by handheld shots in Wiseman's Highschool*

Furthermore, through these apparently accidental, naturally imperfect shots observational cinema has the effect that the audience tends to forget about the camera's presence; therefore, this documentary mode is frequently referred to as 'fly on the wall'. Nevertheless, the 'fly' remains visible to the film's subject, which alters its behaviour due to the camera's presence. The audience, however, perceives the recordings as honest and remains totally unaware to what extent the camera's presence influenced the subject's actions and on what basis the respective shots were selected for the final film. Does this gap between the audience's perception and the filmmaking process not greatly reduce the validity of such films? Ultimately, the producer and filmmaking process remain hidden from the audience and with that any insight into the filmmaker's reasoning.



*Fig. 2: Michael Moore in T-shirt and baseball cap in Bowling for Columbine*

Moore's participation carries the opposite effect on our understanding of his films. Accusations, such as by David T. Hardy, one of Moore's fiercest critics, asserting that Moore's films "argue that the viewer has no choice other than the filmmaker's" (Hardy) must be

reconsidered. Since we assume the subjective nature of any film, including documentary film, Moore's audio-visual presence provides the audience with an understanding of the producer and filmmaking process. Moore presents himself as a mainstream American in a T-shirt and baseball cap and situates himself on one level with his viewers (Fig. 2). The audience can familiarize itself with the producer and his driving motifs, which shape the final product.

The performative mode through Moore's personal involvement also helps the viewer to better understand presented facts and information. In the first minutes of *Bowling for Columbine*, for instance, Moore goes to a bank to receive a free gun announced in a promotional offer in a local newspaper. He accentuates the absurdity of gun control in the U.S. by personally showing that they are sold anywhere. This becomes even more impactful, when the viewer realises that the suspect of the Columbine massacre purchased his gun in a local supermarket, a direct connection to Moore's previous experience in the film. The scene is a prime example of how Moore's involvement highlights the key ideas expressed in his documentaries. He does not merely state them through spoken language but proves them to the audience through his own experiences. When they are referenced later in the film, the audience already carries insight into the presented facts instead of simply having to accept them without any prior knowledge.

Besides, Moore's performative scenes are never arbitrary or loosely connected as in observational cinema but serve the purpose to allow a logical build-up of events. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for instance, Moore is told by several congressmen that barely any senator



*Fig. 3: Moore reading the PATRIOT act out loud in front of the White House in Fahrenheit 9/11*

ever read the PATRIOT act passed as a response to the 9/11 attacks. As seen in Figure 3, he subsequently borrows an ice-cream van in Washington DC to read the PATRIOT act out loud to the congress. This scene is hence an immediate consequence of the preceding scene. The use of a clear cause and effect structure as a narrative technique is a valuable tool to deepen the audience's understanding of the film's subject matter.

Furthermore, Moore's films contain a dramaturgical progression. According to documentary film theorist Betsy McLane it is common for non-fiction films not to feature dramaturgical progression while instead tending "to be functional, varied and looser" (McLane, 3) However, both Moore's films feature a clearly defined antagonist and thereby avoid the arbitrary exposition of information. Charlton Heston, spokesperson of the National Rifle Association, is the antagonist in *Bowling for Columbine*. In *Fahrenheit 9/11* it is George W. Bush and the congressmen surrounding him. Both times they are introduced early in the opening sequence of the films. For instance, in *Bowling for Columbine* we first see the opposition between Moore and Heston, the latter raising a gun to pull the trigger. This is followed by a cross-cut to Moore repeating the same action in Heston's direction. A quick match cut between Moore and Heston pulling the trigger creates the illusion as if they shoot at each other. This scene does not only disclose the primary theme of the film but also raises the viewer's awareness on the stance of the producer, namely Michael Moore.

The climactic scenes in both films are furthermore a result of the dramaturgical build-up. In *Bowling for Columbine*, it is an interview with Heston regarding the high rate of gun violence. In *Fahrenheit 9/11* Moore interrogates senators if they would volunteer to send their children to the army (Fig. 4), after having presented the lacking care by the Bush administration towards the US soldiers fighting in the Iraqi war. This illustrates that the climax of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is visibly connected to preceding accounts made. By using narrative structure Moore thus manages to avoid accidental revealing but intentionally exposes all story elements.



*Fig. 4: Left – climactic scene with Heston in Bowling for Columbine; right – climactic scene with senators in Fahrenheit 9/11*

Moore’s use of the performative mode is not only reflected in the narrative approach but also in the aesthetic side of his films. His use of “uncontrolled” film aesthetic, such as shots out of focus and handheld camera shake, serves as a validating device that the film is not staged but is truthfully reflecting reality. *Bowling for Columbine*, for example, features a 16-second long completely overexposed shot of Moore walking from his car to a shopping mall (Fig. 5). Although the shot lacks careful composition and any technical configuration, it provides an understanding of the filmmaking process and the subjective, performative nature of Moore’s film. The audience is



*Fig. 5: Handheld and overexposed shot indicating uncontrolled film aesthetic in Bowling for Columbine*

reminded that the camera is always present. Ultimately, the uncontrolled film aesthetic demystifies the producer and filmmaking process making them in turn more objective.

## Film Ideology in Michael Moore

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As a response to *Fahrenheit 9/11*, documentary films from the opposite side of the ideological spectrum such as *Celsius 41.11* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* were released to question Moore's claims made in his films. These films state to come with a higher level of scholarship and objectivity, although they are just as subjective. The decisive difference is that Moore exposes his bias using the performative mode. The others though claim to be completely objective, which is certainly not the case. This can be seen in the first scenes of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, when interview extracts of two men of Bush's former staff are presented. Both refute Moore's charges against Bush. One of the interviewees prominently stands in front of the White



Fig. 6: Interview extracts in the opening scene of *Fahrenheit 9/11*

House while the other is filmed through an up-angle with the American flag in the background (Fig. 6). Immediately, the mise-en-scene and framing of the interviews bring up a sense of partisanship, as we can also observe it in Moore's films. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, however, it remains unacknowledged due to the calm and descriptive tone, which carries on throughout the movie.

In contrast, the audience receives an understanding of Moore's subjectivity already in the introductory scene of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. There, Moore juxtaposes a mystery soundtrack with a highly personal and mocking voice-over. By doing so, he creates opposing tones, which reveal the film's partisan nature. This illustrates that Moore does not pretend to argue from a neutral perspective, but rather discloses his perception of reality.

Despite Moore admitting his partisan viewpoints, the overwhelming presence of ideology has negatively affected the validity of Moore's films, though. Following the release

of *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore has been compared to Joseph Goebbels, Propaganda Minister in Nazi Germany, and Leni Riefenstahl, a well-known German propaganda film director in the 1930s. Especially Republicans and advocates of George W. Bush criticized the one-sided arguments made in both movies. In only a few months Moore “gained reputation as an extremist and propagandist” (Toplin, 4). According to film historian Robert Brent Toplin, many of Moore’s critics would have preferred a “subtler approach in cinematic persuasion” (Toplin, 6), a more politically balanced argument. On one hand, if Moore had adopted a subtler approach, his partisan but artistic voice would have been undermined, which arguably shaped his films’ vast success. On the other hand, this leads to the question of how important box office success is in telling a documentary story. As I put forth in the definition of documentary film, the artistic voice should never be stronger than the commitment towards revealing the truth, respecting facts and giving room for different views. Moore’s politically slanted perspective, however, to a great extent contributes towards entertainment instead of being committed to a balanced argument. Moore himself said that “people don't want medicine, they want popcorn,” (Moore qtd. in Barnes). Although this approach may define the success of a movie, it is not appropriate when it comes to the moral obligation of a documentary filmmaker to reveal the truth according to the definition of documentary film.

Moore’s strongly partisan approach can be understood as an adoption to the new communicative norm of mass media, which have increasingly taken on propagandist techniques since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moore decided to “fight fire with fire” (Hennigan, 11) in the form of “purposeful persuasion (...) for ideological, political or commercial purposes” (Nelson qtd. in Hennigan, 3). Whereas in the 1960s Cinema verité and observational documentary were widespread, modern-day documentary language has increasingly shifted to the interpretation of facts by the filmmaker himself, such as in Morgan

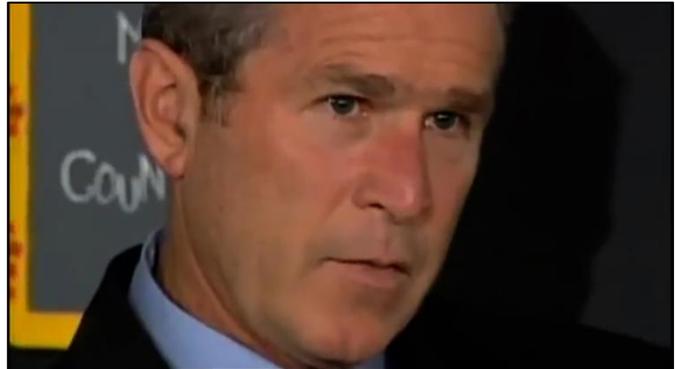
Spurlock's notable *Supersize Me*. Moore's films now confront a dilemma: The widely accepted language of propaganda has developed into the preferred way of communicating with modern audiences, which Moore's films have adjusted to in order to be successful (Hennigan, 13). This, however, raises the question if documentary films, which have adjusted to the modern communication habits by using propaganda language, can still be considered documentaries? Brad Hennigan from the University of Texas, Dallas, believes that the language of propaganda, as introduced by Michael Moore, will in fact be the only way to sustain documentary film in future. Considering my definition of documentary film, a commitment towards revealing truth as opposed to purposefully deceiving the audience remains, however, remains necessary for the validity of documentary film, since the conscious differentiation between fact and fiction would otherwise be impossible and result in a complete 'post-truth' environment. Moore certainly acknowledges his bias, yet his overly partisan approach comes at the cost of portraying an ambiguous reality, in which the audience can form its own perspective, an imperative characteristic of a valid documentary film.

## Editing Techniques

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In this section I will explore the most prominent editing techniques, in particular sound and visual montage, used by Moore, and their effect on the validity of his documentary films. Typical in Moore's films are the voice-overs which guide the audience through the story. Moore's narration moves away from the so-called 'voice of God' and is thus part of his performative approach. Through the voice-over Moore critically examines and questions the authoritative power; he seeks "to speak to power rather than embrace it" (Nichols, 5). For instance, Moore uses the voice-over to attack the persona of the antagonist, such as in *Fahrenheit 9/11* when Bush is informed

of the 9/11 attack. A video clip shows Bush's reaction after being briefed about the event, seen in Figure 7. Moore overlays it with a slowly spoken, almost secretive voice-over contemplating about possible connections between the Bush



*Fig. 7: Close-up of Bush's face after being informed of 9/11 attacks in Fahrenheit 9/11*

and Bin Laden families after having investigated related evidence: "Is that what he was thinking about? Because if the public knew this, it wouldn't look very good." The shot slowly zooms into Bush's face and is played back in slow-motion creating the effect that Bush appears as flawed and vulnerable by exaggerating his facial features. Through combing the voice-over with this shot of Bush, Moore rather creates suspicion than providing verifiable evidence and thus pressures his audience into agreeing with his argument. Here we can see that Moore avoids a clear separation between opinion and fact and it becomes difficult for the audience to separate one from the other and to shape its own opinion. Notwithstanding, a critical examination of authority is a crucial factor in democracy, and the questions, which Moore raises, are "usually justifiable ones" (Toplin, 93). This is because Moore builds his voice-over based on an

informing logic, typical for documentary film, in which his conclusions are based on previous examinations of factual evidence, as it also holds true in this case. Although Moore does not break documentary conventions with his critical, yet overly personal voice-over, a clearer separation between fact and opinion expressed through the voice-over would have been desirable.

Utilization of music is an additional key element in Moore's films, which often contradicts the visual information in their connotation to achieve an effect of mockery. By using songs for mockery Moore provokes "a sensate experience of disease that, while unnerving, rouses viewer's curiosity about what drives Americans to engage in violence" (Ott and Sci, 80). This pattern carries on throughout both *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In the latter Moore juxtaposes Christmas song "Silent Night" with an US raid in Iraq on Christmas eve. Later he takes it a step further and overlays Iraqi victims with hard rock music listened to by US soldiers during their duty. The Bush Administration is represented as inhumane and sadistic since the juxtaposition of the hard-rock music and footage of victims undermines all sense of tragedy and moreover portrays the soldiers as individuals who derive pleasure from killing. An audio match cut from a soldier passionately singing the song's chorus "Burn motherfucker, burn" to the non-diegetic version of the song overlaid in the scene further amplifies Moore's depiction of the evil of the Bush administration. Certainly, Moore expresses a new truth in this scene taking "[the audience] someplace they hadn't been" (Moore qtd. in Barnes). Yet, did Moore's musical choices remain within actuality or were they purposefully supplemented to manipulate his audience? Although indeed "a great deal of this persuasiveness stems from the sound track" (Nichols, 26), Moore typically combines primary footage and respects actuality. Both "Silent Night" and the hard rock song "The roof is on fire" are no fictitious accompaniments but occurred during those exact instances. This, however, is not always the case, such as in the opening sequence of *Bowling for Columbine*, where the

background music mockingly diminishes Moore's opponents. As with the voice-over Moore blurs actual and fictitious elements making it difficult for the audience to shape their own understanding of reality.

A further element which undermines the documental validity of Moore's films is the effect of comedy achieved through visual montages. Frequently, Moore's approach is to contrast the expected qualities, which a person should have in a certain position, as for example the President of the United States, with the unanticipated reality. The technique results in a disproportion between the figure of admiration and the figure's behaviour, which in turn causes laughter (Fleishman, 75). This becomes

evident in a clip in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, titled "Afghanistan". It presents a vintage-style Western, in which a cowboy overlaid with George W. Bush's face is riding a horse in what is supposed to be the country side of



Fig. 8: Bush in "Afghanistan" clip in Fahrenheit 9/11

Afghanistan (Fig. 8). The disproportion is immediately seen through Bush's head, which is slightly oversized and does not correspond with the cowboy's body. Bush therefore appears childish and cartoonish in contrast to his typical TV appearances. Such a filmic trick usually serves to "bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides [with the joker] without any very close investigation" (Freud qtd. in Fleischmann, 74). With this clip Moore diminishes any positive impression of Bush while using this as a foundation to persuade the audience of his own opinion. He does not use an argument, which respects verifiable evidence. Instead he gets by with comedy to manipulate his viewers into taking sides with him while weakening his opponents. Although documentary film can be described as the "creative treatment of actuality" as outlined in the introduction, the audience must still be provided with the opportunity to consciously shape its own understanding. However, the viewers are deceived by the comedic

montages and are therefore deprived of the possibility to appreciate other perspectives. This drastically confines the validity of Moore's films and puts them on a border with propaganda film.

Furthermore, Moore appeals to the viewer's emotion also by juxtaposing visual sequences from opposing contexts and thus uses a logical fallacy to persuade his audience. The technique of combining sequential shots even if they are totally unrelated is known as the Kuleshov effect, which implies that "previous scenes set an emotional context for subsequent ones" (Rhoads qtd. in Hennigan, 6). In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore implements this technique in his depiction of the Iraq War with the intent to criticize the actions taken by the Bush administration. He cross-cuts a speech by Bush announcing the US intervention in Iraq with Iraqi children playing and people going by their daily lives, which are in an instant destroyed by a cut to an explosion (Fig. 9). By contextualizing the intervention in such a way resentment towards the US government is evoked as a by-product, while the audience empathizes with the situation of the Iraqi victims. This means via contextual cross-cutting Moore extracts the audience's emotion of grief and anger to draw it into one viewpoint of reality – namely the perspective of the Iraqi victims. Hence, Moore uses emotion as a tool to raise strong feelings among his viewers, which mere language would fail to create. However, by doing so, he also limits the room for the audience to question the presented interpretation of reality by confronting it with a counter-perspective. Moore certainly manages to thoroughly portray one



Fig. 9: Cross-cutting sequence between Bush and Iraqi citizens in *Fahrenheit 9/11*

truth, but he fails to communicate the possible range of facets and impressions, which altogether form reality.

## Conclusion

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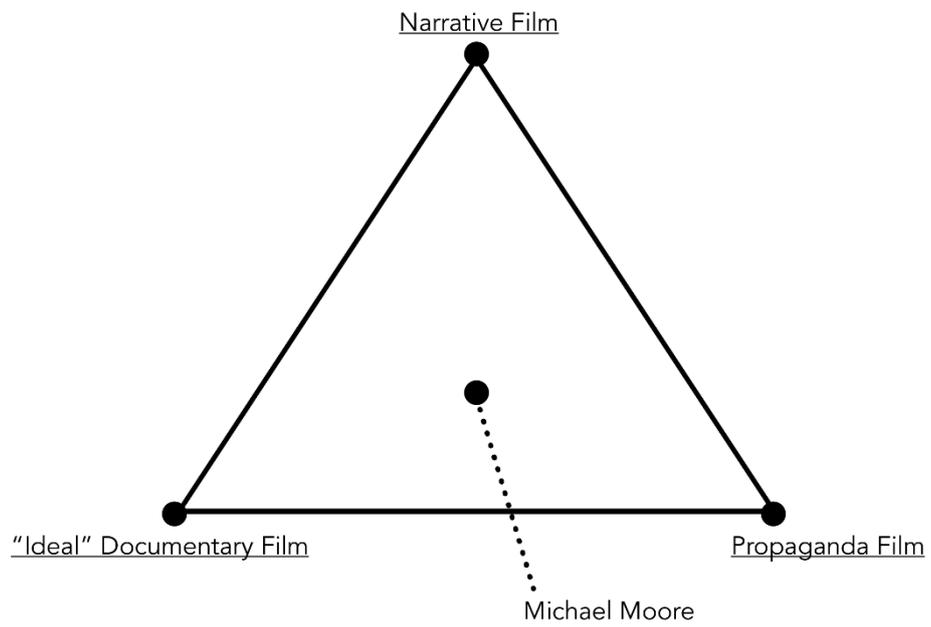
The aim of this essay has been to seek an answer to the question if Michael Moore's films *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* belong to the genre of documentary film based on my definition of documentary film.

As demonstrated Moore's performative mode allows the audience to gain insight into the subjective nature of his arguments. Audio-visual information is not merely arbitrarily presented but the audience is made aware of Moore's subjective portrayal of truth using narrative cause and effect structure. This is an asset of documentary film as the audience comprehends the knowledge presented and can calibrate its own perspective around it. Simultaneously, however, Moore uses editing techniques, causing a comedic effect and the Kuleshov effect, to manipulate the audience into subconsciously agreeing with his subjective depiction of reality.

Considering the use of rather propagandist editing techniques, it can be questioned whether Moore is fully committed to revealing a balanced truth or instead values box office success as a driving motif. This would imply that he does not acknowledge the moral obligation of a documentary filmmaker to reveal truth based on verifiable evidence in the first place. Such negligence would discredit his films as documentaries given my definition. Both of Moore's films have certainly adopted to an era, in which a high regard for facts and evidence has dwindled and communication habits have changed. Therefore, documentary film has stumbled into an identity crisis, where the separation between fact and fiction is becoming more difficult with every day.

In turn, Moore's films show conventions typical for both documentary film, narrative and propaganda films (Fig. 10). Considering today's communication behaviour, *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* may count as valid documentary films. Yet, if we want to

remain in control of a high regard for truth, his movies must be considered with a critical eye.



*Fig. 10: Moore's position on a filmic spectrum according to my analysis*

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