A New Life for Documentaries

As if to disprove the thesis that the twenty-first century cinema was all about virtual realities, movies about real realities—documentaries—came back into favor, fueled by new approaches and new audiences. Beginning in the 1980s, young documentarians began countering the *cinema verité* style of the previous decades by putting themselves into their films, taking their cue from the examples set by earlier self-reflexive documentary stylists such as the Soviet Dziga Vertov and the French Chris Marker. Among the new American talents were Ross McElwee (*Sherman's March,* 1986, and *Bright Leaves,* 2003) and Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line,* 1988, and *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara,* 2003). By putting themselves front and center (as McElwee did) or foregrounding obvious fake re-creations of actual events (as Morris did), these film makers made documentaries into personal essays, often leavening the effect with quirky humor. Documentaries were also given a new lease on life in the new millennium by the political ferment that accompanied the 2004 presidential election, which stimulated interest in muckraking films such as *The Corporation* (Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar, 2003) and *The Control Room* (Jehane Noijaim, 2004).

A documentarian who capitalized on both of these trends is **Michael Moore,** whose politically incendiary *Fahrenheit 9/11* created a media sensation when it was released in the midst of the 2004 presidential campaign (Figure 23.7). Using an approach he had pioneered in his earlier productions *Roger and Me* (1989) and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Moore combined archival footage with aggressively conducted interviews in which he badgered assorted powerbrokers about their putative wrongdoings. The belligerent tone thus created was leavened with humorous asides and sympathetic portraits of social victims. Assertive editing that juxtaposed disparate images to create cause-and-effect chains gave rhetorical force to the movie's argument about the shortcomings of President George W. Bush and the wrongheadedness of his war in Iraq. Though some observers on the right side of the political spectrum saw Moore's cinematic statement as yet another exercise in vir-

tual reality, enough people went to see the film to make it the highest-grossing documentary of all time and a top moneymaker of that year. Moore's razzle-dazzle techniques were especially appreciated at the Cannes Film Festival, where *Fahrenheit 9/11* took the top prize that year.

Like all movies, Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* speaks unmistakably about the time and place in which it was made, and, like many, it came during a rich period of film production in its country of origin. The eloquence of modern film has been built on the foundation of numerous similar moments of national creative flowering. This history has surveyed some of these moments. To go back and review the old by visiting film archives and museums, participating in film history courses, taking in retrospective series, and now renting and purchasing videocassettes and DVDs enriches our understanding of what is new in cinematic art.

Cinema has historically been an awesomely difficult medium in which to create. The very characteristics that distinguish it from the older arts have frequently impeded artists: the massive and complex technology, the demands of high finance, the necessity for a huge and diverse audience. But now, with cheap digital video technology readily available, more people than ever before can make "films." And, as films made for theaters have yielded their place as mass entertainment to television and now the Internet, and as the rigid production-distribution-exhibition systems have been shaken and cracked in many places, film art of a new seriousness and difficulty, greater originality and individuality, has begun to

appear. As Abbas Kiarostami once declared, "The best form of cinema is one which poses questions for the audience."

It's said that speculation about the future reveals more about the present than about what's in store. Nonetheless, the urge to anticipate things to come is inevitable as the dawn of the second millennium has brought what promise to be radical innovations in the ways people entertain themselves. The advent of digital technology has coincided with other innovations to create a world in which the movies are being reborn, a world of virtual reality, convergence, synergy, open-endedness, and interactivity. The virtual worlds cinema has made have become less and less dependent on the real one. Additionally, cinema, once a distinctive art, now bleeds into TV via movie-themed cable channels and pay per view. Films are also available on computers in the form of streaming video. Moreover, received wisdom about the passive cinema spectator caught in a dream-like state in front of a huge screen in a darkened auditorium is now challenged by the reality of viewers who watch videos and DVDs in their living rooms, starting and stopping them at their pleasure, jumping to their favorite scenes, and dismantling their suspension of disbelief by accessing behind-the-scenes footage. Through all of these changes, however, the manipulation of moving images has remained a powerful means by which storytelling, arguing a point, or creating a mood can be achieved. The movies as we have known them may be dying, but other kinds of movies—even more enjoyable and more exciting—are taking their place.

The cinema is dead. Long live cinema!