sciendo

Nordic Journal of
MEDIA STUDIES

Persuasion through people

The rhetorical categories of documentary subjects in Michael Moore's films

ILARI KELLOKOSKI

FACULTY OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES, TAMPERE UNIVERSITY, FINLAND

ABSTRACT

Michael Moore's documentaries have been central to the development of the contemporary political documentary and have served as an instrument of political activism or, as some argue, even propaganda. Delving into the underlying mechanisms, in this article, I examine the ways in which documentary subjects are persuasively deployed in Moore's documentaries. An analysis combining close reading, qualitative content analysis, and rhetorical analysis points to key rhetorical categories of documentary subjects. These subjects' embodiment of six main rhetorical categories displays a correlation with Aristotle's cornerstones of rhetoric: ethos, logos, and pathos. Further, the categories demonstrate how moral emotions are utilised in constructing the ethos of documentary subjects. In addition, the article addresses the significance of identification in Moore's persuasive rhetoric. This research participates in deconstructing the mechanics of persuasive mediated communication and contributes to outlining a theory of audiovisual rhetoric.

KEYWORDS: persuasion, documentary, representation, audiovisual rhetoric, Michael Moore

Introduction

Michael Moore, who gained popularity near the dawn of the new millennium, exemplifies the tendency towards personal truth discourse through a style that Renov (2008: 48) has described as the cinema of "personal voice". Moore can be described as a central figure in redefining the boundaries of objectivity versus subjectivity, truth versus opinion, newsreel versus propaganda, and journalism versus activism, and in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* in 2014, Moore admitted

Kellokoski, I. (2023). Persuasion through people: The rhetorical categories of documentary subjects in Michael Moore's films. *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, *5*(1), 154–171.
https://doi.org/10.2478/njms-2023-0009

that besides making a great movie, his goal with *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004) was "the complete and entire removal of the Bush family and their associates from Washington" (KRT, 2004: para. 5). Opinions on Moore's work are divided: His films have received international awards, including the Oscar for best documentary film in 2003, yet he has been accused of selective manipulation of facts (Hitchens, 2004; Kopel, 2018) and even propaganda (see Stock, 2004; Nolley, 2005; O'Connor et al., 2005). Despite the controversy, Moore is undoubtedly the most prominent political documentary figure of the past 20 years and the most commercially successful documentary director to date (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). Unsurprisingly, his films have been central to the development of the modern political documentary.

In the last decade or so, we have witnessed the advent of a new kind of climate, a "post-truth" environment where objectivity is increasingly called into question through a focus on subjective perceptions of truth – or feelings. Marshall (2014) described the development, where greater emphasis is placed on the individual "self", as moving from representational media to presentational media. Kalpokas (2020), however, defined today's post-truth Experience Age as a "me age" where emotional alignment and individual experience become the key criteria by which truthfulness is judged. One way to achieve emotional alignment is by eliciting moral emotions, such as compassion, through a depiction of people as suffering victims or morally virtuous (Haidt, 2003; Price Tangney et al., 2007). The "me age" meshes with media scholars' general observation of the communication field's burgeoning interest in affect and emotions as the twenty-first century unfolds (Lunenborg & Maier, 2018; Marshall, 2014; Tuomola & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In order to understand how emotions are used in persuasive political communication, I examine the way in which moral emotions, besides rational appeals, are engendered through the selective representation of the people appearing in the films under study.

Until now, there has only been a single academic book dedicated to the rhetoric of Michael Moore (Benson & Snee, 2015). While Primeau (2010) did author a book on Moore, it was arguably more of a defence of Moore than a critical academic analysis. Various documentary theorists, however, have scrutinised Moore academically, including Nichols (1994, 2001) and Bruzzi (2000). Although Moore's rhetoric has previously been examined, some persuasive aspects have been neglected, such as the persuasive functionality of the multitude of people appearing in his films. Scholars such as Nichols (1991), Plantinga (1997), and Winston (1988) have alluded to issues concerning the representative power of documentary subjects, and even the possibility of using the interview as a tool of rhetorical persuasion, but not much research has been conducted to establish how subjects are used for rhetorical persuasion in documentary discourse. To address this, I ask the following research question:

RQ1. What are the main persuasive categories of the documentary subjects in Michael Moore's documentaries, and what role do rationality and moral emotions play in constructing the ethos of a documentary subject?

By answering this question, my study aids in broadening the realm of rhetorical studies by providing a focal point into audiovisual rhetoric, which remains underdeveloped. In addition, it contributes to documentary theory by focusing on the persuasive nature of the genre as well as the discussion about the ethics of representation in documentaries.

Next, I introduce key concepts and theories, including a definition of persuasion and a discussion on how it relates to argumentation and propaganda. I elaborate on the concept of moral emotions following an overview of the role of rationality and factuality in propagandistic communication. Thereafter, I present a description of the analytical methodology, followed by a description of the main rhetorical categories of documentary subjects. Lastly, I summarise the main takeaways regarding the persuasive functionality of the documentary subjects in Michael Moore's documentaries.

Theoretical framework

Persuasion

Simons (as cited in O'Keefe, 2002) defined persuasion as human communication designed to influence others by modifying their beliefs, values, or attitudes. How, therefore, does persuasion differ from argumentation? Argumentation is often linked to rational justification, whereas persuasion is considered to be based on non-rational justification. "At the end of reasons comes persuasion", wrote Wittgenstein (1969: 81e), with Smith (2007: 117) later highlighting the enthymematic nature of persuasion: "in persuasion the argument is truncated". Hatfield and colleagues (2007) described the difference between persuasive manipulation and argument, with the former appealing to unconscious emotions without the possibility of choosing based on rational analysis, whereas argumentation is propositional. Groarke (1996) understood arguments as attempts to convince *rationally*, whereas persuasion was the opposite; however, the meaning of opposite was left unexplained. Conversely, Blair (1996) acknowledged argument as a species of persuasion. From these distinctions between argumentation and persuasion, the following conclusions can be summarised: 1) Argumentation is a rational process, whereas persuasion is *also* non-rational, namely appealing to emotions, and so on; 2) Argumentation is explicit, with grounds, claims, and reasons being expressed explicitly, however, persuasion is more enthymematic in nature; 3) Argumentation and persuasion are not necessarily ontologically exclusive categories.

Smith (2007) associated persuasion with identification and maintained that a persuasive speaker must speak in a manner that audience members can identify with. Wanless and Berk (2020) also emphasised identification by stating that people are more likely to believe those whom they find familiar to themselves. Taylor (1979: 70), however, argued that an effective propagandist must create an adversary – not simply focus on identification – and construct tension between "opposing forces of 'good' and 'evil', or 'us' and 'them'"; the intent is for the

audience to identify with the propagandist's side and stand against those forces cast as the opposite.

Perelman (1996), a prominent scholar of the New Rhetoric school, on the other hand posited a strong relationship between presence and persuasion. For him, the goal of rhetoric is to create a feeling of presence. Jokinen and colleagues (2012) claimed that first-hand experience of an event creates a right to report, and the credibility of this reporting grows with proximity to the issue being reported. Furthermore, Nichols (2001: 54) argued that physical presence functions rhetorically as metonymy, forming associations for the audience between physically parallel phenomena; thus, reporters standing on the scene of an event will get the true story because they are physically close to it.

Moral emotions

Studies have shown that emotional appeals exert a persuasive effect (Baines & Jones, 2020; O'Keefe, 2002; Seo, 2020). As Haidt (2003) pointed out, emotions motivate action and are therefore useful in action-oriented persuasion. Furthermore, human representations are effective at getting viewers emotionally invested (Hietala, 1991) and influencing their attitudes (Seo, 2020).

Moral emotions influence moral decisions and or moral behaviour and highlight the affective quality of morality instead of moral reasoning (Haidt, 2003; Price Tangney et al., 2007). Haidt (2003) divided principal moral emotions into two large and two small joint families. The large families comprised the other-condemning category (including contempt, anger, and disgust) and the self-conscious category (including shame, embarrassment, and guilt). The two smaller families were the other-suffering (compassion) and other-praising (gratitude and elevation) categories.

Other-focused emotions can be engendered to outside observers and can even travel from screen to spectator (Haidt, 2003). Moreover, anger – a result of perceived injustice – can be triggered on behalf of others (Haidt, 2003). Price Tangney and colleagues (2007) saw righteous anger, which arises when the perpetrator's behaviour represents a violation of moral standards, as an especially useful moral emotion.

Contempt is another moral emotion well suited to tarnishing somebody's ethos or credibility. According to Haidt (2003), contempt falls between anger and disgust, which can be generated by hypocrisy, betrayal, cruelty, and fawning. Contempt involves looking down on someone and feeling morally superior. Furthermore, in more egalitarian societies, contempt is elicited by the perception that a person does not measure up to their position or prestige (Haidt, 2003). Contempt approximates Aristotle's definition of indignation, which he described as the pain caused by the sight of undeserved good fortune. Constructing an ethos of hypocrisy, injustice, or moral inferiority is suited to eliciting other-condemning moral emotions, which are useful for creating antagonistic subjects. Other-praising emotions can also influence third-party observers by inspiring them to become better people and, in the case of elevation, follow a moral

exemplar. Haidt's (2003) notion of elevation is elicited by acts of moral beauty, such as charity, kindness, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. Elevation seems an especially suited moral emotion for what Gaines (1999) called political mimesis. According to Gaines, documentary spectators align themselves emotionally with the struggle they see onscreen through what she called "pathos of facts". Conversely, Terrill (2008: 137) called for political mimesis that extends beyond the screen, inspiring spectators to "engage in inventive acts of their own".

Finally, compassion resembles Aristotle's definition of pity, which he believed results from unjust suffering. Compassion, according to Haidt (2003), is elicited by the perception of suffering or sorrow in another person, and it can be felt for total strangers. Price Tangney and colleagues (2007) further argued that compassion often prompts behaviour aimed at helping the distressed other.

Rationality, facts, and propaganda

Although persuasion, like propaganda, is often defined by its emotive content (Baines et al., 2020; Groarke, 1996; Hatfield et al., 2007; Simpson, 2008), appearances of rationality and factuality can form an effective base for persuasion. Livingstone and Lunt (1994) argued that objectivity and neutrality, which are the core values of journalism, can be applied to advocacy. Furthermore, Renov (1993) saw documentary truth claims as the baseline of documentary persuasion. Ellul (1973) employed the term "rational propaganda" for communications that, while appearing to be rationality-based, are actually biased or skewed in some way. Even if the facts themselves are "correct", rational propaganda places them in a misleading context. Baines and colleagues (2020: xxvi) posited that "propaganda operates by creating simulacra of rationality" via the selective use of data or seemingly factual claims, with these facts then being subordinated to narrative purposes. Similarly, disinformation, according to O'Shaughnessy (2020: 60), uses pseudo-rational arguments that are "polished with the veneer of objectivity". Moreover, Blair (2004: 57) noted that visual ads that appear rational accomplish their influence "behind the façade of rationality". The façade of rationalism is further illustrated with Haidt's (2003) social intuitionist model of moral judgements, which places emotions in control of moral judgements and moral reasoning as post hoc justification for moral decisions.

Much of the narration and argumentation in a documentary are transmitted through onscreen personalities. This is evident in Moore's work, wherein various real-life individuals are included and made into rhetorical vehicles. According to Plantinga (1997), for a filmmaker working in the formal style, the question becomes one of fitting the interviews into the rhetorical project of the film. For Nichols (2008), facts never speak for themselves: They must be interpreted, which can lead to different conclusions depending on the aims of the interpreter. "One person's 'truth' is all too often another's 'propaganda'", asserted Reeves (1999: 11), pointing out that it is not the truthfulness of the statements that determines their nature in the propaganda realm but, rather, how these statements are framed and narrated (see also Cohan & Shires, 1988).

Besides narration, expert interviewees are one way of connoting knowledge and objectivity. Scholars of rhetorical studies have acknowledged experts as persuasive authorities (Jokinen, 1999; Jokinen et al., 2012; O'Keefe, 2002). In the hierarchy of discourses (Hietala, 1991; MacCabe, 1974), they represent neutral and objective *histoire* rather than subjective *discours* (Hietala, 1991). O'Keefe (2002: 183–184) maintained that "both expertise and trustworthiness emerge as basic dimensions of credibility". "Ordinary" lay people are often positioned as contrary to experts. To quote Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 129), "experts speak for others while the audience speak for themselves". They argued that because of the new kind of public sphere created by television discussion programmes, "expertise is undermined and lay discourse is elevated" (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994: 97). Echoing this sentiment, Kalpokas (2020: 75) claimed that the post-truth era has brought us from the Information Age to the Experience Age: "Expert knowledge is elitist and out of touch, whereas the [...] authentic experience and gut feeling of the people is taken to be the proper representation of reality".

To summarise, persuasion is an act situated between argumentation and propaganda, or rationality and emotions; however, the boundaries are porous, and there is no clear consensus on the definitions of these terms. Emotive content is traditionally associated with persuasion and propaganda, whereas rationality is associated with argumentation. However, as the concepts of rational propaganda and moral emotions demonstrate, the issue is not as clear-cut as it might appear. Nevertheless, the appearance of rationality can mask the emotional aspect of a constructed truth discourse. Furthermore, facts themselves require interpretation, which in turn creates room for suggestive rhetoric. As the discussion on expert knowledge has highlighted, the constructed ethos of the interpreter or narrator determines how the message is received. In addition, identification and presence enhance a person's persuasiveness.

Method

My research aim was to categorise the subjects of documentaries by their rhetorical function. To achieve this, I used a combination of rhetorical analysis, formal film analysis, and qualitative content analysis, which involves coding categories from qualitative data (see Schreier, 2012).

Through content analysis of Moore's ten documentary feature films (see Table 1), I identified distinct rhetorical categories of speaking documentary subjects. I formed the initial categories on the basis of a close reading and trial coding of one film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Later, after realising the high number of media representatives in the material, I adjusted the coding frame and added "media representatives" as a category. Thus, the coding frame was generated predominantly in a data-driven way, allowing the categories to emerge from the material. The antagonists and the performing director were excluded from the quantitative coding, since their analysis benefits from a different qualitative analytical process. Accordingly, a thorough analysis of the antagonists is beyond the scope of this article.

As stated earlier, an important aspect of documentary rhetoric is the selection of documentary subjects and their utterances (Plantinga, 1997). At least three aspects of selection were at work. First, the selection of subjects was manifested in who got to speak in the film's discourse. Second, how many appearances each subject was given in the film's discourse was considered. Finally, the type of moral character the included utterances constructed was examined. After identifying the categories, I utilised the ATLAS.ti application to code the various rhetorical speaker categories and calculated the quantity of subjects in each category and how many times they appeared in the films. In the second round of analysis, I corrected and adjusted the coding further.

The subject categories are similar to the concept of interaction identities applied by Jokinen and colleagues (2012). These identities are not fixed and can vary in different situations. Likewise, a documentary subject can belong to different subject categories in the course of the film. In cases showing category overlap, my coding assigned two different subject categories for an appearance of the subject.

The focus of my analysis was mainly on the speaker subjects – individuals being interviewed or otherwise given a voice in a film's discourse. My analysis excluded people who appeared in the background or who otherwise did not verbalise a message as well as those who expressed a brief comment as part of a larger crowd (e.g., at a demonstration).

Results

The key subject categories found were 1) witness illustrators, 2) media representatives, 3) experts, 4) emotional subjects, 5) antagonistic characters, and 6) the performing director. The first category, witness illustrators, comprised the largest number of representatives in the corpus (see Table 1). Witness illustrators were vox populi–type documentary subjects who offered lay knowledge and first-hand experience. They were allowed 112 repeat appearances.

Media representatives constituted the second-largest category. Their footage was almost exclusively from secondary archive sources such as news broadcasts and television programmes, and most of them were broadcast news journalists. Also included were television show hosts, people providing infomercial voice-overs, and actors in advertisements. I have excluded fictitious characters from this category.

Next, experts and emotional subjects were similar in number, accounting for 122 and 101 subjects, respectively. However, the experts were allowed more repeat appearances than the emotional subjects, displaying 84 cases of second or further performances as opposed to the emotional subjects' 22. The latter category can be divided into two subcategories. These categories, discussed later, are emotion transmitters (with 43 subjects) and emotion stimulators (58 subjects).

TABLE 1 Number of documentary subjects per film and rhetorical character

Film	Witness illustrators	Media	Experts	Emotion stimulators	Emotion transmitters
Roger and Me	44	13	2	6	5
The Big One	29	10	2	0	1
Bowling for Columbine	79	34	23	4	6
Fahrenheit 9/11	65	35	24	14	8
Sicko	88	11	14	10	9
Slacker Uprising	29	36	4	8	2
Capitalism: A Love Story	40	28	13	4	7
Where to Invade Next	77	21	16	11	1
Michael Moore in TrumpLand	8	1	0	0	0
Fahrenheit 11/9	89	86	24	1	4
Total	548	275	122	58	43

Comments: Does not include repeat appearances. 71 subjects were coded to more than one category per appearance.

The antagonists functioned somewhat differently from the other speaker categories. They were the subjects of the films' discourse. Not all of Moore's documentaries had a single explicit antagonist, but four films in particular employed a main antagonistic character: *Roger & Me* (Moore, 1989), *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004), and *Fahrenheit 11/9* (Moore, 2018). Consequently, these films also exemplified the rhetoric of offence (Jokinen, 1999; Potter, 1996), that is, they pursued an overall rhetorical goal of opposing somebody or something. The main antagonists were generally not interviewed by the filmmaker; instead, their appearances were intercut from different archives. They were often discussed through narration or other subjects and lacked explanatory power themselves. I have included references to the antagonists under the descriptions of various other subject categories; however, a deeper analysis of their functionality requires further study.

While the above-mentioned categories account for the most prominent rhetorical speakers in Moore's documentaries (apart from Moore himself), several additional categories, with fewer representatives, are also noteworthy: celebrities (29), politicians (78), and anonymous officials (32). These categories were not analysed closely; the discussion below concentrates on those with a stronger rhetorical presence.

The speaker subjects manifest different levels of discursive access. Some sub-

jects, such as Congressman Jim McDermott in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, were identified via a chyron, given one-on-one interviews, and granted multiple appearances. Others were interviewed only once. Furthermore, some were not identified as individuals: They were interviewed in a group situation, and their commentary was part of a group identity. In addition, there were extra-diegetic speakers, heard offscreen but not appearing in front of the camera. The picture is completed by subjects who did not speak at all but appeared in the film and carried a non-verbal illustrative message or connotation.

The subject categories were not evenly distributed across the films. Their prominence varied with the overall rhetorical purpose of the film. *Slacker Uprising* (Moore, 2007b) and *The Big One* (Moore, 1997), which functioned primarily to construct Moore's own ethos, employed only a few experts, but frequent appearances of celebrities instead. Finally, *Michael Moore in TrumpLand* (Moore, 2016) depended heavily on Moore's own performance, and other speaker categories were strikingly absent (see Table 1). Thus, the purpose of the people in the documentaries clearly hinged on the overall rhetorical goal behind the film.

Description of categories

The performing director and the hierarchy of subjects

An examination of the rhetorical subjects of Moore's films cannot neglect the filmmaker's own narration and performances. He was present in his films at four levels of discourse set within a hierarchy. First, he was the author, director, and storyteller of the documentaries and had the final say over the narrative discourse and rhetoric of the films. As Nichols (1991: 37) stated regarding the expository mode of documentary:

> [Interviews tend to be] subordinated to an argument offered by the film itself, often via an unseen "voice of God" or an on-camera voice of authority who speaks on behalf of the text. Any sense of give and take between interviewer and subject is minimal.

Second, Moore appeared as the narrator, the "voice of God", in his documentaries. Since his extra-diegetic voice-over guides viewers' interpretations, the term "anchorage", as applied by Barthes (1977), is appropriate in this context. The didactic voice-over works as an anchoring text, limiting and guiding interpretations and connotations.

Moore also appeared as an onscreen reporter in the diegesis of the films. In this role, he conducted interviews, directed the interaction between him and other documentary subjects, and guided viewers' interpretation of what the subjects said. For instance, when a former FBI official interviewed in *Fahrenheit 9/11* stated that had he been given the opportunity, he would have brought members of the bin Laden family to the US for interrogation, Moore's response that "nobody would have questioned it" supplied the viewer with an interpretation and reference point for attitudes towards what had just been uttered.

Consequently, Moore did not treat his documentary subjects equally. In the interview of Charlton Heston – who functioned as an antagonist in *Bowling for Columbine* – Moore confronted him at his home and blamed him personally for the death of a small child. The interview ended as Heston left while Moore, clutching a photo of the child, chased him. It is obvious that the purpose was not to sympathise with Heston or allow him a genuine opportunity to speak for himself. Moore took a different approach in *The Big One*, when he met with a woman whose job was recently eliminated amid downsizing. The scene presented an empathic Moore hugging and comforting the sobbing woman. The difference between the two approaches stems from the differing rhetorical categories of the subjects involved. Heston represents an antagonist and was depicted in the discourse as morally questionable and, thus, a target for contempt, while the laid-off woman was depicted as a victim of circumstance – thus eliciting the other-suffering moral emotion – with whom the filmmaker wishes the audience to sympathise.

Finally, Moore was visible in these films as an active performer. Interaction of this sort is characteristic of Nichols's (1991) participatory mode. At this level of discourse, Moore was an onscreen subject reminiscent of a political activist, even though the performances often included some humour. These activist performances provided both entertaining moments of light relief and templates for viewers' own activism. In a sense, they created a model for political mimesis (Gaines, 1999), translating emotions into concrete action.

It is important to stress that Moore's onscreen persona is a deliberate rhetorical construction, as Benson and Snee (2015) have pointed out. While this character is not identical to the private-sphere Michael Moore, it is an audiovisual representation that sends a message via a nearly caricatured physical appearance that is fundamental to his ethos and which provides a base for viewer identification. The onscreen Moore usually wears a baseball cap, blue jeans, sneakers, and a loosely fitting jacket, also sporting a personal trademark scruffy beard. This visual presence is redolent of a working-class "common man" who stands out against the business elite that the antagonists represent.

The experts

Expertise and trustworthiness are the basis of credibility (O'Keefe, 2002). In contrast, symbolic representations of dishonesty and inauthenticity were used to construct the ethos of the main antagonists, such as George W. Bush in *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Donald Trump in *Fahrenheit 11/9*, thus eliciting moral emotions of justified anger, contempt, and disgust.

Moore used experts mainly to validate the narrative arguments. With only 21 of 122 experts challenging the film's message, most functioned to support rather than counter the argumentation. They provided factual, seemingly neutral, discourse (see Hietala, 1991). However, some expert statements, especially those supporting the rhetorical message of the films, offered normative moral guidance rather than neutral discourse. The FBI researcher in *Fahrenheit 9/11*,

who told how the bin Laden family should have been interrogated, exemplifies this. In these cases, the visually constructed appearance of expertise acts as a façade for normativity.

In general, the experts were filmed rather traditionally. The interviews were typically captured with mid- to close-up shots in an office or other "neutral" surrounding, while material from secondary sources, such as news broadcasts, showed the experts in television studios. In a marked contrast to the settings used for the witness illustrators, the location was generally insignificant, with experts often being filmed in a generic "non-space".

In Moore's work, experts and laypersons jointly strengthen the rhetorical message of the narrative. Most witness illustrators complemented the experts' message or claims with popular verification. However, the experts arguably provided an ethos of rationality that justifies Moore's documentaries as neutral discursive knowledge.

The witness illustrators

As noted above, witness illustrators constitute the largest set of rhetorical documentary subjects; they represent lay individuals and lay knowledge and provide first-hand evidence supporting the arguments offered by the experts, narration, or the discourse of the film itself. The evidentiary power of the witness illustrators comes largely from their physical presence in the location, conveying a sense of "being there".

Moore's documentaries can be interpreted as participating in elevating lay discourse and undermining expertise (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). However, in his case, the phenomenon is not as straightforward as Livingstone and Lunt seemed to suggest. The two are complementary. Experts serve as authorities validating the claims constructed by the media text, yet the documentaries did employ more speakers in the category of witness illustrators than experts, thus giving more exposure to the lay experience.

The distinction between witness illustrators and emotion stimulators (the next subject) is not clear-cut and the categories had some overlap. Some witness illustrators provided eyewitness or first-hand accounts of events, acting almost as narrators, and could be distinguished from emotional subjects. However, since a major part of Moore's witness illustrators represented the disfranchised underdog, they made an emotional impact on the viewer by embodying suffering born of elite decision-making. This impact was caused by the other-suffering moral emotion of compassion repeatedly exemplified in Moore's documentaries, such as the young gunshot victims in *Bowling for Columbine* or families poisoned by lead-contaminated water in *Fahrenheit 11/9*. Moreover, *Sicko* (Moore, 2007a) provided an especially illustrative example of numerous American citizens who have a medical condition for which they cannot access treatment, mainly due to insurance companies denying their claims.

Elevation, on the other hand, was elicited by the repeated accounts of people fighting against oppressive economic structures. Examples of such witness illus-

trators include the factory workers in *Capitalism: A Love Story* (Moore, 2009) who went on a sit-down strike against their employer, or the workers of bookstores who demanded better pay in *The Big One*. These people provided a model for political mimesis through the other-praising moral emotion of elevation.

The emotional subjects

While the emotional subjects (101 speakers) were not as numerous as some other speakers, such as the witness illustrators, experts, or media representatives, they served a significant rhetorical function. Operating on the third branch of Aristotelian logic, pathos, they appealed to viewers' moral emotions.

Let us examine the two subcategories of the emotional subjects in Moore's films: emotion stimulators and emotion transmitters. The rhetorical function of the former was to trigger an emotion in the viewer. The speech acts of emotion stimulators were not aimed primarily at conveying new information or eyewitness testimony; rather, their rhetorical function was to trigger an emotional response to what was being said, even if they may have appeared devoid of emotions while speaking.

The moral emotions elicited depend on whether the subject was intended for identification or alienation and antagonism. Approximately half of the stimulators belong to the other-condemning family of moral emotions eliciting mainly contempt, indignation or anger, thus arousing antagonism – the "them" of the narrative discourse. The people who attended the Great Gatsby party in Flint, Michigan in *Roger & Me* provide an illustrative example of subjects eliciting contempt and righteous anger. Here, glamorously dressed guests were made to look and sound as if they lacked sympathy for the difficulties of the city's underprivileged residents. Moore's narration introduced the partygoers, stating that they had hired local people to act as human statues at the party. Later, a guest in an interview setting stated that his advice to residents experiencing a rough time would be "to get up in the morning and do something". The film then cut to a scene of people being evicted from their homes in Flint because of financial difficulties. The positioning of the utterance in the narrative discourse cast it as expressing arrogance or indifference to the plight of the disenfranchised, thus intimating the immorality of the speaker. Evoking negative feelings in the viewer – anger, distrust, and indignation at injustice – cultivated emotions of particular use in character assassination (Aristotle, 1997; Haidt, 2003; O'Keefe, 2002; Price Tangney et al., 2007; Samoilenko & Karnysheva, 2020). Moore's depiction of the elite, specifically the main antagonistic characters such as George W. Bush in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, often resonates with the Aristotelian conception of indignation, which is evoked by witnessing seemingly undeserved good fortune.

In addition to other-condemning emotion stimulators, there were also other-suffering emotion stimulators eliciting compassion and some stimulators intended for positive identification. These other-praising subjects mainly elicited elevation by providing a morally "righteous" model. For example, the father of a victim of

the Norwegian terrorist act in UtØya, in *Where to Invade Next* (Moore, 2015), elicited elevation through his forgiveness of the perpetrator.

The other subtype of emotional subjects, emotion transmitters, transfers the onscreen emotion to the viewer through empathic identification. Eder and colleagues (2019: 97) called the mediated emotions that viewers observe from the outside "witness emotions". As a mirror or model for identification, emotion transmitters transfer their visible emotions to the audience.

A majority of emotional transmitters belong to the other-suffering family of moral emotions that elicit compassion. They include Rosemary Dillard in *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Laura in *The Big One*. Dillard tearfully told of how she lost her husband in the 9/11 attacks. Laura, in turn, was the laid-off GM worker with whom Moore empathised at his book signing.

Furthermore, my analysis found that the moral emotions elicited by the documentary subjects are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, often the emotional subjects elicit a combination of compassion and anger. That is, compassion for the interviewee subject, but anger for the party responsible for their misery. Examples include the Iraqi people who have lost their children in bombings by the American military in *Fahrenheit 9/11* or the daughter of a deceased company employee in *Capitalism: A Love Story*, who said, in tears, "when someone passes away, they should not get something out of it", referring to the insurance compensation received by the company resulting from her mother's death, while the family was left without compensation.

The media representatives

The media representatives in Moore's films fulfilled three distinct rhetorical functions. They served primarily as intertextual validators who provided "neutral knowledge" in support of the dominant discourse. However, in some cases, especially in *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, they functioned as a source of inadvertent comedy: a technique described by Perelman (1996) as prolepsis, in which someone is allowed to speak only to face immediate refutation. For example, following a section of *Fahrenheit 9/11* that addressed bogus reasons for the Iraq War in 2003, Moore's voice-over said that "fortunately, we have an independent media in this country that would tell us the truth". This comment was followed by excerpts from numerous television journalists lauding the war effort in rapid succession. The juxtaposition of Moore's narration and that audiovisual montage made a mockery of the news media. Perelman (1996) referred to this irony-oriented strategy as "intentionally inadequate illustration". The rhetorical use of media representatives as sources of comedy or questionable information diminishes their credibility and rhetorical authority.

Finally, especially in *The Big One*, *Slacker Uprising*, and *Michael Moore in TrumpLand*, the media representatives connoted the importance and relevance of Moore as a public figure. These films included short news inserts in which journalists explained, for example, where Moore was going next or how many people were expected to attend one of his speaking events.

Discussion

As demonstrated, the various subject categories have distinctive rhetorical characteristics. Experts, and partly media representatives, function in the realm of logos – or reason, in Aristotle's rhetorical definition – connoting neutral discourse (Aristotle, 1997; Hietala, 1991; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). However, media representatives are also represented as ridiculous "clowns". Witness illustrators draw their rhetorical appeal mainly through presence and identification through compassion. Presence works rhetorically both physically and emotionally. First, the witness illustrators themselves portray a sense of physical presence in the circumstances being filmed. Second, they connote emotional presence to the audience by being positioned as similar to "us", that is, the "ordinary" working-class people. Moore's on-screen habitus is likewise aimed at identification with working-class people and against an antagonistic elite, whose ethos is largely constructed through other-condemning moral emotions of indignation, contempt, and righteous anger (Haidt, 2003; Price Tangney, 2007). Emotional stimulators – who exemplify the pathos of Aristotelian logic –evoke other-condemning moral emotions useful for character assassinations (Samoilenko & Karnysheva, 2020) besides other-suffering and other-praising moral emotions. Conversely, emotional transmitters predominantly engender the other-suffering moral emotions compassion through outside witness emotions (Eder et al., 2019).

Although Jokinen and colleagues (2012) claimed that an explanation pinned in the expert category can override one rooted in personal experience, an overview of the post-truth public sphere casts any universal applicability of this conclusion into doubt. As Kalpokas (2020) suggested, one's personally experienced "truth" may well override expert knowledge, with distrust in medical experts amid the Covid-19 pandemic constituting an example of this phenomenon. Indeed, Moore's rhetorical hierarchy of expert and lay discourse questions the discursive dominance of the expert category. While he validates the argumentation with seemingly neutral expert statements, his documentaries grant greater exposure to lay knowledge. Furthermore, the experts provide a façade of rationality in the sense that some of their statements include normative moral instructions. Ultimately, the significance of ethos, or charisma, in rhetorical persuasion suggests that knowledge requires an element of belief. Facts alone are insufficient; we must trust in the reliability of the person or institution delivering the information to us. Much of the perceived reliability according to the audience, in Kalpokas's (2020) view, is caused by affective investment in the narrative. Thus, emotional identification can be used to create a feeling of truth.

Moral emotions influence moral judgements (Haidt, 2003; Price Tangney et al., 2007), and moral judgements influence the way we perceive the ethos of the person being judged. My analysis demonstrates the usefulness of the construction of representations that engender moral emotions in creating "us" and "them" dichotomies, a feature Taylor (1979) associated with effective propaganda. Other-condemning moral emotions are used to create representations of elitist antagonism, whereas other-praising and other-suffering engendering representations are used

to create compassion and admiration for representatives of the working class. Often, the documentary subjects elicit a combination of compassion and anger – compassion towards themselves and anger towards the wrongdoer.

One way to create an illusion of objective rational argumentation is to simulate a public debate through a multitude of voices. A documentary merely presents an illusion of balanced debate, since the power to select the opinions and arguments rests solely with the director. Therefore, the issue with representation extends beyond rhetorical force and function and into the ethics and responsibility of the filmmaker. The lack of power regarding one's own representation can result in becoming a spokesperson for an ideology or message that one does not agree with, which may have implications regarding attitudes towards journalists, and journalistic media more generally.

This article challenges the dichotomy between persuasion and information – or, for that matter, propaganda and documentary. Thus, it participates in the discussion around the ontology of documentary. The people cast as subjects in a documentary become persuasive tools, to some extent, and the plurality of voices starts to appear as rhetoric persuasion rather than a balanced debate leading to "objective truth".

Conclusion

This article reports on research aimed at categorising documentary subjects by their persuasive function in Moore's documentaries. These subjects form six principal rhetorical categories: 1) witness illustrators, 2) media representatives, 3) experts, 4) emotional subjects, 5) antagonistic characters, and 6) the performing director.

The analysis demonstrates how Moore constructs the ethos of subjects for either identification or condemnation and alienation, in line with the pro-working class and anti-elitist dichotomy present in his films. His own rhetorical force relies strongly on the anti-elitist working-class ethos that he has constructed for himself. While some (e.g., antagonists or emotional subjects) are used for emotional appeal, experts provide the rational appeal for rhetoric persuasion. However, the documentary subjects form only a part of the persuasive rhetoric in Moore's documentaries. Other non-textual audiovisual and narrative techniques are involved in the construction of the overall persuasive audiovisual rhetoric, deserving additional research.

Although Moore's documentaries are explicitly leftist in their ideology, my analysis suggests that they share some similarities with today's right-wing populist communication. First, the rhetorical functions of experts and lay persons reflect the trivialisation of expert knowledge (see Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). Second, anti-elitist sentiments can be found both in Moore's work and populism (see Mudde, 2004). Third, the representations of news media and journalists in Moore's documentaries portray them as partly untrustworthy sources of ridiculous statements. However, more research is needed to understand whether – and how – Moore's documentaries have contributed to the development of modern populist communication.

Acknowledgements

This work received funding from Suomen Kulttuurirahasto (Grant no. 00170451) and C.V. Åkerlundin säätiö.

References

Aristotle. (1997). *Retoriikka* [*Rhetoric*]. Gaudeamus.

Baines, P., O'Shaughnessy, N. J., & Snow, N. (Eds.). (2020). *The Sage handbook of propaganda*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526477170

Baines, P., & Jones, N. (2020). Countering the fear in propaganda. In P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, & N. Snow (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of propaganda* (pp. 336–349). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526477170.n22

Barthes, R., & Heath, S. (1977). *Image music text* (S. Heath, Trans.). FontanaPress.

Benson, T. W., & Snee, B. J. (Eds.). (2015). *Michael Moore and the rhetoric of documentary*. Southern Illinois University Press

Blair, J. A. (1996). The possibility and actuality of visual arguments. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *33*(1), 23–29.

Blair, J. A. (2004). The rhetoric of visual arguments. In C. A. Hill, & M. H. Helmers (Eds.), *Defining visual rhetorics* (pp. 41–63). Lawrence Erlbaum. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410609977

Box Office Mojo. (n.d.). *Genre keyword: Documentary*. Retrieved April 9, 2023, from https://www.boxofficemojo.com/genre/sg2245914881/

Bruzzi, S. (2000). *New documentary: A critical introduction*. Routledge.

Cohan, S., & Shires, L. M. (1988). *Telling stories: A theoretical analysis of narrative fiction*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203136393

Eder, J., Hanich, J., & Stadler, J. (2019). Media and emotion: An introduction. *NECSUS*, *8*(1), 91–104. https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/4189

Ellul, J. (1973). *Propaganda: The formation of men's attitudes* (K. Kellen, & J. Lerner, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Gaines, J. (1999). Political mimesis. In J. Gaines, & M. Renov (Eds.), *Collecting visible evidence* (pp. 84–102). University of Minnesota Press.

Groarke, L. (1996). Logic, art and argument. *Informal Logic*, *18*(2-3), 105–129. https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/philosophypub/24

Haidt, J. (2003). The moral emotions. In R. Davidson, K. Scherer, & H. Goldsmith (2003). *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 852–870). Oxford University Press.

Hatfield, K. L., Hinck, A., & Birkholt, M. J. (2007). Seeing the visual in argumentation: A rhetorical analysis of UNICEF Belgium's Smurf public service announcement. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *43*(3-4), 144–151.

Hietala, V. (1991). Tv-uutiset viihteenä ja populaarikulttuurina [TV news as entertainment and popular culture]. *Media & Viestintä*, *14*(1). https://doi.org/10.23983/mv.64243

Hitchens, C. (2004). *Unfairenheit 9/11: The lies of Michael Moore*. Slate. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2004/06/unfairenheit_911.html

Jokinen, A. (1999). Vakuuttelevan ja suostuttelevan retoriikan analysoiminen [Analysis of convincing and persuasive rhetoric]. In A. Jokinen, K. Juhila, & E. Suoninen (Eds.), *Diskurssianalyysi liikkeessä* [*Discourse analysis in practice*] (pp. 126–159). Vastapaino.

Jokinen, A., Juhila, K., & Suoninen, E. (2012). *Kategoriat, kulttuuri & moraali: Johdatus kategoria-analyysiin* [*Categories, culture, & morality: An introduction to category analysis*]. Vastapaino.

Kalpokas, I. (2020). Post-truth and the changing information environment. In P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, & N. Snow (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of propaganda* (pp. 71–84). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526477170.n6

Kopel, D. (2018). *Fifty-nine deceits in Fahrenheit 911*. http://www.davekopel.org/redirect/Terror/Fiftysix-Deceits-in-Fahrenheit-911.htm

KRT. (2004, June 4). Michael Moore takes aim at President Bush in 'Fahrenheit 9/11'. *Chicago Tribune*. https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/chi-040621dpmoore-story.html

Livingstone, S. M., & Lunt, P. K. (1994). *Talk on television: Audience participation and public debate*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131916
Lunenborg, M., & Maier, T. (2018). The turn to affect and emotion in media studies. *Media and Communication*, *6*(3). https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i3.1732
MacCabe, C. (1974). Realism and the cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses. *Screen*, *15*(2), 7–27. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/15.2.7
Marshall, P. D. (2014). Persona studies: Mapping the proliferation of the public self. *Journalism*, *15*(2), 153–170. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913488720
Moore, M. (Director). (1989). *Roger & me* [Film]. Dog Eat Dog Films; Warner Bros.
Moore, M. (Director). (1997). *The big one* [Film]. Mayfair Entertainment International; BBC; Dog Eat Dog Films.
Moore, M. (Director). (2002). *Bowling for Columbine* [Film]. United Artists; Alliance Atlantis; Dog Eat Dog Films; Salter Street Films.
Moore, M. (Director). (2004). *Fahrenheit 9/11* [Film]. Fellowship Adventure Group; Dog Eat Dog Films.
Moore, M. (Director). (2007a). *Sicko* [Film]. The Weinstein Company; Dog Eat Dog Films.
Moore, M. (Director). (2007b). *Slacker uprising* [Film]. Dog Eat Dog Films; Westside Productions.
Moore, M. (Director). (2009). *Capitalism: A love story* [Film]. Overture Films; Paramount Vantage; The Weinstein Company; Dog Eat Dog Films.
Moore, M. (Director). (2015). *Where to invade next* [Film]. Dog Eat Dog Films; IMG Films.
Moore, M. (Director). (2016). *Michael Moore in TrumpLand* [Film]. Dog Eat Dog Films; IMG Films.
Moore, M. (Director). (2018). *Fahrenheit 11/9* [Film]. State Run Films; Midwestern Films; Briarcliff Entertainment; Dog Eat Dog Films.
Mudde, C. (2004). The populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*(4), 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x
Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Indiana University Press.
Nichols, B. (1994). *Blurred boundaries: Questions of meaning in contemporary culture*. Indiana University Press.
Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to documentary*. Indiana University Press.
Nichols, B. (2008). The question of evidence, the power of rhetoric and documentary film. In T. Austin, & W. De Jong (Eds.), *Rethinking documentary: New perspectives, new practices* (pp. 29–38). McGraw Hill; Open University Press.
Nolley, K. (2005), Fahrenheit 9/11: Documentary, truth-telling, and politics. *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, *35*(2), 12–16
O'Connor, J. E., Toplin, R. B., Mintz, S., Briley, R., & Nolley, K. (2005). Michael Moore: Cinematic historian or propagandist? *Film & History*, *35*(2), 7–16.
O'Keefe, D. J. (2002). *Persuasion: Theory & research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
O'Shaughnessy, N. (2020). From disinformation to fake news: Forwards into the past. In P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, & N. Snow (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of propaganda* (pp. 55–70). Sage.
Perelman, C. (1996). *Retoriikan valtakunta* [*The realm of rhetoric*]. Vastapaino.
Plantinga, C. (1997). *Rhetoric and representation in nonfiction film*. Cambridge University Press.
Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. Sage.
Price Tangney, J., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *58*(1), 345–372. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070145
Primeau, F. (2010). *American dissident: The political art of Michael Moore*. Lulu Press.
Reeves, N. (1999). *The power of film propaganda: Myth or reality?* Cassell.
Renov, M. (1993). *Theorizing documentary*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873083
Renov, M. (2008). First-person films: Some theses on self-inscription. In T. Austin, & W. De Jong (Eds.), *Rethinking documentary: New perspectives, new practices* (pp. 39–50). McGraw Hill; Open University Press.
Samoilenko, S., & Karnysheva, M. (2020). Character assassination as modus operandi of Soviet propaganda. In P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, & N. Snow (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of propaganda* (pp. 189–204). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526477170.n13
Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Sage.
Seo, H. (2020). Visual propaganda and social media. In P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, & N. Snow (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of propaganda* (pp. 126–136). Sage.
Simpson, K. E. (2008). Classic and modern propaganda in documentary film: Teaching the psychology of persuasion. *Teaching of Psychology*, *35*(2), 103–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/00986280802004602

Smith, V. J. (2007). Aristotle's classical enthymeme and the visual, argumentation of the twenty-first century. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *43*(3-4), 114–123. https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2007.11821667
Stock, B. (2004, August 7). Michael Moore: Master of propaganda. *The American Daily*. https://archive.ph/tbkyL
Taylor, R. (1979). *Film propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*. Croom Helm.
Terrill, R. E. (2008). Mimesis and miscarriage in Unprecedented. In B. Snee, & T. Benson (Eds.), *The rhetoric of the new political documentary* (pp. 131–152). Southern Illinois University Press.
Tuomola, S., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2023). Emotion mobilisation through the imagery of people in Finnish-language right-wing alternative media. *Digital Journalism*, *11*(1), 61–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2061551
Wahl-Jorgensen, K., (2019). Questioning the ideal of the public sphere: The emotional turn. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119852175
Wanless, A., & Berk, M. (2020). The audience is the amplifier: Participatory propaganda. In P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, & N. Snow (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of propaganda* (pp. 85–104). Sage.
Winston, B. (1988). The tradition of the victim in Griersonian documentary. In L. Gross, J. Stuart Katz, & R. Jay (Eds.), *Image ethics: The moral rights of subjects in photographs, film, and television* (pp. 34–57). Oxford University Press.
Wittgenstein, L. (1969) *On certainty*. Harper Torchbooks.

© 2023 Respective authors. This is an Open Access work licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of the licence, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/