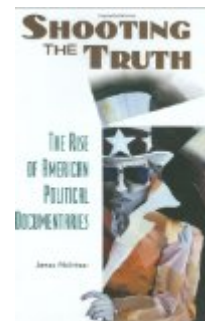


James McEnteer. *Shooting the Truth: The Rise of American Political Documentaries.* Westport: Praeger, 2006. xxii + 196 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-275-98760-2.



Reviewed by Stephen Pimpare

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Shooting the Truth begins with the observation that "eight of the ten top-grossing documentaries of all time were released since 2002" (p. xii). Setting aside the fact that fewer than half of those documentaries are actually about politics (the list includes *March of the Penguins* [2005], *Winged Migration* [2002], and *Mad Hot Ballroom* [2005], for example), it is clear that there has been a recent profusion of nonfiction political films. Some of them, like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), have become part of the national political discourse in ways not seen, perhaps, since Edward R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame* (1960). James McEnteer wonders "why the sudden prominence of nonfiction films?" It is a fine question. But *Shooting the Truth* is not, at heart, an effort to answer it. While, McEnteer promises an exploration of "the political evolution of American nonfiction films over the past half-century" (p. xiii), this generally worthwhile book is instead a serial summary of some of the most notable of those films, with some attention to the political context in which they were released.

That's not to say that McEnteer does not have his thoughts on the subject. As he summarizes in his introduction, the documentaries under discussion exist in part because they overcome the failures of "concentrated ownership of news media, the corporatization and trivialization of the news, and the decreasing spectrum of information" (p. xii). McEnteer argues later that these documentaries also serve to "prod our collective memory" (p. 54), to "bear visual witness to important events" (p. 61), and, perhaps most important, "to tell stories that undermine or refute the sociopolitical consensus proposed by majoritarian media" (p. 61).

The first chapter focuses principally on Vietnam-era documentaries, offering a fine survey of a range of films (including government propaganda efforts) and the state pressure to censor those appearing on television. It is an interesting account that would be even more powerful if McEnteer could gauge the impact of these documentaries and compare their role to that of print reporting. This is a complaint I make about much of the volume: left underexplored here is why film

matters. How is this particular form of journalism different than print reporting, and do documentaries on television or in theatrical release differ in any substantive way? That is, what kind of analytic distinction should we make (if any) between print reporting and documentaries; between documentaries and daily television news; and between documentaries produced for television and those released as film?

Chapter 2 turns to documentaries produced in other periods about Vietnam and the Vietnam era, from *Vietnam: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1988) to *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* (2002). Chapter 3 then brings us up-to-date, describing films ranging from the invasion of Panama to the Iran-Contra affair to the Branch Dividian siege at Waco, Texas, and other aspects of the Clinton years to the growing corpus of films about Iraq. These too are fine descriptions and consistently well-told stories, but I was left wanting McEnteer to move beyond description to an analysis of which of these movies had what kinds of impact, if any. That type of analysis might help us think more usefully about the function of the documentary film in the past and the opportunities for documentaries in future political debate.

McEnteer then devotes one chapter each to directors Barbara Kopple, Michael Moore, Errol Morris, and Robert Greenwald, offering what amounts to short professional biographies of each filmmaker. These biographies are interesting, but not always on point. Fine as they are, do we need summaries of Kopple's *Fallen Champ: The Untold Story of Mike Tyson* (1993) or *Wild Man Blues* (1998), her terrific portrait of Woody Allen on tour as jazz musician? And what might we say about the overall import of Kopple's body of work? The almost haphazard inclusion of some films is made even clearer in the chapter on Errol Morris, since so much of his work does not seem to be "political" within the context of the book. And it is surely not political in the way that Robert Greenwald's films are, for example *Unprecedented* (2002),

about Florida and the 2000 election; *Uncovered* (2003), about pre-Iraq War propaganda; and *Outfoxed* (2004), about Fox News.

In the chapter on Moore, McEnteer notes that "critics accused him of egomania and deception" among other complaints (p. 81). McEnteer does not really tackle these critiques head on, although he returns to these questions in chapter 8, which focuses on the 2004 election. While he observes that Moore may be engaged in a form of political communication that is not quite journalism, yet not fiction either, he does not explore this sufficiently for my tastes. What obligations does a filmmaker have to fair-mindedness? How does this differ from the obligations we associate with more traditional journalists? And how much license might a filmmaker take for dramatic or emotional effect before he crosses a line into something, well, propagandistic? I ask these questions as someone who thinks Moore's films have contributed in positive ways to broadening public discourse about important issues. But I also find myself feeling manipulated by his movies and do not think he always plays fair with the audience. To what extent does this matter, and how should we think about the role and obligations of contemporary political documentaries?

That McEnteer provoked these and a host of other questions is very much to his credit, but the failure to investigate them more systematically is an opportunity missed. Disappointing, too, is McEnteer's reluctance to weigh in on the debates about Moore (and others). He refers to a broad range of reviews (by film critics and political analysts) of the documentaries under discussion, but seldom provides the reader with his own conclusions and interpretations, and rarely sifts through competing interpretations to provide his own judgments. Finally, the discussion of *Fahrenheit 9/11* begs for some effort to evaluate its actual impact on the 2004 election. McEnteer asserts that the film mattered, but offers us little assistance in gauging how or how much. As he suggests in the

chapter on Greenwald, it is possible that these filmmakers "may not be preaching to the converted, but to the wind" (p. 129).

If that is indeed the case, it becomes even more urgent to ask what function such documentaries ultimately serve. Other questions come to mind as well: why these films, and these directors? Are there patterns we can see, such as evidence of filmmakers learning from others or notable variation in style or approach from era to era? To what extent have any of these documentaries had any measurable effect upon politics? McEnteer writes, for example, that "most 2004 political campaign films reified viewer values, but did not change many minds" (p. 153). Similarly, in writing of a broader range of post-Reagan documentaries, he states "though these films had little effect on policy, they impacted the hearts and minds of audiences" (p. 41). First, how do we know this? Second, if it is true that these documentaries had little or no effect on policy, and that they were in fact preaching to the choir, then why do these films matter at all? The final chapter may be the most satisfying in that it endeavors to step back and understand both the genesis of and need for documentaries, their place in public political discourse, and the possible role they might play in citizen "empowerment."

All of these complaints aside, *Shooting the Truth* is a good resource. It drew my attention to movies I have not seen (and will result in a few new ones being added to my syllabi), and it raised a broad range of important questions. Perhaps, then, it is unfair to grumble that McEnteer did not do more to answer such questions. Ironically, McEnteer's book would, itself, form the basis for a terrific film on the modern history of political documentaries.

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