

(De)information – On the Politics of Fictional Figures in Fictitious Times

Claudia Reiche

The fictional figures [1] to be discussed here are not figures generated by computer programs to imitate human beings more or less realistically. My considerations much rather focus on figures of thought and the fictional aspects of fundamental beliefs and motivations in the complex context of political discourse. While a critique of the current debate on the possibilities offered by new media technologies is implied, I do not intend to engage with positions that either deride avatars for being unrealistic or commend them as successful simulations. This is a superficial contrast, mistaking simulation for realism, and has little to do with the opposing terms of fiction and nonfiction to be discussed here. The basic question I would like to address in the following is how the opposites »fictional/nonfictional« come into play in contemporary language-based artistic practice.

Do the opposite meanings of fiction and nonfiction imply the difficult distinction between truth and untruth, or, to put it baldly, truth and lies? The works of *Michael Moore* suggest as much and make an interesting case study in this context. By targeting U.S. President *George W. Bush*, *Moore* has achieved overwhelming resonance both in the *United States* and abroad, especially in *Germany*. In my opinion, his popularity is to a large extent due to his unique way of querying how the opposites fictional/nonfictional are related to truth/lies. The same question underlies the *Turing Test*, and we must be careful to acknowledge its value for what it is worth, rather than mistaking the search for genuineness in computer-generated characters and human participants as a quest for intelligence and truth.

The *Turing Test* compares the imitations of human speech acts generated by language-based computer programs with real human speech acts; by a subtle twist, it makes an imitation that is no

longer recognizable as such the proclaimed goal of programming. Can a program that succeeds in this fictional framework be considered genuine? The answer is necessarily relative. In the world of the great language game that is the *Turing Test*, it would be affirmative, since »genuine« is here defined without reference to origin, so everything the test does not recognize as an imitation, a fake, or a deception, is genuine. For us old humans the rules of the imitation game mean that we lose all claim to original genuineness even before a masked machine has deceived our ability to distinguish it from a human being. Since information science has accepted a machine's ability to foil our sense of difference as a decisive quality, the language game has turned into a full-blown fiction that successfully shifts meanings and reveals their ambivalences, penetrating far into the tissue of reality. But our culture is not nearly as confident in dealing with such machine-made representational ambivalences as the *Turing Test* seems to suggest. When in doubt, go ahead and declare that the differences between natural and artificial, carbon- and silicon-based life forms are irrelevant anyway, or just delete them – as do some representatives of Artificial Life sciences (epistemologically) and techno fantasies stretching from kitsch to apocalypse (artistically). Underlying this is a dubious, naïve concept of realism that sees truth in what passes as genuine and therefore misunderstands technical simulation in a gesture of exaggerated empathy. As a result, more appropriate ways of differentiating between fake and genuine, fiction and non-fiction are neglected and the idea that truth is a multifaceted and complex concept – the key to every person's self-perception – is lost. But the urge to tell truth from lies is currently making a comeback in the political scene, where it has appeared as a basis of judgments made in the context of protests against the war in *Iraq* and the policies of *George W. Bush*. The way this urge is articulated in the critiques we are talking about here sheds a light on different concepts of fiction, and that brings us back to the problems with which machine simulation confronts culture(s).

Moore's Acceptance Speech

Last year *Michael Moore* was honored with an *Academy Award* for his documentary feature film »Bowling for Columbine«, which looks at possible reasons and contexts for the *Columbine* high school massacre. The film suggests that the traditional – one might even say fetishistic – attitude to guns and firearms prevalent in American society and their comparatively unrestricted use at both private and

1 These »fictional figures« include the »fictitious figures« from the subtitle of our conference *Virtual Minds: Congress of Fictitious Figures*. But while the »agents, spies, zombies, con-men, fakes, legal entities, novel and dream characters, avatars and bots« mentioned in the outline for the conference and the present publication are fictional figures, not all fictional figures are fictitious.



global levels, combined with angst-ridden personality structures, are the causal factors. *Moore* uses fairly conventional techniques of documentary filmmaking, such as interviews and montage, though there is a strong focus on the author and his satirical commentary and interview style. *Michael Moore's* acceptance speech at the 75th Annual *Academy Award* Ceremony in March 2003 has become something of a legend. The speech never even mentions »Bowling for Columbine«; there are only oblique ellipses and the direct invocation of the President, thus placed in the same context as the high-school killers. The phrase »fictitious times«, which *Moore* coined to characterize the present state of affairs in the *United States*, has become a recurring theme in critiques of the political situation.

At the time, the audience's reaction to *Moore's* brief acceptance speech was remarkably cool, with more booing than laughter or applause. But recent history has in the meantime created more general agreement with *Moore's* opposition to the war in *Iraq* than there was at the time he made his speech – a time when *Hollywood*, in particular, for the most part still believed that an allegedly necessary, just, and militarily simple retaliatory strike against *Iraq* would be a popular measure:

Even by *Hollywood* standards, *Moore* had gone too far. He was out of the mainstream... What a difference a year makes!... When he made his *Oscar* speech, *Moore* seemed like the loudmouth in the theater who shouts during the movie that it's all fake. In the months since, the loudmouth seems to have become a prophetic. [2]

It remains to be seen whether this really was the message that *Moore's Oscar* speech seemed to convey – that it's all fake, not just the reality generated on screen, but the reality we live in. So what does that mean, »all«? What does that mean, »fake«? And what is so prophetic about *Moore's* statement? The movie theater has always been a place where events are staged, and the times when representations on film were indistinguishable from the realities they represented are surely mythical.

But »what a difference a year makes!« We have to bear in mind that *Moore's* speech was a daring venture, particularly at the time it was made. From today's point of view, in retrospect, we may think that it was hardly possible not to entertain doubts about the necessity, legitimacy, and chances of success of the war in *Iraq*. But the speech

act category into which *Moore's* speech falls shows that he was moving in the sublimely free and yet empty space of risk, or, in more general terms, in the ontological void inherent in what we call reality. This reality is one pervaded and determined by fictions, which in their turn are shaped by precisely such speech acts.

Michael Moore's Oscar acceptance speech for »Bowling for Columbine« can be read on the *Academy Awards* website. In the television recording he can be seen speaking with empty hands, as he had passed the award to *Kathleen Glynn*: »Whoa. On behalf of our producers *Kathleen Glynn* and *Michael Donovan* from *Canada*, I'd like to thank the *Academy* for this. I have invited my fellow documentary nominees on the stage with us, and we would like to – they're here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or fiction of orange alerts we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you. And any time you got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up. Thank you very much.« [3]

How does he use the adjective »fictitious« in his brief speech? »We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times«, he says. The English language differentiates between fictitious, in the derogatory sense of not real, not true, and fictional, which is more neutral and belongs to the noun »fiction« in the sense of artistic invention. *Moore's* words relate the category of nonfiction, in which documentary films run at the *Academy Awards*, to what is unreal, untrue, or fake about the political situation. He does not talk about fictional times but fictitious times. Interestingly enough, the conjunction here is »and«, so it is left to the audience to define more closely the logical relationship between nonfiction and the fictitious. This will most likely be one of contrast, even of contraries. What we hear is »We like nonfiction but we live in fictitious times«. The meaning has begun to shift, and is given a further push by the words that follow: »We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons.«

3 75th Annual Academy Awards, http://www.oscars.com/oscarnight/winners/win_32297.html, last visited Jan. 23, 2004.

2 Neal Gabler,
»Hollywood's Shifting
Winds«, *Variety Times*
(Nov. 30, 2003).



And then *Moore* goes on to create a new word, the noun to »fictitious«. The official transcript twice notes him saying »fiction«: »Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or fiction of orange alerts we are against this war, Mr. Bush.« This is crucial. *Moore* very carefully attacks not fiction but fictitious. Nonfiction – represented by the documentary film directors on stage – is not set up against fictional film, the motion picture; instead, nonfiction is juxtaposed to fakes and deception. Quick ears will hear additional meanings in »nonfiction«, understanding the term to mean more than simply »not invented«, to lay claim to more than a basis in verifiable facts. The deliberate (mis)understanding triggered by the implied contrast with fiction turns nonfiction into a synonym for honesty, even truth. A close reading reveals the following line of argument: if fiction is untrue (and the status of fiction with regard to truth remains undetermined as it is not mentioned), we may conclude that nonfiction holds at least a possibility for truth. A specific function of negation comes to the fore in this context: non-black can refer to all other colors except black as well as to any specific other color. Nonfiction can, quite neutrally, refer to all other modes of expression except fiction as well as to one that is, more specifically, documentary, honest or true, depending on the way you look at it.

In any case, *Moore's* speech suggests, nonfiction is certainly not determined by fraud, tricks, and manipulation, e.g. faulty counts and manipulations at presidential elections, nor by covert interests, e.g. U.S. corporation's interests in the war, in reconstructing *Iraq* after the devastation wrought by the armies. Nonfiction is not the result of governmental deception. What is untrue and deceitful, the speech implies, is *Bush's* position, his tactics in waging war with insufficient, faked facts that are no more than pretexts. Truth, honesty, and genuineness, in turn, are characteristics that can now be assigned to *Michael Moore* and to an extent to his co-nominees in the nonfiction category at the *Academy Awards*.

For what was it that *Moore* said about his fellow directors? He says they are in solidarity with him, adding that they like nonfiction. Voluntarily or willy-nilly, by their physical presence on stage they are making a statement, confirming the implied claim to truth or at least a possible access to truth. The crucial question is how *Moore's* speech succeeds in making nonfiction appear truthful without actually saying as much. He never explicitly says that nonfiction filmmakers have a greater claim to truth; it even seems that he is carefully avoiding

any such statement. But he does lay something of a trap and actively invites misinterpretation, mainly by accusing the President of lying.

What actually happens when someone calls someone else a liar, as *Moore* did when talking about a »fictitious President«, a president who took office on the basis of fictitious election results? The speaker is asking listeners to recognize a twofold claim: the claim to an authority that can distinguish right and wrong, and the claim not to be lying. *Moore's* speech appeals to reason, courage, and our sense of justice. It conveys the feeling that scheming, deceitful interests and a cowardly, tacit acceptance of their doings has made simple honesty a difficult undertaking. Speaking the truth – one's own truth – *Moore* suggests, is the first step in the healing process we call democracy. Now, accusing a person of lying is a performative speech act that throws doubt on this person's integrity and authority. It is more than a factual diagnosis, and its purpose is not only to expose the lie, but also to deprive the alleged liar of all authority vis-à-vis the speaker. The illocutionary force of an accusation is a revolutionary force. [4]

That is exactly what *Michael Moore* does when he repeats: »Shame on you Mr. Bush. Shame on you.« Daring his all on what is at this stage no more than a fiction, i.e. that the audience will support him, he claims the authority to call the President a liar and to personally call him to book. »Shame« can mean both embarrassment and disgrace, and both are called upon the President. Shaming involves a loss of credibility, even exclusion from the community, and in this speech act »performs« the deposal of the President. The presenters at the TV network *Fox* were quick to understand this, so it is no wonder that *Moore's* words reduced them to a dumbfounded stammer: »I will tell you, when Michael Moore says that this president is an illegitimate president he crosses the line, he crosses the line . . . he crosses the line into anarchy all right.« [5] So it only makes sense when *Moore* closes his brief speech with the words »Your time is up.« This is another bid for authority, though disguised as a constative utterance or logical conclusion: »Any time you have the pope and the dixie-chicks against you – your time is up!« The utterance »Your time is up« however has a declarative force (like the *Declaration of Independence*) and thus functions as a demand. This type of statement is familiar: »The meeting is closed.« How does such a speech act work? In his essay »Grimaces of the Real«, *Slavoj Zizek* asks what a speaker is actually doing when he says these four words. The speaker, he says, creates a

4. . . , even when the accusation is leveled at subordinates and not the persons in charge.

5 Bill O'Reilly, of Fox News Radioshow, quoted in *Michael Moore, Dude, Where's my Country?* (New York: Warner Books, 2003).

6 Slavoj Žižek, *Grimassen des Realen*, 110 – 111; quoting John Searle *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*.

7 *Ibid.*, 111.

fact (the fact that the meeting is closed) by stating that the meeting is closed, i.e. by representing the fact as a *fait accompli*. According to Žižek (quoting John Searle), the speaker consummates an action by describing it as having been consummated. This is called a declarative speech act, an act by which the speaker, if he is successful, changes the world by saying it has changed. [6]

»Mr. Bush . . . your time is up.« If Moore is successful, he will change the world by pretending that it's not his airtime in the format of the Oscar acceptance speech that is drawing to its end, but the President's term in office. If he is successful, he will have achieved his end through a speech act. Žižek cogently argues that when a speaker says »Close the door!« he may be giving an order, but it is up to the addressee to obey and create the new fact (a closed door/the end of the President's term in office). If, on the other hand, the speaker says »The meeting is closed« or »Your time is up«, he really is closing the meeting or ending Bush's presidency. Declarative speech acts, Žižek says, have the magical power to turn their proposition into reality, but, he adds, the price to be paid for this verbal wizardry is repression. You close a meeting by declaring it closed, i.e. by pretending to describe an existing situation. To be effective, the »pure« performative speech act giving rise to its propositional content, paradoxically, has to assume the guise of its opposite, the constative speech act. [7]

With respect to Moore's Oscar acceptance speech, this means that when he says »Your time is up«, he pretends to be describing an existing situation, masking a mode of fiction as nonfiction: »That's the way it is«. Moore's speech illustrates that he has understood a fundamental paradox underlying all existential propositions – today often called »facts« – namely, their unfailing performative dimension.

This is underlined by the way Moore uses humor in presenting his constative statements, e.g. when he names the pope and the *Dixie Chicks* as the spearheads of a grotesque opposition movement, able to unite the entire, heterogeneous audience behind them in an improbable, self-proclaimed army with himself as its dubious leader arising to topple the equally absurd President.

Those who laughed at Moore's last sentence are affected by the joke's communicative mechanism. A joke surreptitiously overcomes the psychical censorship that is subsequently expressed in an energetic discharge, the audience's laughter. As Sigmund Freud described

in »Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious«, an accord has to be noted between the first person telling a joke (about a second one) and the third person who listens to and laughs at it: [*The third person as listener*] should be in sufficient psychical accord with the first person to possess the same internal inhibitions, which the joke-work has overcome in the latter . . . He [the third person] must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself the same inhibition which the first person's joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken. This readiness for inhibition, which I must regard as a real expenditure, analogous to mobilization in military affairs, will at the same moment be recognized as superfluous or too late, and so be discharged *in statu nascendi* by laughter. [8]

So those who laughed at Michael Moore's speech have given themselves away: any »mobilization« readily intended to secure the President's authority as well as their own critical reason and sense of respectability come too late. Censorship was undermined; pleasure was felt.

In his speech Michael Moore demonstrates clearly that the nub of the matter is how to do things with words – publicly, frankly, and obviously. It is this performative dimension that further differentiates the opposition between nonfiction and fiction that we identified in his speech. At no time does Moore explicitly mention any possibility of bringing about nonfictional times, much less better, non-fictional times, a time when fiction has been defeated and what we might call real times dawn. So does that mean that under a new president we can at best expect fictional instead of fictitious times? That is one possible interpretation of Moore's speech, and that is what makes it so clever and subtle. Moore makes no promises, issues no commands, but by highlighting the performative dimension of his statement, by playing with surprising combinations and shifts of meaning, by keeping his balance on the slippery slope of double negation, he activates a suggestive web of links between fictional/nonfictional, fictitious/not fictitious and true/not true, real/not real.

It is not only in his Oscar acceptance speech that Moore comes across as an angry man who is funny in his fury when he makes his one major claim: to be able to tell truth from falsehood. There is nothing inherently funny about what is essentially an assertion of personal

8 Freud, *Jokes*, 151. Originally published as *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*.

maturity. Psychologically, it is the basis of subjectivity and political identity. Philosophically, it is the basis for the rule of law. *Moore's* strategy, however, sacrifices the subject's normality and respectability by presenting the act of telling true from false as the kind of quixotic heroism that today's political and media landscapes let us see in anyone who pursues and consistently stands up for personal judgments. Which promises, commitments, and values a state stands for are ever redeemed? And what if they could not be redeemed at all? What would we lose by that? Perhaps the fiction of national and political discourse itself as the authentic and stable reference value that ties words to their referents – instead, we would recognize this discourse as a fiction, a network of temporary and changing truces in a battle of words and meanings.

Moore stages a discrepancy between critical purpose and the possibilities of communicating and asserting meaning that necessarily spells failure for a performance whose success, paradoxically, relies on it, putting his own person at stake. The standpoint emerging in this spectacular show is that it is impossible not to »lie«, in the broadest sense, which is the only way of revealing truth. This strategy is culturally anchored in the figure of the clown – a paradigm defined by uninhibited subjectivity and terrific hubris, anarchic sentimentality and cruelty, and a childish pleasure in nonsense.

Moore's interpretations are usually founded in dichotomies. If *Moore's* performances are liberating and stirring, that may be because the audience is encouraged to identify *Moore* (or his propositional persona) with the position of truth, while the people he criticizes emerge as liars. Others however will endorse his views mainly because he thoroughly undermines precisely that personified position by clowning around in a pleasurable and subtle word game. By exposing their interpretations and arguments to satire and laughter, he strikes at his adversaries' soft belly. This parodist element in his attack on their claim to truth is probably what triggers the passionate opposition that *Moore* tends to provoke (rather than a reasoned refutation of his statements).

That is why I use the term »fictional figure« for the dichotomy of lies and truth that *Moore* uses as a point of reference in the complex performances that parody this very dichotomy – in this case, by playing on the meanings of nonfiction. Is it, however, an effective and acceptable strategy in what he calls fictitious times to construct

such a fictional figure so as to suggest that he is simply telling the suppressed truth? Is this paradoxical approach an acceptable way of standing up for change? Or, to put it differently, is there an alternative, a way of articulating opposition and disagreement without referencing fictional figures of identification set up against each other in a Manichean system designed to determine where truth lies?

I doubt it. It just depends on how you do it. I introduced *Moore's* acceptance speech to illustrate a strategy worth supporting – a consistent politics of fictional figures in fictitious times. Its strength lies in the creation of a fictional figure (falsehood vs. truth) to anchor the point of view from which statements are made, and in the political technique of claiming authority in the traditional role of the clown, who can redefine meanings and attempt to bring a term in office to an end by simply declaring that it has come to an end. To confirm and at the same time refine this view let me quote *Alexander Kluge*, who says that the most powerful fiction or, in other words, the most strident ideology, is the following: »Die schärfste Ideologie, dass die Realität sich auf ihren realistischen Charakter beruft.« The first lines of his eponymous text read: »Es muss möglich sein, die Realität als die geschichtliche Fiktion, die sie ist, auch darzustellen. Sie hat eine Papiertiger-Natur. Den einzelnen trifft sie real, als Schicksal.« [9] His words also make quite clear that any interpretation of *Michael Moore* as merely operating in the realm of fiction is to be rejected: in *Kluge's* sense, his show would have to be counted as more realistic than what we know as reality itself.

Let me specify the strategy and standpoint emerging in *Moore's* acceptance speech by contrasting it with an example from the number of current artistic and journalistic *Bush-bashing* works that also center on the dichotomy between truth and lies. Best-selling books like »The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception« by *David Corn* and »Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them)« by *Al Franken* [10] prove that the name *George W. Bush* is being established in *U.S.* culture as a synonym for liar.

I should like to discuss more closely a thirty-second political ad made for television. The clip »Polygraph« by *New-York-based* directors *Adam Feinstein* and *Rich Garella* was one of the winning entries in a competition held by »MoveOn« in 2004. »MoveOn« is a *U.S.* voters' initiative that called for TV clips intended to help prevent the re-

9 *Böhm-Christl, Alexander Kluge*, 291: »The most strident ideology, that reality refers to its own realism.« The quotation continues: »It must be possible to show reality as the historical fiction that it is. Reality is a paper tiger; but it hits individuals with real force, as fate« (my translation).

10 A lawsuit filed against *Al Franken* by *Rupert Murdoch's* media empire *Fox* in 2003 focused on his book title »Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them)«: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right. *Franken* was parodying *Fox's* official trademark slogan, »Fair and Balanced«. The reason for the lawsuit was given as the unauthorized use of the words in a way that may devalue them. This verbal battle was a vain attempt to define legally who is lying and who is not. *Fox* lost the suit. See *Suzanne Goldenberg*, »Fair, Balanced and Furious«, *The Guardian*, Aug. 14, 2003.

11 »The Voter Fund's mission is to create and run powerful political ads in swing states to challenge President Bush's policies and his administration.« <http://www.MoveOn.org>.

election of *George W. Bush*. The airtime for these TV clips is financed through fundraising, and they are broadcast in those states where forecasts suggest they may have a decisive influence on the political majorities. [11]

The clip shows a polygraph reacting with violent deflections accentuated by a high-pitched whistling noise to statements made by *George W. Bush*: »Saddam Hussein had an advanced nuclear weapons development program. Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa. Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of Al Qaeda.« To throw doubt on the statements made, the clip relies on the presupposition that when a polygraph whistles and traces violent, irregular curves of black ink on white paper, it has caught someone lying, or, to be more precise, deliberately telling falsehoods and attempting to deceive. One of the next shots in the clip zooms in on an eyeball reflecting the negative of the polygraph's deflections, i.e. a white line against a dark background. This marks the transition to the final shots, which show a regular, »honest« polygraph curve against a black background. The text »Americans are dying« fades in, and the next shot continues, »for the truth«. The clip visualizes a play on the lexical meanings of »die« and »die for«. If the first part of the text suggests that Americans are laying down their lives, its sequel in the next shot adds a dimension, so it can either mean that Americans are dying for the truth or that they urgently desire to know the truth. The brief delay takes the faded metaphor in »to die for« to its literal root and references death before the telling sequel brings us back to the metaphorical level.

So at first we are given to understand that the *Bush* administration's lies and deceptions sent American soldiers to war in *Iraq*, where they are fighting and dying for faked reasons, and that they are still being lied to and abused. Underlying this image is the polygraph's flat, now white-on-black line – the matrix against which we see the President's lies. Reflected in the close-up of an eye, the white line can only stand for honest Americans and soldiers. They didn't have a chance of interpreting the polygraph's violent deflections; no whistling noise warns them of danger as spidery lines shiver across the wide, unblinking eye. The clip suggests that in the eyes of *U.S.* citizens, the President's lies are accurate statements which they trust and believe. Their desire for truth is honest. They are dying for the truth because they are not allowed to see or interpret the clues revealing the lies.

The play on lexical meaning here has a different purpose than when *Michael Moore* examines the complex meaning of truth and falsehood. Instead of holding an overdetermined dichotomy of true and false up to the light, »Polygraph« uses visualization and symbolism to establish such a dichotomy as a definite truth. There is no critical examination of this position through parody, literary theory, or psychoanalysis. Of course the two examples discussed here do not really have a shared basis of comparison – one records a speech in conventional TV style, the other was deliberately made with the audiovisual means of film – it is only the essentialist realism behind the idea that a polygraph is the right tool for finding and visualizing truth that is convincingly adopted into the clip.

For all the »Polygraph« clip's formal complexity, the naivety of its message emerges as the words »for the truth« fade in at the clip's dramatic climax. It would be more consistent to say »*American soldiers are dying for what they believed was the truth*«, or »for the 'truth'« with the alleged truth in quotation marks. Such a reception is, of course, encouraged by the reference to the assertion that Iraq owns weapons of mass destruction. The clip suggests to viewers that, though the word »truth« has lost its validity in the context of the President's statements, it is in itself unproblematic. For the word »dying«, as contrasted to the twisted »truth«, fully retains its true reference; it can even be seen as a guarantee of truth. The finality of death defies all lies, nor were the American citizens dishonest when they believed in their President's lies. The clip sets up a clear, personified opposition between truth (as a quality of the American people, in particular the casualties of war) and lie (as a label for *George W. Bush*).

Now, I was interested in the way *Michael Moore* attempts to give truth a chance, in contrast to the »Polygraph« clip, which claims truth for itself. The difference between *Moore's* speech and the clip by *Adam Feinstein* and *Rich Garella* lies in their positions vis-à-vis fiction. While *Moore* very obviously constructs a fictional figure – the ability to recognize truth and distinguish fiction from nonfiction – the »Polygraph« clip deliberately avoids any such transparency. The clip would seem to suggest that lies are fictional and truth is nonfictional. I would like to think that the concept of realism underlying *Moore's* strategy holds more truth. This concept says that the dominant reality is fictitious and realistic behavior only emerges



through the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in any fundamental resistance, which critically examines the basic categories we all take for granted, showing that they are by no means as stable as we thought. The »Polygraph« clip claims the ability to tell and visualize the plain truth – and therefore misses it.

How *Moore* establishes his position on this crucial political and aesthetic question is illustrated in an interview that his opponents like to present as evidence for his ruthless dishonesty. In an interview on *CNN*, *Lou Dobbs* confronts *Moore* with inaccuracies in his books. Let's have a look at *Moore's* responses:

Dobbs: Why didn't you call it »Stupid Black Men«, or stupid whatever?

Moore: Well, you know what they teach you back in school. It's always best to write about what you know. You know? (*Laughter*) (...)

Dobbs: I was amazed. [They] just took you to task on this book, pointing out glaring inaccuracies, which – what in the world...

Moore: Some of these, I think they found some guy named *Dan* was named *Dave*, and there was another thing. But you know, look, this is a book of political humor. So, I mean, I don't respond to that sort of stuff, you know.

Dobbs: Glaring inaccuracies?

Moore: No, I don't. Why should I? How can there be inaccuracy in comedy? You know. (...)

Dobbs: Filled with glaring inaccuracies.

Moore: Filled with glaring, comedic inaccuracies. And actually written by sweatshop workers in Honduras. Has that been pointed out yet? I think we might as well reveal all right now. [12]

So all has been revealed, and it only remains to suggest a reference to the concept of information. *Moore* shows information as necessarily language-based in the dimension of fictional figures. Although *Rich Garella* and *Adam Feinstein* refer to death in a metaphor, they act as though truth and falsehood were as visible and tangible as death itself, outside of language. I don't think that's right. *Moore's* strategy, in contrast, raises interesting points for an epistemological discussion of fiction and simulation. Truth, after all, is a word, which can be represented by »Honduran sweatshop workers« or »comedy« or a new invention: »fiction«.

12 *CNN Transcripts*, *Lou Dobbs Moneyline*, aired April 12, 2002, 18:00 ET, <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0204/12/mlld.00.html>.



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Illustrations

Series 01: Stills from Michael Moore's Oscar Acceptance Speech 2003, 75th Annual Academy Awards, http://www.oscars.com/oscar/night/winners/win_32297.html

Series 02: Stills from *Polygraph* by Adam Feinstein and Rich Garella, 2004, *MoveOn*, <http://www.MoveOn.org>

Translation: Sabine Melchert; Copy-editing: Tradukas GbR