

Activism against Donald Trump: Ken Burns and Michael Moore in the trench of the American documentary

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Abstract: Understanding the documentary as a tool that acquires an active role in the construction of political identities, shaping the history of communities, the goal is to analyze documentaries of two American filmmakers –Michael Moore and Ken Burns– and the relation Donald Trump’s candidacy and presidential management. By means of a qualitative interpretive methodology, it is discovered that the directors and their respective documentaries –*Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018) and *The Central Park Five* (2012)–, participate in the current national debate. Concurring in a context they find dangerous and urgent, despite their profound differences and stark contrasts. It is concluded that in the United States, for nine decades, the documentary remains a necessary tool for dissent, opening discussions on issues that are considered of national relevance.

Key words: documentary, political reshape, Donald Trump, dissent, national debate.

Resumen: Al entender al documental como una herramienta que adquiere un papel activo en la construcción de identidades políticas y en la conformación de la historia de las comunidades, el objetivo del texto es analizar los documentales de dos cineastas estadounidenses –Michael Moore y Ken Burns– en relación con la candidatura y gestión presidencial de Donald Trump. A través de una metodología cualitativa de corte interpretativo, se descubre que los directores y sus respectivos documentales –*Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018) y *The Central Park Five* (2012)– abonan y participan en el debate nacional actual, coincidiendo en un contexto que consideran peligroso y urgente, a pesar de sus profundas diferencias y matices. Se concluye que en Estados Unidos, como desde hace nueve décadas, el documental sigue siendo una herramienta necesaria de la disidencia para abrir discusiones sobre temas que se consideran de relevancia nacional.

Palabras clave: documental, reconfiguración política, Donald Trump, disenso, debate nacional.

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Introduction

The main purpose of this text is to analyze Michael Moore's documentary films, *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018) and *The Central Park Five* (2012) by Ken Burns, in the framework of political opposition to Donald Trump both as candidate and president of the United States. First of all it is considered relevant to analyze the production of documentaries as a useful tool in contexts of political debate. Secondly, as a form of expression that acquires an active role in the construction of political identities and in the configuration of the history of communities. Finally, it is expected to contribute to the analysis of North America as seen from the documentary.

Entrepreneur Donald J. Trump won the presidential election of the United States in November of 2016, to the surprise of the Democratic Party, national and international press, academy specializing in political science and a combination of characters that came from different fields and affirmed the impossibility of that success. The electoral results immediately impacted domestic politics, international politics and economic relations on North America and the rest of the world, but also in different fields of culture and american society.

Dissatisfaction quickly spread among various sectors of the U.S. population. One of the largest and most immediate expressions, Women's March, took place in Washington D. C., one day after Donald Trump's inauguration. Nowadays, students and activists have mobilized in most major U.S. cities to chant "Not my president" to express both their discontent and their support for minorities who have been attacked by this presidential figurehead. Expressions as the *Occupy Movement* o *Black Lives Matter* has summed to the cause. However, there have also been signs of discontent and activism from other trenches, one of them being the production of documentary films.

The documentary is a film genre with a long and diverse history. It has been considered (Dittus, 2012) as a discursive practice that aims to make direct statements about the world; that proposes models of reality from the particular vision of the filmmaker, while seeking a plausible relationship with the environment. From the first expressions of more than a century ago to contemporary production, a continuum can be traced by the presence of a transformative intention (Sierra and Montero, 2015: 11-20).¹ This

1 This does not mean that all documentary production shares the spirit of transformation, but it does mean that this spirit has been present in different stages and historical moments.

characteristic, relevant to the subject at hand, has been attributed mainly to political documentaries. It is considered as such (Dittus, 2012: 40) when it is positioned in front of a power dispute where ways of organizing society, building identity, projecting national states, etc. are defined. And in this positioning, it seeks to promote support, responsibility, congregation or even distancing. Through these denominators, with particular combinations and nuances defined by different contexts and motivations, a good part of documentary production has constructed critical positions in relation to the different hegemonic groups over time. In the United States, the production of this cinema is particularly emblematic, as it has built a genealogy of almost nine decades.

Since there is a relationship between documentary work and the context in which it is produced (Ferro, 2008), it was considered relevant to analyze the documentaries *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018) and *The Central Park Five* (2012). The first two with significant activity in the recent U.S. electoral contexts, while the third has been activated in recent months to warn about Donald Trump's racism towards the Afro-descendant community. Although the directors of the documentaries do not share the same political stances and have radically different creative styles, they do converge in questioning the policies and positions of the President of the United States. These examples are relevant because they show the relationship between a moment of political tension and the use of documentaries as a tool to influence the environment.

The paths taken in the analysis of American documentary films

The political dimension of the U.S. documentary has prompted a wide-ranging body of research. For the purposes of this text, two approaches should be highlighted. One is concerned with exploring the possibilities of audiovisual discourses to influence the public sphere and community building (Geiger, 2011). The other concludes that in the United States the documentary has become a place to discuss social policy, from the struggle for freedom and civil rights, to the role of government (Kahana, 2008). Both are important because of the type of relationship that documentary filmmakers and their productions establish with a given context.

Both Michael Moore's work and that of Ken Burns have given rise to numerous reflections. Regarding the former, the effectiveness (Dittus, 2012) of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), comedy as a rhetorical function in that same documentary (Fleischmann, 2007), the different aspects of the

rhetorical device he establishes in his documentaries (Benson and Snee, 2015), the paradox of his success and wide consumption (Granados, 2006) have been analyzed. There are, for example, analyses of the representation of the Canada-United States border (Martínez-Zalce, 2005). It has even been questioned about the relationship it establishes with the truth and the practical incidence it has in the political sphere (Ricciardelli, 2014).

Regarding Ken Burns, works can be found that focus on his influences as an author and the aspects that have guaranteed his television success (Edgerton, 2001). Critical reviews analyze his multi-award winning series *The Civil War* (1990). It is pointed out that it has not incorporated the roles of minorities, women and the Afro-descendant community (Brent Toplin, 1996). More recent texts characterize him as a documentary filmmaker who tends to generate consensus in the portrayal of American culture and history, but who in such an exercise suppresses cultural diversity (Ricciardelli, 2015). Although the last point is questionable, its importance lies in the fact that it provides an opportunity to construct new reflections, derived from the contrast of the findings of the analysis of *The Central Park Five* (2012). President Donald Trump's administration has been analyzed from tariff policy (Lovely and Liang, 2018), to the perception of the United States—under his tenure—internationally (Dixon and Skidmore, 2018). Based on interviews with close sources, there has been talk of the chaos and incompetence that reigns in the White House, the habits he has in relation to Fox News and Twitter, the opinion of those close to him and the disbelief upon reaching the presidency (Wolff, 2018). Still others bring together a set of essays that examine the Trump administration from three major perspectives: the political, the economic, and the cultural (Núñez, 2018). Particularly relevant for the present text is the analysis of the critical representation of him in one of the chapters of *The Simpsons*, showing him as an unlettered, despotic, unethical, vain and empty person, because it reflects the actions from other trenches and his attempt to confront American society (Martínez-Zalce, 2018).

Although the American documentary tradition is almost ninety years old, it is possible to affirm that despite the great amount of research that has been developed (MacDonald, 2013; Geiger, 2011; Kahana, 2008; Leuthold, 2001; Lerner, 1992; Bleum, 1971), much remains to be done. It is necessary to investigate the coincidences or distancing between documentary filmmakers that take place in the political arena. Above all, it is still necessary to identify the characteristics of the active role that the different styles and positions in the documentary world acquire in the national debate. It is therefore

necessary to discern what these expressions consist of and their importance in the context of the political crisis facing the United States today.

Anchoring the looks of Michael Moore and Ken Burns

Despite not being a filmmaker by training, Michael Moore has directed a number of documentaries² and has accumulated a significant body of awards³ that have translated into a vast and robust international recognition. In the world of filmmaking, he is credited with having demonstrated the enormous potential of the documentary genre in terms of economic revenue and entertainment (Plantinga, 2014: 9).

Most of the reflections generated by his work recognize the scope and influence of his work. However, there is no shortage of criticism of his films, his political stances and his person. Ricciardelli (2015: 106-124), for example, criticizes him for having accumulated a fortune making documentaries that oppose the capitalist economic model, which is interpreted as a contradiction. Among other things because Michael Moore identifies in them with the working class. He even doubts and questions the veracity of his arguments. Nor does he seem to like it when he has made his sources available to the public, pointing to a compulsion to validate his documentaries. He reproaches him for elaborating representations of otherness without giving it a voice. He also claims that he uses his documentaries to benefit himself as a political leader.

But it is also undeniable that his films have upset many people (Plantinga, 2014; Nichols, 2013; Oberacker, 2009). These have been characterized mainly by criticizing U.S. governments and their neoliberal policies. Despite this, their films have a global reach, because distributors find it more profitable in the long run to disseminate their work than to censor it (Kahana, 2008).⁴

2 *Roger & Me* (1989), *Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint* (1992), *Canadian Bacon* (1995), *The Big One* (1997), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Sicko* (2007), *Slacker Uprising* (2008), *Capitalismo: Una historia de amor* (2009), *¿Qué invadimos ahora?* (2015), *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018).

3 In 2002 he won the Oscar and César awards for *Bowling for Columbine* (2002); in 2004 he won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004); in 2007 he was nominated for another Oscar for *Sicko* (2007). He has won the Critics' Choice Award for Best Feature Film in 2002 for *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), in 2004 for *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and in 2007 for *Sicko* (2007), among other distinctions.

4 That is not to say that his work has been without attempts at censorship. In fact, there have been times when his own safety has been at risk and he has had to be guarded by security

However, his documentaries tend to become topics of discussion that actively add to the American political debate (Kahana, 2008). They are used to express dissatisfaction with political elites and their decisions. It is also true that with enormous effectiveness he always positions himself as a citizen of Flint, Michigan. Under these coordinates, he not only anchors his commitment to a community hit by a declining economy, but also tells us what his identity is and from where he sees the world. It should be remembered that he not only directs his documentaries, but is a character in them (Plantinga, 2014; Oberacker, 2009; Nichols, 2013), either as an interviewer or by setting up situations where he puts his adversaries in a bind (Kahana, 2008; Oberacker, 2009).

In contemporary U.S. politics, he has been recognized for being among the few to warn about the chances of Donald Trump becoming president of the United States in the 2016 election (Wulfsohn, 2020)

The titles to be reviewed are *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2017) and *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018), whose intention was –in both cases– to impact the electorate that would vote for Donald Trump in 2016 and 2018, respectively.

For his part, Ken Burns is the son of a university professor and studied for a degree in Design and Film Studies. After graduating, he founded the production company Florentine Films and began his career as a creator of documentaries on American history and culture. Most of his work has been produced and distributed by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). His first success is credited to the documentary series *The Civil War* (1990), which was shown on U.S. prime time television. The great reception among the public surpassed all estimates (Edgerton, 2001). He relied exclusively on still photographs that he had accumulated over several years of research –in public and private archives– and nourished them with accounts, testimonies, speeches, news, memories, etc., of the time (Ricciardelli, 2015: 80-81).

This audiovisual construction strategy with the research work that underpins the respective stories, has become its hallmark. Today it has about 29 documentaries or documentary series about the history and culture of

agents because of his positions and statements. For example, in 2003, after his speech regarding the Iraq War, upon receiving the Oscar award for Best Documentary, he said: “I have invited my fellow nominees to come on stage with us. They are here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction, even though we live in fictional times. We live in a time when we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time when we have a man who sends us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it is the fiction of duct tape or the fiction of orange alerts: we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you! Shame on you! And very soon you will have the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is running out! Thank you very much” (Moore, 2013: 19).

the United States.⁵ He has been widely recognized. He has won the Emmy Award three times, but has been nominated in fifteen broadcasts. Although in most of his career he has kept his political position outside of professional activity (Collins, 2016), both his work and some statements reveal certain characteristics of it. In interviews he has argued that History is a fundamental tool to have perspective and proceed through rational thinking (Stern, 2017). His main criticism of the media today is that they lack a historical point of view, which causes confusion and little clarity in the facts they report (Stern, 2017). A recurring concern in his documentaries is the issue of the historical and persistent racial discrimination against the Afro-descendant community in the United States. In relation to this issue he has pointed out that racial tensions in the country are deep. He believes that the idea that the United States is living in a post-racial era because it has had a president of African descent is misleading (Stern, 2017).

In documentary theory he has been characterized as a conservative filmmaker (Nichols, 2013). However, when the possibility of Donald Trump becoming president opened up, Ken Burns felt it was time to take an explicit and politically active position (Collins, 2016). He has stated that Trump represents a threat in many ways (Stern, 2017), not only because he puts democracy at stake, but because there is a danger that historical evils such as racial intolerance will surface. Burns also opines that the role this character has acquired in U.S. politics reflects a backwardness that denigrates the country's history (Ferner, 2016). It is inadmissible for him to insult veterans, denigrate women, immigrants and Muslims (Ferner, 2016). Simply put, from his perspective, he is not someone qualified to be president (Collins, 2016).

In the documentary *The Central Park Five* (2012), Burns tells the story of the five young men of African descent who were racially charged without evidence with beating and sexually assaulting a white woman in 1989 in New York. It should be noted that the businessman played an active role in the media and social lynching of these young people. And although it is

5 *Brooklyn Bridge* (1981), *The Shakers* (1984), *The Statue of Liberty* (1985), *Huey Long* (1985), *Thomas Hart Benton* (1988), *The Congress* (1989), *The Civil War* (1990), *Empire of the Air* (1991), *Baseball* (1994), *The West* (1996), *Thomas Jefferson* (1997), *Lewis & Clark* (1997), *Frank Lloyd Wright* (1988), *The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* (1999), *Jazz* (2001), *Mark Twain* (2002), *Horatio's Drive* (2003), *Unforgivable Blackness* (2005), *The National Parks* (2009), *Baseball, The Tenth Inning* (2010), *Prohibition* (2011), *The Dust Bowl* (2012), *The Central Park Five* (2013), *The Address* (2014), *The Roosevelts* (2014), *Jackie Robinson* (2016), *The Vietnam War* (2017), *The Mayo Clinic* (2018), *Country Music* (2019).

a documentary that was not intended for electoral purposes, since 2016 it has been used by both the director and other media as a tool to highlight Trump's racial stance.

As can be seen, the two cases present radically different characteristics. While both filmmakers enjoy wide recognition, Moore's is primarily in film festivals and theaters, while Burns' is in the realm of public television. The first became a filmmaker out of a political motivation related to an economic problem that was facing the community where he grew up, and the latter out of a purely academic interest. Hence, in the political sphere, their ways of proceeding also differ. Moore explicitly combines his profession with his political stance. Burns, on the other hand, tries to maintain a sober link between these two areas. The first aims to influence the public debate on contemporary politics. The second, in the collective memory, through the construction of American history and culture.

The interesting thing is that film materials were selected that although they differ radically in motivation, style and temporality, converge in the same space-time as media tools to raise public awareness about the dangers posed to the population, history and culture of the United States by the same character: Donald Trump, the current president of that country.

Strategy for understanding the U.S. documentary in the Trump era

To understand the role that these documentaries are playing in the contemporary political debate in the United States surrounding Donald Trump, it is necessary to establish a set of general approaches. The first refers to the inescapable relationship between the documentary and the historical world (Nichols, 1997; Ferro, 1980). In addition to portraying and bringing us closer to specific events –in our case the tensions of the 2016 US electoral context and the subsequent questioning of the positions and actions of the US tycoon–, the documentaries reflect the gaze, concerns and worries that took place in certain spatio-temporal coordinates. That is, the reactions and/or motivations of Moore, Burns and the communities to which they belong.

The second approach emphasizes the dialogue that is established between the filmmaker and the audience (Nichols, 1997) about one or more issues that concern them both, such as the capabilities, qualities and performance of the U.S. Executive. Such interlocation is usually built through an implicit agreement. The director commits to expose information in an ethical and reliable manner, while the audience will give credibility to the facts and arguments narrated, due to the professional legitimacy held

by each filmmaker and their trajectory (Plantinga, 2014). This device tends to acquire particular importance in places such as the United States, where historically there has been a strong control of the media and the information disseminated by hegemonic groups.

The third is based on the work of Jonathan Kahana (2008), who suggests that in the United States the documentary has become a form of political culture. On the basis that it has a critical potential that is inseparable from its analytical function, he points out that it is at the same time a form of democracy and social pedagogy. Through research and argumentation, these films put under the spotlight aspects and events that shape American history and public life. Kahana (2008) states that in the United States, aspects such as the struggle for civil rights, government performance and the power of the mass media are discussed and take place in documentary films, opening and nurturing a kind of national debate. This happens because the audiovisual device collects evidence of experience and delivers it to the public sphere, where it lends political force to social movements and feeds the social imaginary with data and graphic representations (Kahana, 2008).

For Kahana (2008), the use of documentaries by activists, intellectuals, members of social organizations, government agencies or community groups allows for a reconfiguration of political discourse. But it also weakens the traditional oppositions between popular and official discourse, between the idea of art and mass culture, as well as between academic knowledge and common sense. It functions as an articulator of the social imaginary and its multiple levels. This position is important because it helps to situate the dialogue between the filmmaker and the audience in the political arena. It also contemplates the link between different social actors and the documentary, as part of the impact and incidence it achieves in social reconfiguration. This invites us to pay attention to the way in which the documentaries and filmmakers that make up the corpus have related to the environment.

Finally, it is necessary to contextualize each of these documentaries and filmmakers in the long genealogy of American documentary production. Following Barnouw's (2011) review of the political documentary in this country, it can be said that its trajectory consists of nine decades. It began with the economic crisis of 1929, in reaction to the effects of the Great Depression and a context of strong information control. In New York City, the League of Motion Picture and Photographic Workers was created to portray events such as closings of establishments, irregular settlements due to poverty, strikes, etc., which they later broadcast in screenings open to the public.

With this background, in the late 1930s, the cooperative Frontier Films was also formed, which devoted itself to making political documentaries in an attempt to realistically portray the problems faced in the United States - racism, poverty, unemployment - and in other parts of the world.⁶ In the 1950s, despite the anti-communist persecution led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, there were also some documentaries that attempted to record labor conflicts⁷. In the following two decades there was an enormous preoccupation among documentary filmmakers to construct different views of the Vietnam War than the official⁸ ones. In the 1980s, documentary filmmakers put the spotlight on armed conflicts in Central and South America.⁹

This is the context that precedes Michael Moore's work. At the end of the 1980s, his first documentary *Roger and Me* (1989) was released, which arrived in theaters with low expectations, as it strongly criticizes General Motors for the economic damage it caused in Flint, Michigan, by closing one of its car assembly plants; but it was a huge surprise due to the success it had among the public. At the time, it was even rated as the documentary that had raised the most money.

The 1980s was a very fruitful decade in the field of American documentaries. During the same period, historical documentaries emerged, perhaps with less political aspirations to have an immediate impact, but with the clear objective of contributing to the history and culture of the United States. Because of the characteristics of Ken Burns' work, it should be emphasized that this type of film began to be made using film materials that had been produced by the government several years earlier. As time went by, they became less important for political regimes and became accessible materials. In addition, their use did not generate any cost, thus facilitating their production.

Within this type of documentary, Barnouw (2011: 283-287) locates a set of slopes that he attributes to the American documentary. Each one

6 For example, the New York cooperative Frontier Films dealt with the Spanish Civil War with *Heart of Spain* (1937) and the Japan-China conflict with *China Strikes Back* (1937).

7 Like the one produced by the Chicano community: *Salt of The Earth* (1953), by Jacobo Biberman, which was banned in the United States.

8 For example: *Vietnam in the year of the pig* (1968) by Emile Antonio, *Hearts and Minds* (1974) by Peter Davis and *Winter Soldiers* (1971) of anonymous authorship.

9 For example: *El Salvador: Another Vietnam* (1981) by Glen Silver and T. T. Vasconcellos, *From the Ashes: Nicaragua Today* (1981) by Hellen Sollberg, *Cuando las montañas tiemblan* (1983) by Pamela Yates, Tom Sigel and Peter Kinoy.

with a different narrative strategy. The first ones were a sort of compilation of film materials, whose common thread was the voice of a single narrator, who played an omniscient role. The later ones mixed historical footage with contemporary accounts from people who were part of the events. Another path was film biography. In one style or another, these types of works documented various social struggles and passages in U.S. history – the role of women in union conflicts¹⁰ or in the arms industry¹¹ and the recognition of the dignity of the Afro-descendant– population.¹²

The last aspect of the historical documentary refers explicitly to Ken Burns' *The Civil War* (1990), whom Barnouw (2011: 292) considers paradigmatic in this subgenre. It refers to documentaries made mainly for television, many of them in several chapters that are based on serious research work, nourished with various testimonial and archival sources. Sound and music play a preponderant role in the narration. There is also an exercise of including different versions of the events being narrated. Since then, Burns has come a long way, nurturing not only American history and culture, but also contributing to the production of documentary films.

To close this section, it is important to point out that both the approaches and the brief historical contextualization are fundamental in the interpretation of the corpus. Based on the first ones, an interpretative qualitative methodology was implemented, which allowed contextualizing the directors and their films in the Trumpist scenario, as well as analyzing the content of each one of them (Giroux and Tremblay, 2011). This approach emphasizes both the elements that make up the corpus pieces and the people who underwrite the films. The reviewed coordinates of the genealogy of the American documentary show that Kahana's (2008) approaches have support and validity both at present and in previous decades. That is to say, regardless of the styles of one or another filmmaker, documentaries constitute a form of political culture that has a historical trajectory.

10 *Union Maids* (1976) by Julia Reichert, James Klein and Miles Mogulescu, and *With Babies and Banners* (1977) by Lorraine Gray, Lynn Goldfar and Anne Bohlen.

11 *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980) by Connie Field.

12 *Men of Bronze* (1977) by William Milles and *Miles of Smiles* (1983) by Jack Santino and Paul Wagner.

Michel Moore and his criticism of Donald Trump

Michael Moore in Trumpland (2016)

Michael Moore's activism against Donald Trump began in 2016, a few weeks before the U.S. presidential election took place. Concerned about what he saw as the candidate's imminent triumph, he decided to intervene. He staged a number to show audiences in conservative cities the negatives of voting for Trump and the many positives there were in voting for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Thereafter this exercise would be made into a film, which is the record of one of the performances in Wilmington, Ohio.

Dressed as usual: sweatshirt, jeans, tennis shoes and a San Francisco football cap, his general strategy was to seek out meeting points with the public. The expertise consisted in identifying the diversity of the attendees and building bridges of affinity with each of them: Republicans, Democrats, women, young people, Mexicans, Muslims, etc. To soften the tense countenances of the Republican audience, he began to describe and praise attributes that usually characterize them, while mocking the annoying and relaxed relativity that is conducive to the flexible judgment of the Democratic crowd. In relation to the Mexican and Muslim public, he began by asking his assistants to put a wall around the former, while he asked the latter to have a drone with a camera fly over their heads. "Just to keep an eye on them," Moore commented. Amidst nervous laughter from the audience he calmly stated: "Don't worry, everything is fine, it's just to make the rest of the people feel comfortable". The situation was effective because it questioned the rationality of the measures enunciated by Trump.

Moore established a connection with the young people characterized as millennials, accepting that the generations before them have ruined the world for them. He stated that they do not worry him because they do not hate people because of the color of their skin or their sexual preference. Noting that the world has been ruled by men and that everything has gone wrong, he reached out to women. He acknowledged that the independence they have achieved scares the patriarchal world a lot. To both sectors he tried to warn them that there would be a setback in the aforementioned areas if Trump became president. He did not omit to characterize him as a misogynist, nor to mention the fact that he had servants all his life. While accepting that Democrats are no longer an option, he implored the public not to use voting for Trump as anger therapy.

Regardless of how many people attended to witness this monologue, what is certain is that Donald Trump won the election and became the president of the United States. Only a few people were able to calculate his imminent triumph. Surprisingly, many of Michael Moore's warnings –that made the public laugh at the absurdity– are now part of everyday life.

In terms of audiovisual language, we can say that like most of his documentaries (Nichols, 2013), in this one he is also a main character and speaks to the public from his personal position, from his political stance and from what he considers is best for the population. However, it distances itself from the expository strategy used in the rest of his works. Here his persona carries considerably more significance. Except for the introductory minutes, the entire documentary takes place inside an auditorium, where he and the dialogue established by the audience's facial reactions –provoked by Moore's comments– are the only characters. That is, this time there is no archival footage, no interviews, just as there are no ambushes, because the audience – although Republican and conservative– knew they were going to the theater to sit for a couple of hours to listen to Michael Moore.

In terms of the documentary modes noted by Nichols (2013), *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016) stands primarily in the participatory mode. This is because its structure is built based on the interaction or dialogue that is established between the director and the subjects of the historical world – the audience that attends the theater to see Michael Moore–. For Nichols (2013), the value of such a strategy lies in the fact that the characteristics of this encounter show a concrete fragment of the world. In the case at hand: tense, serious, blushing, relieved, nervous or smiling faces are used to show what is going on among voters in the 2016 presidential election. But also being able to observe the director responding and interacting in the same spatio-temporal coordinates as the subjects gives him the opportunity to act as “mentor, critic, interrogator, collaborator or provocateur” (Nichols, 2013: 211).

Fahrenheit 11/9 (2018)

The title alludes to the date on which the U.S. primary election was held in November 2018. The importance of this electoral exercise was that the results usually set the tone for what will happen in the next presidential election; in this case the 2020 election, that is, whether Donald Trump will be in charge of a second term or not. The objective was to provide voters with tools to exercise a critical vote.

Moore makes a strong criticism of Donald Trump and shows a set of statements by the president of the United States; some are intelligible, others violent, but there are also racist and misogynistic ones. Such statements show how this character is constantly out of place: he gives orders to the media and fights with them; insults or disqualifications are common in every debate he sets up; he has not stopped campaigning and has suggested lengthening the presidential term; he called for the death penalty for five young Afro-descendants, accused without evidence of beating and sexually assaulting a white woman in Central Park; he wants to build a wall on the border with Mexico, etc.

Aiming to shake the viewer, *Fahrenheit 11/9* brings together photographs and statements by Trump about his daughter Ivanka. The documentary points out that one of his main problems is that he has always committed the crimes in broad daylight, suggesting that he is unable to discern between right and wrong.

However, he blames the Democratic presidencies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama for Trump's triumph, for distancing themselves from the population and becoming incapable of identifying their main needs, as they minimized movements such as Occupy Wall Street. The democratic system is not spared either. For Moore, there is no real democracy when an election does not award office to the person who obtained the highest number of votes; the same happens when half of the population cannot vote.

Disenchanted with everything, Moore decides to put the spotlight on Bernie Sanders and the congressional candidacies, represented by people from minorities, women of Muslim or Latino origin, but also on those young people who were the authors of the mass mobilizations against guns.¹³ Moore believes that the real change is in these generations: they are pro-sexual diversity and pro-abortion, they are committed to climate change, gun regulation, etc. In short, Moore tries to show that the system is beyond salvation, while pointing out in whom he places the hope for change.

True to his audiovisual style, Michael Moore's first-person voice not only guides our understanding of events, but he himself is one of the main characters. The self-referentiality is such that he includes in the edition a fragment of a television newscast that mentions his correct prediction of the electoral outcome, exposes the characteristics of the chance encounters he had with Trump and members of his family years ago, in addition to linking the president's equivocations with specific issues facing his

13 In a single day, more than 700 demonstrations were held in cities across the United States, most of them massive.

community –Flint, Michigan–. From that personal stance he rejects and disapproves of the president, but supports his position with information (Nichols, 2013) and value chains (Dittus, 2012); for example, it is not right to sexually desire your daughter, to discriminate, to assume women as sexual objects, to dismiss climate change, and so on.

In terms of the modalities proposed by Nichols (2013), this documentary combines the expository mode with the participatory mode¹⁴. Based on the former, it congregates moments in world historical –U.S. history under the presidency of Donald Trump– and informs us about them. The robust amount of information presented to us –data, figures, statements, testimonies, archival material– aims to build a perception of seriousness and credibility. It functions as evidence that legitimizes Michael Moore’s point of view and allows him to make judgments about the social actors that shape the environment. The participatory mode carries less weight; however, it is also present. To show concerns and worries during this presidential term, he appears on frame conducting interviews or having conversations with a broad and diverse set of social subjects –from a fireman to Bernie Sanders–. But he also interpellates unsuspecting Trump supporters by positioning himself at the entrance of Trump Tower.

Michael Moore’s role as an active member of American politics did not end with the release of his documentaries. His stance has remained dynamic. Through his official website¹⁵ he has made explicit his positions on U.S. policy and has made known his proposals to confront the Trumpist regime. In it you can read a public letter addressed to Ivanka Trump –“Your Dad’s Not Well”–. On behalf of the nation and the world he asks for her intervention to remove his father from politics, arguing that he is clinically insane and needs professional help. In another letter –“Trump is Not The Only Grabber Who Must Go”– he addresses the American people to note that everything the president embodies is the result of Republican culture. Meanwhile, the Need to Impeach initiative, a petition already endorsed by more than eight million Americans, has been published, calling for the president’s impeachment. Moore invites his followers to sign it and spread it. Similar actions are being undertaken from his Facebook and Twitter accounts. Nor has he abandoned exercises such as *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2016). As part

14 Modalities –or voices– are rarely found homogeneously. What is common is for the same documentary to use more than one narrative strategy (Nichols, 2013; Plantinga, 2014).

15 www.michaelmoore.com

of the actions he proposed to confront the government of Donald Trump¹⁶, he again mounted a show, this time called *The Terms Of My Surrender*. These activities are relevant, because from the perspective of Nichols (2013) the participatory modality also includes the documentary audience as part of the interaction and states that the involvement that occurs through different platforms is also part of this dynamic.

Ken Burns and his criticism of Donald Trump

The Central Park Five (2012)

The premieres of Ken Burns' work have no necessary linkage to what is happening in U.S. politics. It is no coincidence that in 2012 –more than twenty years after five young men of African descent were framed for a crime committed in Central Park– his documentary about these events was released. *The Central Park Five* (2012) reconstructs the story from the perspective of these social actors. With period music, testimonies of those affected and their families, photographs, newspaper data, television news archives, film archives of the trials and interrogations in police offices, it shows the failure of the U.S. justice system.

Each piece of the puzzle reveals that no one did their job –cops, detectives, prosecutors– and exposes that everyone lied. It shows that these young people were trapped in a system where discrimination and hatred towards the Afro-descendant community prevails. Hence, Burns devotes a good part of the documentary to show that they were forced to testify about an event they did not know about and were not present at. With no DNA evidence to prove their participation, such a statement was the only thing used to determine their guilt.

It is in this context that an early Donald Trump decided to intervene. He paid thousands of dollars for major newspapers to publish a full-page statement calling for the death penalty for teenagers, and made statements on television that further incited rejection of these young people. The documentary highlights one of them: “I can assure you that I feel hatred towards the people who took this girl and raped her. I can assure you”.¹⁷

16 1) Mass citizen actions; 2) run candidates who can win; 3) hobble Trump with court orders; 4) form an army of satirists to fight back with humor and spread the risks this man embodies at the helm of the White House.

17 But there were others from Donald Trump himself in relation to the case at hand: “Of course I hate these people. And let’s all hate these people because maybe hate is what we

According to the data presented, Trump's intervention caused 76% of New Yorkers to favor applying the death penalty to criminals, regardless of whether they were minors.

By the time the documentary was released, the young men had already been exonerated. Fundamental to this was the confession of the real perpetrator, whose DNA did match that found at the crime scene. However, Trump declared about the documentary: "The documentary *The Central Park Five* was a piece of garbage that does not explain the horror of the crime of those young people in the park" (Now This, 2019); that is, with all the evidence there was of the equivocation, the now president of the United States did not retract it.

Nor did he do so in 2016 or in 2017, when reporters questioned him on the subject. In the first instance Burns used this case to make a point about Trump's racism. In the second circumstance, along with Now This, he made a video broadcasting the president's statements regarding the events. The goal was to show the danger it posed to the population. In those years, Burns has given a number of interviews where he has stated that for him it is fundamental to combat the racism that underlies American culture (Now This, 2019; Collins, 2016; Ferner, 2016). Hence the importance of people knowing the history of Central Park and the president's behavior.

The Central Park Five (2012) works through an emphasis that theorist Bill Nichols (2013) locates in personal portrait documentaries. This is a strategy where the main characters talk about themselves, as is the case with the five young defendants, because it aims to show the audience that the knowledge emanates from people who experienced the events firsthand. Thus, the stories are constructed from individual experience, referring to feelings and moments in the private sphere. The qualities of the social actors and the challenges they have had to face are highlighted. Therefore, it is not necessary for them to reflect on the problem of racism against the Afro-descendant community; it is enough for them to tell the story of how it irreversibly changed their lives. The intensity of the story generates empathy with the audience.

With less emphasis, features of the expository and participatory modalities are also present (Nichols, 2013). The search for a full representation of the social actors affected by racism, as well as the intention to inform and move the public, are attributes of the former. The care that the documentary

need to get something done, (...) it's more than hate and I want society to hate them" (Now This, 2019).

places on the dignity of the subjects and the bridge it builds between past and present are characteristics of the latter.

Conclusions

Michael Moore and Ken Burns have different positions, both in the way they make films and in their political affiliation. Most likely Burns would never have voted for Bernie Sanders. In 2016 he pointed out that Sanders and Trump were fragmenting the American people rather than uniting them (CNN Business, 2016). Unlike Moore, who combines his profession with his political stance, Burns has proceeded in this area in a cautious and sober manner, which shows that there are different ways and intensities of acting in the media in the field of documentary production. The political stance of the former is explicit and accessible. The same is not true of the second, as it requires a more thorough work of research and deduction. Moore locates the future in minorities and youth, while Burns in an inclusive reconstruction of American history. However, in the Trump era these disparate characters coincide on the same side of the trench. They share the rejection of the current president of the United States, the struggle to eradicate and denounce racism against minorities, as well as the feeling that the nation and its people are in danger.

Based on the legitimacy he has achieved through his multiple documentaries and the wide projection they have had, Michael Moore has become an active character in his country's politics (Oberacker, 2009). Through various platforms, he not only keeps in touch with the public, but also makes his opinions known, underpinning the dialogue on the issues at stake in a wide and diverse range of sectors. Because of its trajectory, its premises are discussed both among festival curatorial elites and among audiences who visit the cinema seeking only a couple of hours of entertainment. And although there are people who differ from their positions, what is relevant is not there. What matters, Kahana (2008) would say, is that they keep the debate around American politics open and ongoing. Today, whether Trump should continue as president or not.

In this sense, it is questionable that Ricciardelli (2014: 106-124) qualifies Michael Moore's political participation as dishonest. He claims that his real quest is to advance his political agenda and social demands, facilitating the identification of the public with his interests. It gives the impression that for Ricciardelli (2014) a documentary filmmaker loses legitimacy when their motivations are not limited to filmmaking and are

mixed with a political positioning. In recalling the nine-decade trajectory of the political documentary in the United States and its actions to transgress the official versions in moments of political tension, it becomes evident that the author elaborates a rather decontextualized analysis, both of the history of the American documentary and of the motivations of Moore's work; that is, the author fails to link the activist tradition of the documentary and its commitment to influence politics with Moore's motivations. If you take into account that he became a documentary filmmaker out of the need to denounce the economic and labor crisis in which the community where he grew up was plunged, then it is evident that he wanted to participate in what was happening. The same goes for the rest of his documentaries. Moore expects the audience to empathize with his point of view and get involved.

In the case of Burns, what is interesting to note is that his documentary was not originally made to question Donald Trump. The objective was to show the horror that these teenagers experienced just for being of African descent and to lead us to conclude that in the United States this type of injustice is a daily occurrence. However, despite the stance that had characterized the director –at times labeled as conservative (Nichols, 2013)– he decided to use the documentary to confront a context that he finds threatening to the entire population.

The echo achieved by *The Central Park Five* (2012) shows the ability to bring an issue from the past to the present, to highlight the racial criteria of the entrepreneur in the present and to add new audiences to the discussion. It helps to show that Trump has the same stance as three decades ago and that this absence of self-criticism is a risk for the population. Following Kahana (2008), this kind of materials build a kind of social pedagogy, because they inform and instruct people about an event.

The accessibility of the audiovisual discourse allows it to function in different spheres, building a bridge between academic knowledge and common sense; but above all, weakening the hegemonic version and making the social imaginary about racial discrimination in the United States more complex. This dialogue is not only limited to the filmmaker and the audience, but is brought into the political arena, it is common for multiple actors to join in, such as the recent Netflix series: *When They See Us* (2019), among other TV shows that addressed the issue.

It is therefore striking that Ricciardelli's (2014: 79-105) analysis characterizes Ken Burns's work on the basis of a single and not at all recent series –*The Civil War* (1990)– by noting that this director tends to simplify the American experience and homogenize cultural differences. Although

it is true that at the time the documentary series was questioned, it is essential to note that the filmmakers and their approaches are far from being anachronistic. *The Central Park Five* (2012) shows, based on the testimonies of those affected, what are the costs and risks of being different, of not being white. The story manages to portray what is hidden in the everyday life of American society: deep racism and its consequences. It shows that the United States is far from being a nation where physical and cultural differences are unimportant. Hence, it is risky to characterize a documentary filmmaker on the basis of a single work.

The review of the materials, the trajectories and particularities of their authors reflect the way in which the documentary is used as a tool to construct both the past and the future, but above all to subvert the present, as shown in the cases analyzed. Faithful to the genealogy that precedes them, they teach us that the documentary in the United States continues to play an active role in shaping its history and environment; they are produced as a response and an option to an information encirclement. They reflect the value they have when opening debates in society, because they provide information to the public allowing them to take a position.

It was also possible to learn about some of the resistance and communication strategies of a sector of U.S. society linked to audiovisual production, public television, universities, schools and film festivals. This made it possible to distinguish some of the region's dissenting voices –and their nuances– in relation to Donald Trump. It was also emphasized that this president has shaken U.S. politics in such a way that it has caused distant sectors to coincide and their respective positions to become more radical.

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