

Michael Moore's 13 Rules For Making Documentary Films

Abridged from the original article. Read in its entirety [here](#).

1. My number one guiding principle in making documentary films is essentially the “Fight Club” Rule.

What is the first rule of “Fight Club”? The first rule of “Fight Club” is: “Don’t talk about ‘Fight Club.’” The first rule of documentaries is: Don’t make a documentary — make a MOVIE. Stop making documentaries. Start making movies. You’ve chosen this art form — the cinema, this incredible, wonderful art form, to tell your story. You didn’t have to do that.

If you want to make a political speech, you can join a party, you can hold a rally. If you want to give a sermon, you can go to the seminary, you can be a preacher. If you want to give a lecture, you can be a teacher. But you’ve not chosen any of those professions. You have chosen to be filmmakers and to use the form of Cinema. So make a MOVIE. This word “documentarian” — I am here today to declare that word dead. That word is never to be used again. We are not documentarians, we are filmmakers. Scorsese does not call himself a “fictionatarian.” So why do we make up a word for ourselves? We do not need to ghettoize ourselves. We are already in the ghetto. We do not need to build a bigger ghetto. You are filmmakers. Make a film, make a movie. People love going to the movies. It’s a great American/Canadian tradition, going to the movies. Why wouldn’t you want to make a *movie*? Because if you made a *movie*, people might actually go see your documentary! Seriously, if you have a hard time calling yourself simply a “filmmaker,” then why are you in this business? Many of you will say, “Well, I make documentaries because I think people should know about global warming! They should know about the War of 1812! The public must be taught to use forks, not knives!! This is why I make documentaries!” Oh, you do, do you? Listen to yourselves. You sound like a scold. Like you’re Mother Superior with a wooden ruler in your hand. “I Am The One Who Knows All And Must Impart My Wisdom To The Masses Or At Least To Those who Watch PBS!”

2. Don’t tell me shit I already know.

I don’t go to those kinds of documentaries, the ones that think I’m ignorant. Don’t tell me that nuclear power is bad. I know it’s bad. I’m not going to give up two hours of my life to have you tell me it’s bad. All right? Seriously, I don’t want to hear anything I already know. I don’t like watching a movie where the filmmakers obviously thinks they’re the first people to discover something might be wrong with genetically modified foods. You think that you’re the only one who knows that? Your failure to trust that there are actually quite a few smart people out there is the reason people are not going to come see your documentary. Oh, I see — you made the movie because there are so many people who DON’T know about genetically modified foods. And you’re right. There are. And they just can’t wait to give up their Saturday to learn about it.

3. The modern documentary sadly has morphed into what looks like a college lecture, the college lecture mode of telling a story.

That has to stop. We have to invent a different way, a different kind of model. I don't know how to say this, because like I said, I only went three semesters to college. And one thing I'm grateful for from that is that I never learned how to write a college essay. I hated school, I always hated school. It was nothing but regurgitation back to the teacher of something the teacher said, and then I have to remember it and write it back down on a piece of paper. The math problem was never a problem. Somebody else had already solved the problem and then put it in the math book. The chemistry experiment was not an experiment. Somebody else already did it, and now they're making me do it, but still calling it an experiment. Nothing is an experiment here. I hated school and the nuns knew it and they felt bad for me. I would just sit there bored and mad and it didn't do me much good — except I ended up making these movies.

4. I don't like Castor Oil (a foul-tasting medicine from a hundred years ago). Too many of your documentaries feel like medicine.

The people don't want medicine. If they need medicine, they go to the doctor. They don't want medicine in the movie theaters. They want Goobers, they want popcorn, and they want to see a great movie. They just spent a lot of money on getting there, on the babysitter, on the overpriced ticket, on the \$9 popcorn. They have spent all this money. And then they want to go home — it's Friday night. I have a little sign on the bulletin board in my editing room. Actually, I have two signs — one says, "When in doubt, cut me out." The other one says, "Remember, people want to go home and have sex after this movie." Don't show them a documentary that is going to kill their evening! They've waited for sex all week. It's Friday night, and if they go home and it's like, "Oh God, that was just horrible... ugghhhh... I feel just awful..." Well, goodbye fireworks. That's just not fair. Don't do that to your audience. I'm not saying you can't present them with a serious subject. I'm just asking that that you do it in a way that makes them feel full of energy and passion and aroused. Politically, I mean.

5. The Left is boring.

And it's why we've had a hard time convincing people to maybe think about some of the things we're concerned about. Like I said earlier, we've lost our sense of humor and we need to be less boring. We used to be funny. The Left was funny in the 60s, and then we got really too damn serious. I don't think it did us any good.

6. Why don't more of your films go after the real villains — and I mean the REAL villains?

Why aren't you naming names? Why don't we have more documentaries that are going after corporations by name? Why don't we have more documentaries going after the Koch Brothers and naming them by name? Over the last few years, looking at the short list for the Best Documentary nominees, something that has really bothered me is that there are usually only two or three, at the most four, where the subject matter is about something in the present, something in the U.S. (something that we are doing as Americans in America right now), and something that is political, really political, and edgy and dangerous.

7. I think it's important to make your films personal.

I don't mean to put yourself necessarily in the film or in front of the camera. Some of you, the camera does not like you. Do not go in front of the camera. And I would count myself as one of those. It was an accident that I ended up in "Roger & Me," and I won't bore you with that story, but people want to hear the voice of a person. The vast majority of these documentary films that have had the most success are the ones with a personal voice. Morgan Spurlock, Al Gore, Bill Maher, "Gasland," "Shoah," etc. I know that most documentary films stay away from that, most don't like narration, they just put up a couple of cards to explain what's going on, but the audience is wondering, who is saying this to me?

You know when you see a Scorsese film who is saying it. I knew when I went to see "Gravity," because it was made by Alfonso Cuarón, that I wasn't going to see a Hollywood movie, even though it was distributed by Warner Brothers. It was not an American movie. I was going to see a Mexican movie. He's a Mexican filmmaker, and if you have seen his films, including the one Harry Potter that he did that is so dark, I knew going in that I would not know what was going to happen in the film. And you didn't know. If no one ruined it for you, going in, it was very possible that Alfonso Cuarón could kill both Sandra Bullock and George Clooney and anybody else in space. He's a Mexican filmmaker! And that's what made "Gravity" to me so exciting because I didn't know what was going to happen in the next 10 minutes like I do in most Hollywood movies. You don't want your audience to know that either. In "Gasland" when they lit the water on fire, well, I'd never seen that before! I didn't see that coming. That's when people start telling their friends about it. They tell their friends at work, "You've got to go see this movie."

8. Point your cameras at the cameras.

Show the people why the mainstream media isn't telling them what is going on. You've seen this in my films, where I stop filming whatever it is that's going on, and I just turn my camera on the press pool. Oh, that is a pathetic sight, isn't it? They are all lined up with their microphones like the guy in "Bowling for Columbine" who is at the funeral of a 6-year-old, and he's trying to

fix his hair out in front of the funeral home and he's yelling at the producer through the earpiece, and all of a sudden he realizes he's going live and, bam — it's showtime! It really shows you how little they truly care, and how little REAL information you're getting about the issue.

9. Books and TV have nonfiction figured out.

They know the American public loves nonfiction storytelling. But you'd never know that by looking at the list of movies playing down at the multiplex tonight. But open up the book review section of the New York Times this Sunday. There will be three times as many nonfiction books reviewed as fiction books, three times as many. Nonfiction books sell huge. Nonfiction television is huge! Look at the ratings. The top 25 shows every week have a number of nonfiction shows, from the smarter ones like "60 Minutes," to stuff like "Dancing with the Stars." But there's also Stephen Colbert. And Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, and John Oliver. These are nonfiction shows and they are hugely popular. They use humor, but they're doing it in order to tell the truth. Night after night after night. And that to me makes it a documentary. That makes it nonfiction. People love to watch Stewart and Colbert. Why don't you make films that come from that same spirit? Why wouldn't you want the same huge audience they have? Why is it that the American audience says, I love nonfiction books and I love nonfiction TV — but there's no way you're dragging me into a nonfiction movie! Yet, they want the truth AND they want to be entertained. Yes, repeat after me, they want to be entertained! If you can't accept that you are an entertainer with your truth, then please get out of the business. We need teachers. Go be a teacher. Or a preacher. Or manage an eco-friendly Crate and Barrel.

10. As much as possible, try to film only the people who disagree with you.

That is what is really interesting. We learn so much more by you training your camera on the guy from Exxon or General Motors and getting him to just blab on. Talk to that person who disagrees with you. I have always found it much more interesting to try to talk to those in charge. Of course now it's harder for me to get them to talk to me, so I have to use a lot of techniques and methods that probably wouldn't meet the "standards" of most television networks. But they do meet my one ethic, which is, this country, this world, exists for the people, and not the few rich folks who run it. And those rich people in power have some 'splainin' to do.

11. While you are filming a scene for your documentary, are you getting mad at what you are seeing?

Are you crying? Are you cracking up so much that you are afraid that the microphone is going to pick it up? If that is happening while you are filming it, then there is a very good chance that's how the audience is going to respond, too. Trust that. You are the audience, too. I tell my

crew that the audience is “on the crew.” The audience is part of the film. What is the audience going to think of this film? And so many times when I’m filming, I find myself thinking, Oh man, I already know what is going to happen when people watch this! I can already see it. I am a stand in for that audience. And that’s what you need to be, too.

12. Less is more. You already know that one.

Edit. Cut. Make it shorter. Say it with fewer words. Fewer scenes. Don’t think your shit smells like perfume. It doesn’t. You haven’t invented the wheel. People get it. People love that you trust that they have a brain. Even people who aren’t that smart, who don’t know about the bigger world, they can detect it when you think they are smart and they can also detect when you think they are stupid. And they’re not stupid. Not the 220 million. They’re just a little ignorant. We live in a country where 80 percent of the citizens do not own a passport. They never leave their homes to see the rest of the world. They don’t know what is going out there. We have to have a little empathy for them. They want to come along. They will come along — if they sense that we respect them for having a brain.

13. Finally... Sound is more important than picture.

Pay your sound woman or sound man the same as you pay the DP, especially now with documentaries. Sound carries the story. It’s true in a fiction film, too. You’ve been in a movie theater where it’s been out of focus just a little bit or maybe the frame is spilling over onto the curtain. Nobody gets up, nobody says anything, nobody goes and tells the projectionist. But if the sound goes out, there is a riot in the theater, right? But if the picture sucks, or if you had to run because the police are after you, and the camera is jiggling all over the place, the audience is not going, “Hey, why is that camera jiggling? Hey, stop the camera jiggling!” Let’s say you didn’t shoot something entirely in focus, you had to shoot it really quickly. The audience doesn’t care — IF the story is strong, AND they can hear it. That’s what they’re paying attention to. Don’t cheat on the sound. Don’t be cheap with the sound. It’s so important, the sound, when making a documentary.

Questions

- What rule did you find most thought provoking? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- Michael Moore mentions wanting to see more documentaries that are about subjects in the present. Can you think of a doc you’ve seen (feature or short) that is an example of “in the present”? What are your feelings about it?
- What’s a rule of your own that could be added to this list?