

A short excerpt from the book *P.O.V.* by Anthony Zoubek:

TO BOWL OR NOT TO BOWL

In his *Bowling for Columbine* voiceover narration, Moore says the morning before the Columbine shootings was “pretty much like any other morning in America. The farmer did his chores. The milkman made his deliveries. The president bombed another country whose name we couldn’t pronounce.... And out in a little town in Colorado, two boys went bowling at six in the morning.” Forty minutes into the film, Moore shows us stock footage of a news conference at which Jefferson County Deputy Sheriff Steve Davis fields questions shortly after the massacre.

“What were the suspects doing the morning of attack?” Davis says, repeating a reporter’s question. “I told you, that I’d heard they were bowling.”

Hence the movie’s title.

In a “Frequently Asked Questions” section of the official *Bowling for Columbine* website, Moore states his film’s name “is taken from the little-known fact that the two killers, Dylan and Eric, were supposed to be in bowling class at Columbine High School on the morning of the murders. At least five witnesses, including their teacher, told the police that they saw one or both boys that morning at the bowling alley for their first-hour class.”

Kate Battan of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department was the lead investigator on the Columbine shootings case. She said if Moore “wants to take one or two or three reports out of thousands of pages of documents and say, ‘see—it says right here that they were in bowling class that day’ and call that a ‘fact,’ then he can do that.

“I think that, in any documentary, there is going to be a bit of artistic license,” Battan added. “Otherwise, it would be kind of a boring movie. There are some things that we dispute, like Moore’s claim that [Eric and Dylan] went to their

bowling class that day. Initially, some of the Columbine students who were interviewed said they saw the boys in bowling class. We later found out, through talking to the teacher and through other evidence, that we do *not* believe Eric and Dylan were in class that day.”

Battan went and saw *Bowling for Columbine* as an “average Joe Citizen. I did not go there as an investigator with the Sheriff’s Department to see whether or not the movie was accurate. Because it’s Michael Moore’s movie. The First Amendment—I believe in it. Michael Moore can say whatever he wants.”

Battan said she has “no interest in starting a war” of words with Moore over the discrepancy. “I don’t want to get the Columbine victim’s families angry at us,” she continued. “I don’t want to get Michael Moore angry at us. It’s been [a number of] years since the Columbine massacre. We’re tired of everybody being angry at us. “Whether or not [Eric and Dylan] were in bowling class that day is not the point of the movie. If someone thinks that was the point of the movie, then they didn’t get it. “I got it, and I agree with it.”

Admittedly, so do I. After the Columbine massacre, every media pundit pointed their proverbial gun aimed at the usual pop-culture targets. Putting scapegoats like Marilyn Manson in their crosshairs made about as much sense as blaming Brunswick for the violent tragedies. But Moore could have easily said something to the effect of:

“People initially thought Eric and Dylan went bowling that day. They didn’t, but no one could prove the boys were big fans of Marilyn Manson, either. Isn’t it just as plausible to blame bowling as it is to blame Manson’s music—or video games or violent movies or television shows?”

Moore's message could have remained intact, without doubt's ugly shadow looming so closely at its side.

The steps Moore takes to present his metaphors as "facts" are troublesome. Before talking to Battan, I thought artistic license was a film director's right only in adapting plays, books and fictionalized accounts of reality-based events. Documentaries have implicitly truthful cores through which artistically licensed misrepresentations should not be tolerated. Otherwise, what is the difference between a scripted movie and a documentary if both types of films are allowed to construe their source material into something that is, even in the slightest bit, fictitious?

Deciding what constitutes truth in any Moore movie depends on "what one decides constitutes 'truth' in any documentary," Dana Benelli, an assistant professor of theatre at Illinois State University, said. Over the last 10 years, Benelli taught documentary film courses at ISU, Clark University in Massachusetts, Tulane University in New Orleans and Carleton College in Minnesota. He continues to author scholarly essays on the relationship between Hollywood and documentary filmmaking.

According to Benelli, truth in documentary may be split into two categories.

"There is literal accuracy, as in the documentarian [having] all his facts straight," Benelli explained. "And then there is 'core truth,' that which is found in the significance of the situation being represented, through which errors in detail may not undermine the point of the documentary as a whole.

"That is one of the things I am inclined to think about *Bowling for Columbine*," Benelli continued. "Moore may be significantly warping some of his details, but the question about whether his basic take on the culture of violence in American society remains valid."