

Loose Change: The Persuasion Techniques of Dylan Avery

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Time magazine best summarizes the basic premise of what Dylan Avery, the director of *Loose Change: 2nd Edition* (Rowe, 2006), illustrates for his audience: “Al-Qaeda is not responsible for the destruction of the World Trade Center (4). The U.S. government is. The Pentagon was not hit by a commercial jet; it was hit by a cruise missile. United Flight 93 did not crash after its occupants rushed the cockpit; it was deliberately taken down by a U.S. Air Force fighter. The entire catastrophe was planned and executed by federal officials in order to provide the U.S. with a pretext for going to war in the Middle East and, by extension, as a means of consolidating and extending the power of the Bush Administration” (3).

This startling and sobering conspiracy theory is fuel to the fire that Avery cultivates through his documentary that attempts to “expose the government” and “teach the unknowing and naïve American people” that they were fed false information regarding the events of September 11, 2001. The director uses persuasive rhetoric to form his own truths about the events of September 11th in the effort to force-feed the audience his argument. This analysis - of rhetorical strategies used throughout *Loose Change* - will delve into the major production and persuasive tactics which Dylan (along with fellow editors/producers Jason Bermas and Korey Rowe) uses and will provide examples from the film itself to illustrate these tactics and prove why they fail (4).

Loose Change uses attractive and engaging MTV-style jump cuts, high-end graphics, and engaging techno-music. The purpose of the film is to investigate the official story of 9/11 as told by *The 9/11 Commission Report*, asking a number of highly controversial questions. “Conspiracy theories are rarely true, even though they have great appeal and are often widely believed”, suggests a writer of *Vanity Fair* magazine (1). Dylan Avery seems to be relying on the notion that, because “the conspiracy theory” is so attractive and fascinating, the audience will presumably “drink it up” without questioning Avery’s sources, motives, arguments, or general logic.

Avery’s persuasive strategy is apparent as early as the opening scenes of the film: after the sobering preliminary text that states that the film is “Dedicated to the lives we lost on September 11, 2001”, the film uses a textbook example of the arrangement of a rhetorical film – he uses an opening that “catches the audience’s attention” and immediately proposes “a direct argument in support of [Dylan’s] case from a particular viewpoint” (5). The audience is given the image of the Statue of Liberty (not ironically, a symbol of freedom in the U.S.) from the view of a helicopter with the New York City skyline in the background – the World Trade Centers standing tall. The image is set to a foreboding techno-piano beat and followed by the contradictory statements of government figureheads such as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Whitehouse Advisor Richard Clarke. These statements regarding September 11th include “Your government failed you, and I failed you” and “There were lots of warnings” – statements that Avery cleverly combined to contradict each other and discredit government figureheads as early in the film as possible. This is part of the thought process that Avery wants his audience to have, the theme of “do not trust the government” and “do not trust what they tell you”.

Bill Nichols states that “much of the power of documentary...lies in its ability to couple evidence and emotion in the selection and arrangement of its sounds and images” – a skill that is apparent in the director from the inception

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of the film (5). After the statements are made in the opening scene, the audience is barraged by images of what appear to be government documents and “top secret” plans of sabotage and destruction from the past, along with information that very vaguely describes suspicious government activities in the past which involved the World Trade Center, airplanes, America’s defense system, terrorism, Osama bin Laden, and the Pentagon. Some may believe that this barrage of “facts” and images is intended to confuse, anger, and hopefully cultivate the thought, “Why didn’t we know about this?” and “Why was our government doing this?” thus, setting the tone for the whole documentary, appealing to the emotions of the audience and gaining its trust (because Avery has exposed “evidence” of government activities of which we presumably had no prior knowledge).

Now that Avery has the attention of the audience and has hopefully caused it to rethink the government’s credibility and motives, he begins a more intense series of rhetorical strategies and tactics which, to the untrained eye and ear, may make the proposed conspiracy theory in *Loose Change* appear quite plausible and credible. Consider the use of inflammatory statements and questions by Avery as the narrator. For example, Avery states “If the government has nothing to hide, why are they afraid to answer a few questions?”, “This story does not add up”, “Why would the government do such a thing?”, “Are you angry yet?”, and “It’s time for America to accept 9/11 for what it was – a lie which killed thousands of people, only in turn killing hundreds of thousands more to make billions upon trillions of dollars”. *Loose Change* is full of these statements and questions which are edited between sequences and after poignant points in order to reinforce Avery’s argument and to further persuade his audience.

Third, Avery presents information and “facts” in a way that shows he assumed his audience was not aware of them so to “inform” and confuse them (even though many of Avery’s arguments can be scientifically and evidentially refuted in critiques of the film). For example, Avery throws out series’ of numbers,

dates, times, documents, and chemistry, physics, and scientifically-oriented facts which his target audience (teens to young adults) presumably has no means of disproving; thus, the audience is forced to consider and/or believe them. For example, when Avery argues the true cause of the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings, he uses statements like “the Twin Towers were composed of 200,000 tons of steel, 425 cubic yards of concrete... and 60,000 tons of cooling equipment”, a Murphy’s Law equation, and the estimations that the planes carried “10,000 gallons of jet fuel” and “the buildings were burning at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit”.

This situation shows how the barrage of numbers and facts that Avery throws at his audience is arguably very confusing, as well as hard to keep up with, thus the audience has no time to disagree with Avery’s argument that that airliners could not have brought down the Twin Towers. However, the makers of *Loose Change* failed to do their research on more than one account. A professor at Northwestern University, Zdenek Bazant, for the *Scientific American* stated that the most likely and probable cause for the collapse of the Twin Towers was “the intense heat [that] softened or melted the structural elements—floor trusses and columns—so that they became like chewing gum, and that was enough to trigger the collapse. The floor trusses are likely to have been the first to sag and fail. As soon as the upper floors became unsupported, debris from the failed floor systems rained down onto the floors below, which eventually gave way, starting an unstoppable sequence. The dynamic forces were so large that the downward motion became unstoppable” (6). In addition, Robert McNamara (president of the engineering firm McNamara and Salvia and the same man who was quoted in *Loose Change*), stated that, “the aviation fuel fires that broke out burned at a much hotter temperature than the typical contents of an office. At about 800 degrees Fahrenheit structural steel starts to lose its strength; at 1,500 degrees F, all bets are off as steel members become significantly weakened,” he explained, further proving that the collapse of the Twin Towers due to the aviation fires and

subsequent structural weakening was completely plausible on September 11th (6).

Avery uses this “barrage the audience with numbers” tactic throughout the film, and predominantly to make his point in regards to attack on the Pentagon. Again, Avery uses phrases like “a Boeing 757 is 155 feet long, 44 feet high, has a 124 foot wingspan, and weighs almost 100 tons”, “it slammed into the Pentagon at 500 miles per hour” and “it would have had to travel 310 feet” - facts we, as the audience, may be able to research, but not at the time they are viewing the film; again, the audience must consider and believe this barrage of information they are given simply because they cannot disprove it. However, outside research could conclude that Avery’s argument of “whether or not the Pentagon should show the outline of an airliner in the same way depends on whether it is constructed of the same material as the WTC, and if not, upon the structural differences”, states Michael B. Green for 9/11 Research (2). In addition, “since the outer wall of the Pentagon reportedly was 18” of steel reinforced concrete and reportedly had many of its windows replaced with bomb-resistant 2,500-pound windows in the renovation process that was not yet completed, there is no reason to expect the same pattern” (2).

As a fourth rhetorical tactic, Avery makes highly subjective and arbitrary conclusions that, unlike the former rhetorical tactic, *can* be disproved or disagreed with upon viewing the film (making this tactic less effective). For example, when discussing a single photograph (which, in itself, is a poor choice of photographs because smoke clouds much of the picture) of the façade of the Pentagon post-crash, Avery uses phrases like “the only damage to the outer wall is a single hole”, “why are the windows next to the hole completely intact?”, and “why is this piece of the plane not singed or scratched?”. However, these, and many of Avery’s conclusions throughout the documentary can be subjectively argued; there *was* a great deal of damage to the outer wall, the windows next to the hole were *not* completely intact, and the piece of the plane he showed *was* indeed scratched and torn apart. Another part of this

tactic is that Avery forces the audience to assume that all plane crashes and building collapses are the same and are under similar circumstances. He states “this is what an airplane crash would look like”, and he shows other structure fires to relate them to the Twin Towers. But many audience members can and should be aware of the fact that the results of a plane crash or building collapse are completely circumstantial.

Fifth, Avery uses the rhetorical strategy of using creative editing, graphic simulation, interviews, “government documents”, and obtained news coverage to appear as an “official” expository documentary. For “a pair of industrious twenty-somethings using a laptop, pizza money and footage scavenged from the Internet” Time magazine calls the *Loose Change* experience, film elements such as these ordinarily give a documentary credibility (3). Avery includes simulations of airplanes crashing into the Pentagon to show that the Boeing 757 is “too large to have made the small hole in the wall”; however, the audience is not known the dimensions of the simulated plane in reference to the hole in the Pentagon wall, slightly discounting this “evidence”.

Avery uses includes interviews he himself has performed with a witness of the World Trade Center attacks and the Chief Flight Instructor at an alleged hijacker’s flight training school to seem more comprehensive and to expose detailed information about the September 11th events. However, the eye-witness’s story is slightly vague and subjective, and, while the witness discusses what he saw and thinks he heard, the witness himself is not an expert source in building construction or demolition. The interview with Chief Flight instructor, which had the potential to be an important interview, has clearly been heavily edited. Michael Green points out that Avery “omits such questions as whether Hanjour, [the hijacker], could have acquired the necessary skills in the month or two between when he was shown deficient [(in flying experience)] and 9/11” (2).

Supposed government and official

documents, typed interviews, and witness accounts are interspersed between images such as those of the burning and collapsing World Trade Center and the demolished wall of the Pentagon – footage and photographs lifted from the Internet and news coverage. Nichols states that “images not only provide visible evidence, but they pack an emotional punch, boosted by the indexical whammy of our own belief in their authenticity”, and that images “locate an argument all the more forcefully in relation to the historical world and in relation to our own engagement with the world” (5). The fact that Avery provides his audience with stock footage of the sites of the attacks on September 11th should support his arguments and add credibility to them; however, as explained in Avery’s fourth rhetorical strategy, the images and Avery’s subjective narrated opinions frequently contradict each other. It also seems as though much of what the film alleges can be refuted by some of the evidence Avery presents – anything that the government does not answer is interpreted by *Loose Change* as proof of a cover-up.

Likewise, when documents and internet articles are shown, such as the terrorism brochure in the opening sequence, military and classified documents, or still shots of websites, the audience has no way of knowing the sources of Avery’s information, whether those sources are credible or fabricated, or whether contradictory information within the documents is omitted (Avery only highlights relevant text within the documents chosen because they coincide with his argument). Furthermore, the news coverage that Avery uses to show credibility actually may have hurt his argument: “He asks why there are “absolutely no traces of the aircraft at all” even while showing a *Fox New Alert* that shows the entire area littered with what look like small pieces of aircraft debris. Mr. Avery even asks why there is “not one seat cushion,” on the outside, apparently having forgotten his own statement of moments before that the fuselage penetrated the Pentagon” (2). In the same way, because “the time, source, and subjects of most of the Pentagon photos are unknown – and since we do not know what photographs have been withheld – it is difficult

to know what to make of the ones [Avery] addresses” (2).

Sixth, the director, on several occasions, uses the rhetorical strategy of aggressive persuasion – he uses language and makes statements that cause the audience to feel stupid, uninformed, or ignorant. Thus, the audience may compensate by agreeing with the film’s arguments so they do not feel “stupid” for being unaware of the “facts”. For example, when quoting passages from the 9/11 Commission Report throughout the film, Avery will say things such as “Who writes this stuff?” and “To think the government would have us believe...” Along with the multiple conclusions that Avery draws which are in contradiction of the images he shows us, he almost insults the audience’s intelligence when he shows “the famous Osama bin Laden confession tape”. Avery displays four pictures of “Osama bin Laden” and argues that the man in the confession tape is not this Al Qaeda leader. What the director does not take into account, however, is the possibility that, on the flip side, the four pictures he provides of the real bin Laden may *also* not be the real bin Laden (if this argument is to be completely carried out).

In the attempt to be comprehensive in his theory, Avery entertains the idea that the passengers on the plane were “in on the conspiracy” and he discusses the possibility of voice simulation and replication in the plane hijackings - a program that has been developed recently by the government. In other words, Avery suggests that the phone calls were not actually being made from the hijacked United 93 flight. However, Avery seems to be unaware that post-crash reports and new coverage state that calls from Flight 93 came not from cell-phones entirely but from air phones (phones built into the aircraft which require a credit card to use but are designed to be used on an airplane), thus making Avery’s statement “there is no way the calls could have been made” completely null.

Finally, *Loose Change* uses the textbook rhetorical strategy of, as Nichols defines it, “a summation of the case that stirs the audience and predisposes it to a particular course of action”,

or a “call to action” (5). This particular call to action is designed to be inflammatory and rousing. With statements like “Will you share this information or will you ignore it?”, “Ask questions, demand answers”, and “What’s it going to take for people in this country to give a damn and do something about it?” Avery is making a final effort to persuade his audience to believe his arguments and theory. With a call to action, Avery hopes that, with the incriminating information, images, documents, news coverage, interviews, and “facts” he has shared, a final hearty push will get the audience to spread the virus to others, exponentially increasing his audience.

In conclusion, on the surface, Dylan Avery’s *Loose Change* is a clever and well-executed documentary. The director’s rhetorical strategies and tactics have the potential to be highly volatile and efficient – persuading the unsuspecting audience that their government is lying to them and that further scrutiny reveals how and why. However, anyone with an Internet connection can research the events of September 11th and learn the intense fabrication behind *Loose Change*. This is the reason Avery’s rhetoric is unsuccessful – there are too many inconsistencies and counterarguments. We cannot discount the documentary as completely unsuccessful – over 2 million people (and counting) have viewed the film over the Internet and even more have viewed it through other means. Nevertheless, just because over 2 million people have seen the documentary does not mean they believe it; force-feeding the audience a conspiracy theory and using intense rhetoric neither makes the arguments true nor does it give them credibility. *Loose Change* should remain only something by which to be entertained and to be considered.

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