

Louder than words: The manipulative use of mise-en-scène in *Loose Change**

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Film analysts often hail the importance of mise-en-scène analysis in cinema. Theorists—particularly those who subscribe to auteur theory—pick apart the director’s visual choices to pinpoint his message and artistic vision. These analysts look at the use of lighting, costume, color, props, space, action and performance and come to conclusions and a deeper understanding of the film as a whole.

Mise-en-scène is important in documentary film as well. John Gibbs defines mise-en-scène as “the contents of the frame and the way that they are organized” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 5). A documentary typically has an overt and easily discernable message. The footage the filmmaker chooses to put into his film greatly shapes the documentary as a whole. In addition to this choice of what to put into the shot, how it’s organized and presented are very important aspects as well.

Dylan Avery’s *Loose Change 2nd Edition* (2006), an agitprop documentary asserting that the United States government was behind the attacks of September 11, 2001, contains numerous visual choices that shape the message of the film. Jarrett Murphy of *The Village Voice* writes that the documentary itself began as a “fictional story about discovering that 9-11 was an inside job” (Murphy, 2006). This statement is supported by Avery’s biography on *Loose Change*’s official website (Loose Change Website). Remnants of this imagined screenplay still remain in the documentary, as it is scanty on factual information and an overall conclusive argument. It compensates for this, however, through the highly-stylized and manipulative way that it presents the material. Through various uses of mise-en-scène, Dylan Avery seeks to emphasize and alter the footage in *Loose Change* in order to guide the viewer towards his predetermined conclusion. This paper will explore the use of framing and lighting, the juxtaposition of

images to suggest association, shots that Avery chooses to emphasize his point, the use and misuse of citation and source authority, and color manipulation within the film.

While the majority of *Loose Change* consists of existing footage and omniscient narration, there are a few interviews that pervade the film. Two of these interviews—one with a flight instructor and another with a janitor at the World Trade Center—are the only ones conducted by Avery himself. Both are filmed in similar ways. The flight instructor interview is very darkly lit, featuring the interviewee on the right side of the frame. Conducted in the instructor’s office, the shot features various flight manuals and other forms of aviation literature on the shelves above his head. The interview is lit primarily by a desk light behind the speaker, resulting in a partially silhouetted frame that darkens but does not obscure the subject.

The interview with Willy Rodriguez, a janitor at the World Trade Center, is similarly lit and framed. Rodriguez is on the right side of the frame looking to the viewer’s left. The location appears to be a parking garage or basement with grey concrete walls. The shot is also darkly lit, with one small light source coming from the right side of the camera. While both interviews have low image and sound quality, they visually reflect the tone that Avery is trying to convey; conducted in locations befitting their subjects, and lit very minimally to shroud the subject matter in secrecy.

The rest of the interviews are borrowed from other source material, such as the Naudet Brothers’ *9/11* (2002). Regardless of the source, these interviews give the documentary a dark and mysterious feel. One sequence, featuring fades to various interviews of New York firefighters, is darkly lit and correspondingly framed, reflecting the morose, intimate nature of the material discussed. While Avery did not conduct these interviews himself, they complement his previous framing and lighting choices.

The visuals of *Loose Change* consist primarily of government documents, Internet and newspaper articles, and news footage. As a result of this, where these images are placed in the film becomes very important. The topics that Avery covers follow a general chronological progression. The introduction of the film goes through a sequential chronicling of seemingly related events that lead up to September 11. Within the timeline, the *Operation: Northwoods* document of 1962 and FEMA’s *Emergency Response*

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to *Terrorism* cover of 1997 both lead up to the events of September 11. Regardless of whether these have any connection to each other, they contribute to Avery's overall message of government involvement. By insinuating that the government could feasibly orchestrate such a nefarious plan from as early as 1962, the film is feeding on the audience's fear and paranoia. While Avery never states that these documents have any direct connection to the events of September 11, they are placed chronologically in order to suggest a logical progression of government actions up until the attacks.

In an equally assumptive manner, Avery has predetermined that the towers fell through a controlled demolition. The footage is structured to support this conclusion. First, Avery goes through shots of previous buildings that were engulfed in flames. The footage of these fires increases in severity; starting with the rather tame Empire State Building fire in 1945 to the brutal Windsor Building inferno of 2005. These shots are followed by the contrastingly tame fires of the World Trade Center, suggesting a disjoint between their severity and the towers' eventual fate.

Another sequence, featuring varying news footage from September 11, suggests that journalists initially agreed on the reason for the towers' destruction. Since Avery determined in the previous sequence that the towers should not have fallen as the result of fire, it is inevitable that he would include existing footage supporting this conclusion. As a result, the sequence jumps to and from various news sources—ABC, CNN, CBS, NBC, FOX News—all supporting his hypothesis that there were secondary devices within the buildings. All of the footage essentially says the same thing, but what is said is not important. Rather, it is the corporate logo—the visual representation of the news service—that enhances Avery's authority on the matter. If all of these networks came to the same conclusion as he did, then it increases the believability of his claims. Whenever Avery discovers a symbol of professionalism or expertise, he takes care to include it in the film by either citing the source or allowing the camera to linger on this image of authority.

In addition to the film's manipulative use of semiotics, extraneous footage is included in an artistic fashion to emphasize certain points. When the film asks how the World Trade Center towers were brought down, footage of controlled implosions is shown. When Avery asks what hit the Pentagon, a missile is fired, coupled with the computerized image of a tank exploding. Given that Avery produced the

first manifestation of *Loose Change* “for less than \$2,000, using off-the-shelf video-editing software on his notebook computer” (Manjoo, 2006), this footage characterizes the financial and technical restraints of the film. While there are numerous birds' eye shots of the earth, these are obviously borrowed from *Google Maps*. While there is nothing wrong with the inclusion of these public domain images, they are so readily available that it casts an amateurish sheen onto the film.

Numerous other source materials are taken directly from the collaborative online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, a citation so dubious that not even high school teachers will allow it in their essays. Perhaps the most questionable inclusion in the film is a clip from a Japanese horror movie. In order to illustrate an Asian flight attendant's call from one of the hijacked planes, Avery uses a short clip from Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998). To the lay viewer, this appears to be supporting footage. To someone who has seen the film, this is a lazy use of copyrighted material. No educated viewer would think that this footage was taken directly from the airplane's cabin. However, this omission and manipulation affects *Loose Change*'s overall message. If Avery borrowed public domain footage that involved terrorism or September 11, this would be an appropriate (though inexpensive) use of supporting visuals. Instead, he includes copyrighted material from a fictional Japanese horror film, contributing nothing but the blurry image of an Asian woman on an airplane.

Avery manipulates evidence by juxtaposing images. This technique was pioneered by Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who claimed that, through the precise and manipulative use of editing and visual association, he could elicit a visceral reaction from the viewer. “We have discovered” Eisenstein stated, “how to force the spectator to think in a certain direction” (Rosenblum & Karen, 1979, p. 47). Modern directors who wish to emotionally or ideologically influence their audiences implement Eisenstein's techniques. This includes Dylan Avery. In regards to the Osama bin Laden confession tape, *Loose Change* references three different pictures of bin Laden and compares them to screenshots from the tape. From the images shown, it seems that the subject on the tape looks nothing like the actual bin Laden. However, Avery takes special care in using different angles to manipulate the perspective. While the undisputed pictures show bin Laden looking forward, the screen captures from the tape are grainy, and feature the subject in unusual angles.

In addition, Avery juxtaposes satellite footage of the Cleveland airport and various statistics about Delta 1989 and Flight 93. While it is not entirely clear what the connection between the two flights are, by putting them side-by-side in the same frame, Avery is visually linking this association in the viewer's mind.

In documentary filmmaking, what isn't shown is just as important as what is. While a reputable filmmaker will make sure not to distort indisputable facts, this does not mean he is obligated to spend equal time citing or emphasizing source material. Any time a source is questionable, Avery makes sure to gloss over it as quickly as possible. There is no footage or station logo for WCPO-TV in Cleveland, the basis for the sequence about Flight 93. The source is mentioned and quickly disregarded, and for good reason. It turns out that while "WCPO reported this news on its Web site...the story was actually authored by the Associated Press wire service, and the AP corrected the news minutes after it was posted" (Manjoo, 2006). Surely Avery was aware of this when he included it in the film. The omission of this evidence is an intentional directing decision, and when it was not included, it greatly shaped the ethos of the film.

Many other sources are intentionally obstructed in order to hide their dubious origins. Perhaps the most deceptive of these involves material from the *American Free Press*, a self-proclaimed populist publication spearheaded by Willis Carto. The website's "About Us" page lets the reader know the publication's mission statement, part of which is to educate people about the nefarious "Masters of the Media" that "promote the perverse, anti-Christian Cultural Communist ideology that permeates publishing and broadcasting today" (American Free Press). Even the most perfunctory reader would come to the conclusion that this is not the most reputable source material.

Avery takes note to mention this publication, but uses it more frequently than it is cited. The image of the *American Free Press* logo conveys a patriotic authority, but Avery makes sure not to put too much emphasis on what the publication is or where it gets its information. There are many instances in which the film mentions a source but takes special care to obstruct its origins. Many of these involve excerpts from *American Free Press* articles: the surrounding text is darkened to the point of illegibility, and any acknowledgement of the publication is done so within the article, but with the acronym "AFP." Avery makes no effort to hide the acronym, for it

means nothing to the viewer. These letters could represent a number of organizations—including *Agence France-Presse*, a highly reputable global news agency—but Avery makes no attempt to specify. Given the semiotic inclusion of well-respected news outlets previously in the film, it seems suspicious that Avery would have material from a reputable source and make no attempt to cite it.

Colors and images are extensively manipulated throughout *Loose Change*. In many cases, this is done to parallel the overall dark mood of the film. Numerous visuals show a reversed colorization of the source material, from the government documents at the beginning of the film, to *Wikipedia* screenshots interspersed in the middle. This white-on-black image appears much more mysterious, and contributes to the film's overall feel.

Other examples of color manipulation show an intentional obstruction of visual aspects in order to support the film's view. When talking about the explosions during the World Trade Center collapse, the footage is deliberately altered in order to support Avery's point. These explosions are enlarged and moved within the frame, placing them out of context. To further manipulate the image, the shot's background is darkened and tinted blue. By moving these shots to the foreground and altering the brightness and color of the background, Avery is isolating these unconnected incidents in order to support his assertion that the towers were brought down with a controlled demolition.

This egregious use of post-editing shot manipulation is unprecedented in documentary filmmaking. As the purpose of a documentary is to use evidence to support a viewpoint, *Loose Change* intentionally alters shots and evidence to come to a predetermined conclusion. Though slick in its presentation, the film itself is an abomination to legitimate documentary filmmaking and relies too heavily on "circumstantial evidence, facts without analysis or documentation, quotes taken out of context and the scattered testimony of traumatized eyewitnesses" (Grossman, 2006) to allow it any sort of factual merit.

Sometimes, a strict *mise-en-scène* analysis of a documentary is inappropriate. Particularly in the case of an entirely observational documentary, the film does not feature enough intentional artistic choices to justify a visual breakdown based on auteur influences. However, in the case of *Loose Change*, enough visuals are manipulated, omitted, and

juxtaposed to dig deep into the intentions of the film's director: Dylan Avery. His documentary is an intentional exploitation of pathos; a slick association of manipulated, circumstantial hearsay presented to suggest an evil, calculated, and precisely-executed government conspiracy. This manipulation is effective in a work of fantasy. If two images are juxtaposed in a fictional film, they are done so to suggest an association. If the same is done in a documentary without solid, supporting evidence, the end result becomes a slap-dash and slothful appeal to lay logic and circumstantial associations.

September 11 conspiracy theories come about through existing emotions about the tragic events and, as Senator John McCain states, exploit "the public's anger and sadness" (McCain, 2006). *Loose Change* is only one sampling from a long line of conspiracy theories derived from the public's general and inherent distrust of the United States government. Each of these theories utilizes similar tactics, and *Loose Change* is neither the first nor most effective one to do so. The most apparent of its visual pathetic appeal appears in the final shot of the film when, during Avery's emotional narration, the dim image of a waving American flag is shown. Through this clichéd icon of American jingoism, he is employing the same tactic as the government he criticizes so vociferously in the film's preceding frames. By doing so, he is hiding behind the red, white and blue, absolving any responsibility for his claims and justifying his deception and manipulation in the sake of freedom and justice. This final element of mise-en-scène says a lot about *Loose Change*'s intentions and Dylan Avery's personal character. Regardless of whether Avery is sincere about his claims, manipulating evidence in the name of "truth" is dangerous, misguided and fundamentally paradoxical.

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