**Unveiling Manipulation: Analyzing the Expository Nature of "Merchants of Doubt"**

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Bill Nichols, a pioneer in the field of documentary filmmaking and film theories is best known today for his extensive writing on different aspects of documentary filmmaking, the primary one being his classification of the six documentary modes. Expository mode documentaries are one such example of films that fit under this umbrella. According to Nichols these films tend to organize fragments of the historical world within a rhetorical or narrative structure rather than emphasizing an aesthetic or poetic approach. They integrate the four foundational elements of documentary filmmaking: Indexical images of reality; poetic, affective associations; storytelling qualities; and rhetorical persuasiveness and using both inartistic and artistic proofs attempt to convey information, mobilize support within a framework and provide their audience with a clear and structured exploration of a particular subject.

Merchants of Doubt, a film directed by Robert Kenner, is a documentary film that explores the strategies employed by various interest groups to create doubt and confusion on scientific issues. The documentary draws parallels between the tactics used by the tobacco industry to cast doubt on the health risks of smoking in the mid-20th century and similar strategies employed by other industries facing scientific scrutiny. It examines how certain individuals and organizations utilize public relations tactics, media manipulation, and political influence to challenge scientific consensus, particularly on issues such as climate change.

This essay seeks to analyze why Robert Kenner’s film Merchants of Doubt should be characterized as an expository film and aims to explore how the documentary uses filmmaking strategies such as indexical images of reality, evidentiary editing, and rhetorical strategies in its inspection of how corporations are able to successfully manipulate the public masses even when even when presented with opposing scientiﬁc evidence.

To begin with, a prominent feature employed in Merchants of Doubt, which is a staple in Expository mode documentaries is its use of Evidentiary Editing. This type of editing in a film involves prioritizing the inclusion of visuals spanning across space and time to strengthen an argument, even at the expense of maintain a seamless ocular flow.

In Merchants of Doubt, Kenner makes full use of this flexibility in organizing his images when providing us with both inartistic and artistic proofs. One such instance that particularly comes to mind is when Kenner cuts back and forth between scenes during an interview with Climate Scientist James Hansen. Here, we see Hansen discussing why he chose to exclude himself from public discourse around the climate crisis and hoping that now that the consequences of these changes were known to the public it would instigate government action. He also touches on how in today’s day and age one can see the consequences of human action on the climate in forms of melting ice caps and increased temperatures.

To emphasize Hansen’s fear of being a public figure discussing a global issue, the developments humanity has made in the scientific field, and the negative aftermath on our environment Kenner chooses to cut from a shot depicting Hansen Walking alone on a street to scenes of climate change professionals in high-end scientific labs, and to a shot of the earth’s view from space before finally cutting back to the interview with Hansen. The swift changes in visuals are act as a proof that are in line with Hansen’s and help corroborate his words on developments in science and damage to the environment. Like in most expository mode documentaries this technique helps maintain the continuity of the spoken perspective. His firsthand account in dealing with the subject matter being discussed alongside the impactful visuals strategically incorporated into the narrative pushes us as an audience to believe him and helps us foster a deeper connection with the crisis at hand.

We see evidentiary editing all throughout the film, Kenner employs it even when providing his viewers with examples of the rhetorical strategies certain corporations use to manipulate their target audiences into believing falsified and obviously inaccurate information. A case in point is when we come across a sequence about the George C. Marshall Institute, a small science-policy think tank" and its then President William O’Keefe.

The sequence starts with an interview of an ex-employee at the Marshall Institute who worked hand in hand with the President explaining why he chose to quit his job. It then discusses how climate change deniers like O’Keefe abuse the power that comes with their positions to constantly alter their discourse to the public. We come across three separate clips of him addressing the masses and changing up his statement from “The earth is not warming” to “The earth is warming but not due to human activities” to finally stating “The earth is warming due to human activities but the cost of doing something about it would be ruminous to human society.” Additionally, Kenner also throws in visuals of O’Keefe being a registered lobbyist and then switching to an interview scene with the man himself where he admits he has ties with Exxon Mobil and claims “Greenpeace couldn’t afford me.”

Positioning these scenes one after the other Kenner emphasizes to his audience how untrustworthy and precarious powerful individuals like O’Keefe are. He displays how these people make use of ethos, a form of inartistic proof, to appeal to the public. O’Keefe’s position helped establish him as a speaker with credibility and expert knowledge, making his audiences prone to believing what he propagates. Kenner’s evidentiary editing style, however, reveals his true corrupt and deceitful nature as the audience views firsthand how many times he changes his statement over the course of the years to continually exploit his following.

Another prominent feature in Merchants of Doubt that helps it fit so well within the realm of expository film is its use of indexical images of reality, particularly archival footage, and candid moments. A good example of this is the beginning of the film when it expounds upon the cunning forces heading the tobacco industry. We come across Stanton Glantz’s, Professor and Tobacco control activist, commentary on how smoking was an absolute rage in the late 1900’s. His words are accompanied with archival footage from the time of people smoking in airplanes, hospitals, courtrooms, etc. These visuals serve as indexical images revealing to the audience the extent of unawareness around the harmful effects of tobacco and helps ground the documentary in the reality of the situations it presents.

Further on the audience is also introduced to footage from courtroom hearings and images of tobacco industry documents titled “Playbook: Strategies and Tactics of the Tobacco industries” “Question The Science,” “Create Controversy” alongside visuals of the factually inaccurate research that these industry giants were promoting and funding. These indexical images of reality that Kenner makes use of unveil the sector's awareness of the health hazards associated with smoking and their endeavors to instill skepticism regarding the scientific consensus. Moreover, witnessing these devious ploys unfold through visuals helps the audience grasp the gravity of the issues presented by Glantz in a more concrete manner, whilst also creating a stronger sense of trust in Kenner’s work as they can now perceive the images as direct evidence of the issues discussed.

The documentary also effectively employs a range of rhetorical strategies, particularly Logos, in a comprehensive manner. This strategic utilization significantly enhances its persuasiveness, positioning it aptly as an expository documentary.

When presenting information on the adverse impacts of climate change it provides its audience with clear and logical arguments using scientific data, statistics, and expert opinions. The film appeals to both logic and authority in a particular sequence involving Dr. Michael Oppenheimer, a climate scientist involved in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s Third Assessment Report Dr. Oppenheimer employs data and statistical analysis to illustrate how the global average temperature has risen by approximately 1 degree Fahrenheit since the late 19th century, with an accelerating warming rate. He attributes this warming phenomenon predominantly to the heightened concentration of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, released into the atmosphere through the combustion of fossil fuels.

Whilst this is an example of inartistic proof, the film also touches upon how many corporate industries use rhetorical strategies but in the form of subjective artistic proof (self-created proofs.) It exposes the practice of climate-denying groups funding scientists and experts who would question established scientific consensus by abusing their credible authorities. An example of this that Kenner mentions in the film is Fred Seitz and Fred Singer. Both these men, as shown in the film’s footage, were active skeptics of the climate movement, they would often be seen as the skeptics at public debates challenging, creating doubt, and undermining public trust in scientific evidence.

Kenner later goes to reveal to his audience that both Singer and Seitz were fraudulent individuals who received hefty paychecks from large companies such as ExxonMobil, Shell, Sun Oil Company, and Unocal to continue their denial of the adversities economic growth and industrialization was causing to the environment. Dr. David Michaels, an environmental health scientist, further sheds light on how this is a common manipulation tactic, He elucidates how these studies often suffer from methodological and conclusional shortcomings, serving the purpose of fostering skepticism and ambiguity among the public.

In summation, Robert Kenner's documentary, "Merchants of Doubt," adeptly utilizes diverse filmmaking strategies, positioning itself as a commendable exemplar of an expository documentary. The film's incorporation of indexical images of reality, evidentiary editing, and rhetorical techniques encompassing logos, pathos, and ethos collectively enhance its persuasive impact. This multifaceted approach not only effectively informs and engages the audience but also successfully exposes the tactics employed by various interest groups in fostering doubt and confusion on scientific matters.

**Works Cited**

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