Misrepresentation And Manipulation In Documentaries: Bowling For Columbine And Blackfish

It’s clear that the unavoidability of bias present in documentaries is ubiquitous. While documentaries have the power to shed light on different social topics, they can also manipulate your opinion, as the camera angles, what action to shoot and what to add and leave out is all up to the director. So, are we watching the truth or the director’s version of the truth? In the past decade many documentaries, such as “Blackfish” and Bowling for Columbine” have in some ways doctored information to dramatize their film as well as influence the audience’s opinion in the favour of the director, these documentaries are harmful. A primary example of documentaries containing bias, misrepresentation, manipulation, or elision is “Bowling for Columbine” directed by Michael Moore. A specific scene from this famous documentary, where the filmmaker visits a bank, opens an account and walks out with a gun has caught the attention of many critics. In the film ‘manufacturing Dissents’, Rick Cain and Debbie Melnyk dissects Michael Moore’s various techniques used to get his political message across. Their expert opinion suggests that, yes, a gun for opening a new account is advertised by the bank, but no,

getting the rifle is not that easy, it would take six weeks for the customer to receive the gun, as well as a police check. So was the filmmaker, being dishonest, to emphasis about the ready availability of guns? Bowling for columbine also includes manipulative scenes of Charlton Heston, former president of NRA, proudly declaring, from my cold hands’ moments after audio and video recordings of the Columbine massacre are shown. Thus, making it seem like he is unaffiliated with the massacre. This remark shown above was actually said by Heston one year after the massacre.

Another prominent documentary that uses techniques to persuade the audiences opinion in the filmmaker’s favour is, ‘Blackfish’ directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite. The documentary focuses on the captivity of a killer whale, named Tilikum, who is involved in the deaths of three people. There are many examples of fabricated evidence present in this film, in the beginning of the documentary a combination of 911 calls are played, which are recorded from the orange county sheriff, then the scene featuring the attack and death of Dawn Brancheau. However, the director uses pre-recorded footage of a show from a year ago, to persuade the audience that dawn was in the water with Tilikum before the orca attacks her. But Tilikum was never a ‘water work whale’, which ultimately means that the trainers never got in the water with him. In the film, an interview is conducted with George Tobin where he claims that Ms. Brancheau’s arm was completely swallowed, this is entirely false as the coroner report shows that the victim’s complete body and arm were recovered (2020). The film also claims that “here are no recorded Orca attacks on humans in the wild.” This statement is incorrect as there has been 6 recorded incidents of orca’s attacking and expressing aggressive behaviour towards humans (Mass, 2020). Furthermore, in the film, Mr Ventre states that dorsal fin collapse in captivity happens to all male orcas and almost all female orca. However he also claims that dorsal fin collapse only happens to one percent of killer whales in the wild, this is false, it is estimated that ¼ of killer whales have this, and is proven by scientists and experts that the dorsal fin collapse has no relation to the orca’s overall health (2020).

Black fish and bowling for columbine quite often relied on emotion and not factual reasoning, A

significant example of blackfish using emotion to manipulate the audience's opinion is when the documentary highlights and dramatized the separation of the mother orca and the calf named Takara. The film uses techniques to make the audience assume that Takara is a calf, but in reality, Takara was 12 years old when she was removed from her mother. This is key evidence that the documentary wants to make the audience feel sympathetic, guilty and most importantly feel angry at SeaWorld. On the other hand, in bowling for columbine the director uses pathos to get his message across, an example of this is when he walks into Charles Helton's house, showing him picture of a 6-year-old girl who was shot dead by her classmate. This included in the film because, Charles Helton made an appearance shortly after the murders had happened. This makes the audience feel angry towards Charles Helton and people who support guns.

So, are documentaries telling us more than they leave out? The examples shown above show that the biggest problem with media is that is it designed on emotions and not reason, documentaries are to personal and are limited to one's perspective. Bowling for columbine and Blackfish also include many examples of doctored evidence, which allows the director to manipulate an individual's perceptive on a topic. Therefore, this cements the idea that