

Final Essay

Film Studies 100 - Assignment 2

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Making reference to Bill Nichols' chapter, "Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?", address why ethics are so important to documentary filmmaking. How do we see this centrality of ethics at work in *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer 2012) AND one other appropriate documentary?

1.0 Introduction

Films are made to represent ideals of society if not to suggest alternatives. Documentaries strive to represent the world in its most natural, 'unfiltered' form. In their purest form, documentaries are non-fictional and tend to express ideals, perspectives, experiences, and stories of people, communities, and places. Documentaries serve as mediums of raising public awareness and their beauty lies in the fact that while retaining a fine balance between journalistic and artistic tradition, these films can convey different meanings based on how a director chooses to present his/her argument.

In his chapter, 'Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?', Bill Nichols emphasizes that documentaries have three main functions. First, "documentaries offer us a likeness or depiction of the world that bears a recognizable familiarity" (Nichols 42), second, "documentaries also stand for or represent the interests of others" (Nichols 43), and third, "documentaries make a case for a particular interpretation of the evidence before us" (Nichols 44).

While examining what documentaries convey, he also emphasizes on the central role that ethics plays in documentary film making. Hence, this essay will explore how ethics are central to documentary films. It will explore the role of ethics in two documentaries, *The Act of Killing* by Joshua Oppenheimer, 2013 and a Vice episode, *SOFEX: The Business of War* by Shane Smith, 2012.

Both these films take a rhetorical form with various ethical choices throughout that shape the audiences' understanding of the film. This essay argues that ethical choices are central to the accurate conveyance of meaning in documentaries. Hence, ethical choices made by the directors with regard to how information is presented in their films through its narrative form, helps guide the audiences' understanding and position on the issue at hand.

2.0 Ethics

Ethics are central to the making of any documentary and can be divided into two categories - ethics of content form and ethics of professional practise. Every director is required to make various ethical choices while filming – from deciding what parts of a story to include or omit (content form), to deciding whether to pay a ‘performing’ individual or not (professional practise). In the case of omitting information, there is usually no doubt that such a practise is unethical as one would expect all the facts of an argument to be presented. Although, in the latter case of payment to an individual appearing in a documentary, one side of the debate is that these, “Social actors continue to conduct their lives more or less as they would have done without the presence of a camera” (Nichols 46), so why should they be paid? However, on the other hand, it is only because the individual has consented to share their personal experience that the film has a purpose and meaning - maybe they should be paid.

Traditionally, documentaries only presented information – they were purely journalistic. However, this changed with the New Journalism movement; Documentaries were now creative non-fiction – a perfect blend of journalism and creativity. Ethical considerations don't just come into play while filming, but also in the message that the film wants to get across, and how it does so. Hence, ethical considerations of a film majorly revolve around how information is conveyed. Information is fundamental to any film as it

guides the viewers' overall understanding and perspective on the subject matter. The way information is presented to the viewer is guided by the narrative form. Hence, documentary filmmakers are expected to present all facts of an argument in an unbiased manner. The biggest ethical conflict arises when the director fails to strike a balance between his journalistic duties and artistic freedom. Being too objective can deter meaning, while being too subjective can create bias.

Documentary film makers are expected to conform to journalistic tradition of being objective, honest, and unbiased. It would be highly un-ethical if the biased and prejudiced view of a director led to the misrepresentation of information. Hence, directors need to have a certain level of sensitivity with respect to the motives and aim of their film, where the outcome is achieved without any manipulation.

3.0 The Documentaries

The Act of Killing by Joshua Oppenheimer documents the journey of former Indonesian death squad members while they make their own film, re-enacting the killings they had conducted during the Indonesian genocide. The film's ethical stand remains elusive until the end. Throughout the film, Oppenheimer merely serves as a bridge between the subjects and the audience. This minimal intervention on behalf of the director helps the narrative freely flow in the direction that the subjects take it in. Hence, the film progresses with a neutral stance, leaving all judgement up to the audience. It is only towards the climatic end of the film that the director steps in, turning it all around by channelling information through a new lens.

The Vice episode, SOFEX: Business of War is one that documents the de-sensitized business of war. SOFEX (Special Operations Forces Exhibition and Conference) is a biyearly

convention hosted by Jordan, where 85 countries participate, buying and selling cutting-edge weaponry. The presenter and director, Shane Smith, walks the viewer through the convention, looking at exhibits, drills, and talking to various people, giving the viewer a good feel of the ambiance. Although Smith seems to have his personal opinion on this practise, he does not directly endorse it. He simply guides the narrative by exploring opinions of other people by conversing with them, leaving it up to the audience to decided what their stand is.

4.0 The Role of Ethics

Although none of the films directly attempt to ‘impose’ their ideologies onto the viewer, they are essentially rhetorical documentaries, and hence do attempt to change the viewer’s opinion to a certain extent. However, as these documentaries are very subtle in their persuasion, their narrative form plays a crucial role in what is conveyed.

In every film, the relationship established between the subjects, filmmaker, and audience is crucial to how the presented information is interpreted. Bill Nichols divides the relationship between subjects and filmmakers of documentaries into 3 broad forms, “I speak about them to you”, “I/we speak about us to you”, and “It speaks about them/it to us” (Nichols 60). The difference in these forms is simply based on who presents the information to the audience. When the director speaks about a cause to the audience, then there is a sense of authority, credibility, and distance that is established, where the audiences’ opinion is likely to be in line with the director’s interpretation of the cause. On the same lines, if the director choses to represent the cause itself, then again, he endorses his own personal opinion, which the audience has the flexibility to accept or reject. But, when the director lets a cause represent itself, merely serving as a bridge, the audiences’ opinion is completely based on its own ability to perceive information. This tends to be the most unfiltered, ethical, and effective form of documentary film making.

The Act of Killing is a film that follows the, 'It speaks about them to us' form. Throughout the film, Oppenheimer only observes and documents the subjects as they make their film. While it would have seemed as though the main aim of the film was only to document the gangsters' journey of making the film, it actually had an underlying motive to expose the killers. It can be debated that Oppenheimer played trickster as while the subjects took pride in making their film, Oppenheimer secretly took the individuals on a journey of an 'accidental' self-exposure.

"Documentary filmmakers typically obtain a release from anyone they film that grants full decision-making power to the film-maker. The individual forfeits any and all control over the use of his or her likeness and therefore over the final outcome. A common litmus test for many of these ethical issues is the principle of "informed consent" (Nichols 53). The ethical debate in this case revolves around whether the subjects were ever informed that Oppenheimer would end the film on such a note. On one side of the debate, this can be classified as clear-cut manipulation, which is unethical. Although the subjects had signed his releases for filming, they never could have predicted the line of questioning that was to come. However, the debate in favour of this is that if Oppenheimer had guided the film, and informed them of what is to come, they wouldn't have been true to their character. "Self-consciousness and modifications in behaviour can document the ways in which the act of filmmaking alters the reality it sets out to represent" (Nichols 46). Hence, the only way for Oppenheimer to achieve his goal was to take the disillusioned killers on this journey of self-discovery.

While it would have seemed as though the director was working 'with' the subjects throughout the film, his line of questioning towards the end changed their relationship to a distant one. Oppenheimer questioned their character, now channelling the information

through his previously suppressed opinion of them being boastful, disillusioned killers. In theory, this would have been deemed as an ambush or un-ethical manipulation. But, what shielded him was the fact that he first let the subjects proudly and foolishly expose their disillusioned selves, without any intervention. Only then did he express his opinion, hoping that the 'ethical' audience has already taken a moral stand.

SOFEX subtly follows the, "I speak about them to you" narrative form. While Smith does walk the viewer through the convention, the information conveyed comes only through his unfiltered conversations with people. Of course, the ethical debate in this scenario could be that the conversation is guided only through the interviewer's questioning. But the argument of Smith's questions being loaded is evidently dismissed by his true journalistic practise.

Hence, while the narrative form of this film might seem relatively confined, the information flows just as freely. "Issues often arise in relation to the question of how to relate to people ethically because of the degree to which the filmmaker stands apart from those he or she films. The filmmaker controls the camera and thus possesses a power others don't. Further, filmmakers, especially journalistic filmmakers, belong to organizations and institutions with their own standards and practices" (Nichols 58). Hence, as Smith runs the reputed organization VICE, it would be deemed unethical of him to endorse his personal opinions. Therefore, he smartly steers the conversation through his conversations with people, using their opinions to channel the audiences'.

For example, when Smith asked a marine how he felt about the convention, he responded, "You know, it's weird, man. It's like everybody's real cordial with each other. But, at the end of the day, we're, like, buying weapons to destroy each other. I don't want to, like, sound liberal or anything. But it's really not glamorous. This shit fucking kills people."

This seemed to be the turning point of the whole documentary, because a marine of all people, had expressed how de-sensitised everyone had become. This clearly served as a wake-up call to the viewer and provoked moral questioning of the convention itself.

“In this case the filmmakers adopt a professional detachment from the issues at hand. Ethics need not mean taking a stand for or against the values and beliefs of others so much as acting in ways that do not withhold respect from subjects or undermine trust from audiences” (Nichols 59). Hence, Smith’s ethical choice of not expressing his opinion directly, and instead letting others do so, played to his advantage as he conformed to journalistic traditions, presenting information objectively, and yet achieved the desired outcome.

Throughout the film, it was only the weapons, drills, and interviewees that were shown. Although, Smith decided to ‘silently’ end on a rhetorical note to express his opinion. The film climaxes with the gory footage of actual people being killed by airstrikes, leaving the viewer with feelings of unease and disgust. This was a very smart choice as while Smith never actually ‘said’ anything, he had successfully convinced the audience of how inhumane this business is. Hence, even though this can be seen as a move to influence the audiences’ opinion, the argument is dismissed by the fact that killing itself is considered ethically wrong.

5.0 Conclusion

Every film maker has his/her own style that is shaped by their personal experiences. It is natural for each of them to have their own subjective opinions. The influence of style and ideologies over the films they make is inevitable to a certain extent. Of course, a documentary film maker would choose to make a film for a cause they believe in. Although, what is respected is film maker’s ability to separate their beliefs from the films message, and make something unbiased, that pushes the audience to introspect, and take their own stand.

“Filmmakers who choose to observe others but not to intervene overtly in their affairs run the risk of altering behaviour and events and of having their own human responsiveness called into question” (Nichols 52). So, if the ethical debate were about Oppenheimer’s sensitivity, then in theory, “ethical considerations attempt to minimize harmful effects” (Nichols 52). Although, if one were to weigh out the killers’ wrongdoings in comparison to Oppenheimer’s attack on their character, then they clearly deserved to know that they were wrong. Oppenheimer’s film destroyed the regime of fear and impunity that was built by the killers, and this was acknowledged by the Indonesian government, and the world. Hence, even if Oppenheimer’s method is deemed as un-ethical, the end still justifies the means.

In my opinion, both the films were brilliantly executed through meticulous planning. I strongly believe that no ethical lines were crossed in the making of either films and instead felt that it was the directors’ ‘un-expressed’ ethical stand that helped guided the narrative and let the cause speak for itself, making the films so powerful.

Works Cited

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