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English 250H

Rhetorical Analysis of “The Corporation”

“A corporation is like a…” is a commonly used phrase in the first scene of “The Corporation.” In this first scene, the filmmakers focus on defining what a corporation is and how it affects society as a whole. In here, they define a corporation as several different things according to several different people. The use of pathos in this first scene is almost overpowering, seeing as there’s almost nonexistent logos and ethos. Using this theme and many different audiovisual elements in the first scene set the mood for the rest of the documentary.

The bulk of the first scene is based in audio clips of people talking. The main comparison phase is in the second half of this opening scene. Different voices speak over video clips of whatever comparison they’re describing. The first few comparisons display “nice,” wholesome images of a company (i.e. a puzzle, a football team, a family, an eagle). After the image of an eagle, the view goes to the man that is making the eagle comparison. The filmmakers show the man’s credentials, as a possible attempt to establish ethos with the audience so they feel like they can trust this man. He continues by saying “Enough bullshit,” which is clearly an attempt by the filmmakers to show that he doesn’t really mean the words he just said, nor does he think that companies are majestic like an eagle. The audience would pick up on that immediately and it would strike a negative point in their minds about companies before the documentary had really even begun. This is clearly the filmmakers using pathos to negatively influence the audience. It’s at this interview that the filmmakers decide to change the course of these comparisons to better provide for their agenda. They start to interview people who compare corporations to bad things, like Godzilla and Frankenstein. It seems like the filmmakers are trying to lull the audience with the helpful comparisons of corporations to good things, and then convince them otherwise that corporations can be very bad.

Another comparison that the writers make is that corporations are like “bad apples.” They spend much of the first half of this scene on this comparison, stressing its point that companies are, for the most part, corrupt. The filmmakers use pathos in many different forms of media to emphasize that, to convince their audience that these corporations and ones after them are mostly bad apples. They start off with the song “Bad Apple” by David Wilcox, and play it over top of images and video clips of CEOs and other executives being escorted away by police officers, testifying in court, etc. Quickly moving images of news reporters saying “bad apple” directly follow this scene. It’s important to note that there are no facts used in this series of images, only the fast blur that is trying to mold the audience’s minds in a way that makes them think about corporations as “bad apples.” The very short news clips are just a barrage of people saying “bad apple” whose only purpose would be to show the audience how much this bad thing has spread. This was a strategic move by the filmmakers to use immense amounts of pathos to sway their audience, without using sufficient amounts of logos. This seems to be the filmmakers’ main crux, that is, to use pathos as much as they can, at least in this first scene. Finally, the narrator comes in and sets up the mood for the rest of the documentary. The dialogue is played over a video of an apple-picking machine, insinuating more about the “bad apples.” Mentioned again later, the music in this section is ominous, largely in an attempt to influence the audience in more ways than one (i.e. Not just visually, but aurally as well). The intended “meat” or body of this documentary’s first scene isn’t the only thing that can help convince the audience. The subtler audio and visual clues can help sway the audience’s point of view as well.

The use of color in this first scene again works with the documentary’s agenda. The scene starts out with almost a minute of company logos flashing by in pure black and white, perhaps to starkly contrast them and show the audience how many there are and how much of an impact they might have. This strategy is cleverly interlaid with the narrator saying things that go along with the flashing, contrasting images. Using both audio and video simultaneously to prove the same point is a neat strategy employed by the producers to gain more and more of the audience’s opinion to swing to the filmmakers’ “side.” Another use of different colors and film-altering tactics used is in the use of old-fashioned films. The filmmakers decided that inserting many of these films into their documentary would help prove their point a little better. The old-fashioned films are put everywhere into not only the first scene, but the entire documentary as well. Many of these films are of the educational, classic 50s style variety. I think the producers were trying to show how corporations used to be fully good and innocent back when they first began and now they’ve changed to be something completely different (as alluded to in the “bad apple” comparison).

What I haven’t focused on much is the music in this scene. Apart from the obvious song “Bad Apple,” most of the music played is played very subtly as background music. However, even though the music is quieter and not as prominent, it still has a profound effect on the intended audience. During the beginning piece of this scene, the music that plays is quite ominous and is intended to leave the audience wary of the images being shown. The images shown are many company logos and a tour through an office building. As a result of these two elements being played together, the audience begins to associate ominous with corporations and they become wary of the latter. Along with this, the narrator is speaking in a soft voice, leading the audience in. The producers are hoping to use these elements as the pathos needed to trigger an emotional response from their audience and turn them against corporations. This music/narrator mix is a common theme all the way through not only the first scene, but also the entire documentary. The repetition of this combination is surely intentional. The repetition of it is intended so the audience is brought back to that same feeling or mindset they felt the first time they heard that “theme song,” if you will. And again, the filmmakers here are hoping that their first mindset is one that would end up turning the audience against corporations in order to fulfill their strategy for this documentary.

As one can see, in the first scene the filmmakers are setting up their agenda. They’re setting up the mood and “feel” of the film before the facts even start coming forth. To accomplish this, they use a wide variety of elements and tactics to force their audience to think the way that the filmmakers intended. They end up using video clips, music tracks (both apparent and subtle), narration, and live interviews. They end up weaving these various elements together in a complex web to produce different forms of pathos, ethos, and logos. Although pathos took the largest portion of argumentative appeals by far, the filmmakers smartly put in small helpings of the other two as well to keep a semi-balanced and well-rounded documentary.

Work Cited

*The Corporation*. Dir. Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar. Perf. Mikela J. Mikael. Big Picture Media Corporation, 2004. DVD.