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AP Language and Composition
19 February 2020

From Visionary to Fraud: The Downturn of America's Next Great Inventor

Though Thomas Edison is commonly known as America's greatest inventor, he is also responsible for introducing a highly deceptive technique to innovators. Edison knew that his success in selling his inventions relied on his manipulation of the press. From Edison to the greatest inventors of Silicon Valley today, projecting the illusion of success while developing a new invention has led to the greatest lift in marketing, and it has evolved into a defining phrase of Silicon Valley: "Fake it 'till you make it." In the documentary *The Inventor: Out For Blood in Silicon Valley*, directed by Alex Gibney, Gibney tells the story of Elizabeth Holmes, a nineteen-year-old Stanford University dropout who built a nine billion dollar biotech company named Theranos. Envisioning a groundbreaking medical technology that had the potential to revolutionize the healthcare industry, Holmes promised to cheaply and rapidly conduct standard blood tests with just a finger poke of blood. Gibney depicts the evolution of Holmes's journey from a promising visionary capable of changing the world, to a fraud putting human lives at risk. He juxtaposes Holmes's deceptive rhetoric with truth-revealing interviews and archival footage of other inventors to expose Holmes's progressively fraudulent downturn; ultimately, he criticizes the Silicon Valley system of "fake it 'till you make it" in being responsible for destroying the moral compass of a modern-day inventor.

Setting up a glossy image of Holmes and her company, Gibney accentuates her idolized figure by imitating her own rhetorical strategies and comparing her to leaders of the technology industry. At the beginning of the film, Gibney incorporates footage of Holmes speaking about her vision. These TED talks, speeches, and interviews immediately establish her persona as an intelligent hero, working for the public good and bringing greater wellbeing to the average

American through modern technology. In order to emphasize the attention she was receiving from the world, Gibney interweaves this footage with interviews of world-renowned economists, scientists, and politicians, such as George Shultz, who praises her as “a revolutionary in the truest sense.” Gibney elaborates on the public perception of Holmes at the time, juxtaposing identically constructed images of Steve Jobs holding an iPod, and Holmes holding a nanotube of blood. Gibney cinematically imitates Holmes’s crafted persona as “the next Steve Jobs” through this comparison (*The Inventor*), as Holmes modeled her life on Jobs down to the smallest details including the black turtlenecks he wore to work every day. Gibney establishes a similar perception of Holmes’s technology, the Edison Machine (named after Thomas Edison), characterizing it as a highly modern disruptor of the blood diagnostics industry. He incorporates archival footage of the first blood analysis laboratories from the 1950s, depicting the large amounts of blood and massive machines that phlebotomy required. After Holmes reveals that phlebotomy has remained relatively unchanged since its beginnings, Gibney exhibits an animation of an Edison machine. The animation shows the perfectly operating internal machinery of the miniaturized laboratory, using only a finger poke of blood. Lastly, Gibney associates traditional phlebotomy with close-up footage of a needle penetrating skin and drawing large amounts of blood from a vein. The disturbing image makes Holmes’s finger poke method seem painless, convenient, and more modern compared to 20th-century methods of blood extraction. In promoting a glossy, idealized perception of Holmes and her company, Gibney emphasizes the promise Holmes showed and the wide-spread support for her vision.

Gibney then breaks open the messy, inner reality of Theranos by establishing fundamental, scientific differences between Edison’s and Holmes’s visions. Similar to Jobs, Gibney directly associates Holmes with Edison. While using archival footage of Edison’s success to hint at Holmes’s promise as an inventor, Gibney exposes the fact that Edison spent four years testing 6000 different filaments. Another animation of Theranos’s Edison machine

follows Edison's 6000 failures; however, this second animation reveals endless complications and defects. Thin glass needles transferring blood from one procedure to another snap, blood spills on the insides of the machine, and the miniature machinery is defective. With the animation of the faulty machine, Gibney disconnects the idealized vision of the machine from its reality. While initially associating Holmes with Edison, Gibney fundamentally separates the two inventors' failures by incorporating interviews of scientific experts. Theranos biochemist Douglass Matje and engineer Dave Philipiddes reveal that Holmes attempted to bend the laws of physics to miniaturize a blood laboratory inside a small box. While Edison broke the boundaries of knowledge during his time, Holmes set out on a mission to surpass scientific limitations. In this key difference, Gibney unveils a significant deviation of Holmes's journey from successful inventors like Edison and Jobs. When the scientists pitched the need for a slightly larger box to fit more effective machinery, Holmes replied, "maybe you are not a Silicon Valley person." Her intense fixation on realizing her vision inevitably manifested in her denial of reality. Just like Edison, she vigorously abided by the "fake it 'till you make it" mindset; however, a central aspect of Gibney's criticism is that Holmes was dealing with medical technology, which directly impacts people's health and wellbeing.

Finally, Gibney re-incorporates footage, which earlier developed Holmes's powerful image, with a different context in order to reveal her repeated pattern of lies and danger to the public. Gibney exposes the fraud of Theranos's Walgreens launch (a deal Holmes secured by manipulating regulators) by associating with Theranos the very practices Holmes promised to eradicate. John Carrayou, the journalist who exposed the deception of Theranos, had a test done at Walgreens and reveals that instead of the finger poke of blood the company promised, he received a traditional venous draw. Gibney re-plays the disturbing, close-up footage of a needle piercing a vein immediately after Carrayou's story; in this scene, Gibney directly associates the needle with Theranos. Interviews with previous Theranos scientists reveal that the majority of

the Walgreens blood tests were conducted using conventional methods and large machines, instead of by the Edison machine as Holmes deceptively attested. Gibney then incorporates images of large laboratory equipment that Theranos used for the tests, along with the same archival footage of machines from the 1950s, further associating the company with the very technology it promised to revolutionize. In many of the tests, Theranos did use the finger poke method; however, the company then diluted the small samples so that the traditional large machines could analyze them, dangerously skewing the accuracy of the tests and resulting in hundreds of dangerous false positives and missed diagnoses. After exposing this deception, Gibney incorporates a powerful scene in which Holmes's rhetoric, speeches, and interviews from the beginning of the film blur together in a collage of black and white videos. Since Gibney spends half of the film building up Holmes's image, the obfuscated footage destroys the viewer's physical and moral perception of her. A final interview reveals the extent of Holmes's delusion as she still grasps her initial vision, despite her intricate web of lies. Gibney credits Holmes's over attachment to her dream for warping her sense of right and wrong.

Through Holmes's story, Gibney reveals the dangers of the Silicon Valley mindset, in which inventors set out to achieve a goal so close to the edge of reality that they have no way of knowing if they can truly achieve it. Silicon Valley creates a separation between two worlds: the messy, internal reality of a company and its glossy external image. By imitating Holmes, Gibney illuminates the rhetorical techniques that technology leaders use to gain publicity and burnish their external image. Comparing Holmes to other inventors, Gibney reveals that Holmes attempted to break the laws of physics. Finally, Gibney exposes the internal reality of Theranos through interviews with former employees and juxtaposes them with Holmes's rhetoric to highlight the mass deception. By telling the story of Holmes's journey from a visionary to a fraud, Gibney effectively condemns the inhumanity behind the corporate desire for personal gain. While some of the largest companies of today's world consistently manage their image for

the best monetary results, the story of Theranos warns industry leaders against “[faking] it ‘till you make it” especially when people’s lives are at stake.

Rhetorical Analysis on Documentary Film

Introduction and Thesis. Presents a clear, succinct thesis that clearly articulates the argument that the filmmaker makes, <i>how</i> they develop it, and the extent to which they are successful in achieving their purpose. Begins with an engaging hook that leads smoothly into the thesis statement. Includes a specific and creative title. 15	15
Paragraph Unity and Cohesion. The degree to which the paragraphs focus on one argumentative point; utilize transitions; cohere in a manner that drives the argument; and incorporates evidence smoothly. 15	15
Content and Evidence. The degree to which the paragraphs develop the argument with evidence; explore the significance of director’s choices; and demonstrate a critical and insightful understanding of the documentary. 15	15
Conclusion. The degree to which the last paragraph summarizes the major parts of the argument and addresses further ramifications and further philosophical insights. 15	15
Style and Mechanics. The degree to which the writing demonstrates an appropriate voice; shows an ability to vary syntax and structure for effect; uses active, accurate verbs; exhibits the conventions of usage, mechanics, punctuation and MLA citation. Stays within the 4 page, double-spaced limit. 15	14

Nihaar,

Outstanding job. I was so swept up by your analysis and the clarity of your writing that I nearly forgot to comment in the margins! I know how hard you worked on this paper and the irony is that all that effort made the reading experience effortless -- the absolute highest compliment.

How far you've come in your writing since ninth grade! This essay is truly "next level" in terms of your intellectual insight and the sophistication of your style. Wonderful work.

74/75 99%