

How Do Conspiracy Theorists Argue?
A Sample Analysis of *Loose Change Second Edition* (2006) – Part II

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Author:

Michael Butter and students from the University of Tübingen (Teresa Blessing, Alexandra Fouki, Maximilian Hahn, Johanna Häußner, Clarissa Heinzelmann, Christian Kurz, Thorben Manzke, Marina Pingler, Claudia Scholtysik, Alisa Stümpfle, Tim Tichy, Melis Varan and Sabrina Wagner)

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Loose Change was produced by twenty-three-year-old Dylan Avery with his friends Korey Rowe and Jason Bermas on a laptop for a few thousand dollars. Released online, the film became a hit practically overnight. Within a year, the original version and the revised version compiled shortly afterwards had received several million views or downloads, [prompting the magazine *Vanity Fair* to describe it as the first blockbuster of the internet age](#). In the period up to 2009, Avery released several more versions, the last one being *Loose Change: An American Coup*.


The *Loose Change* films, which challenge the official version of the 9/11 attacks, are the most well-known and financially successful example of a specific type of conspiracy narrative: the feature-length documentary. These documentaries have been an important form of conspiracy theorizing for the past 15 years. They thrive particularly on YouTube. Many people come into contact with a specific conspiracy theory for the first time through such films. It is therefore important to understand their rhetoric and argumentative strategies.

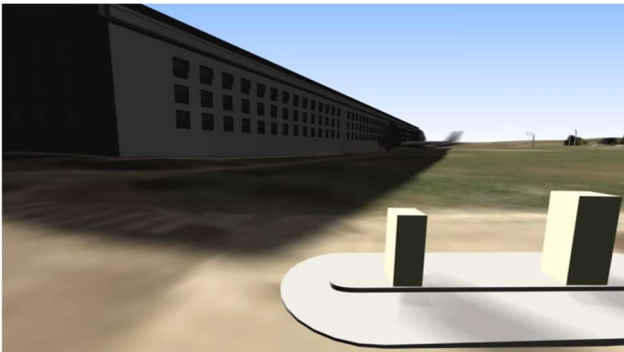
Loose Change lends itself to a sample analysis for several reasons. First, the films are well known and very well made. Watching them, it is easy to understand why many people were convinced by its arguments. Second, the films are quite typical of contemporary conspiracy theories in that they claim that they are “only asking questions” and pointing to the contradictions and impossibilities in the official version of events. At the same time, however, the films also develop a counternarrative: they blame parts of the Bush administration for the attacks. Third, the films employ all the strategies that experts have identified as characteristic of conspiracy theories.

[For this sample analysis, we have chosen the digitally remastered version of *Loose Change* Second Edition, which Korey Rowe uploaded to his YouTube Channel on December 12, 2018.](#) If the film is no longer available under this link by the time you want to watch it, you should be able to find the same version on other YouTube channels.

Our analysis focuses on the first minutes of the film to identify the larger story it tells, and on the beginning of the Pentagon sequence to identify the different strategies it employs. The analysis of the opening sequence follows here. It focuses mostly on how the combination of images and voice-over creates a counternarrative for the 9/11 attacks. See the other PDF file for the analysis of the opening minutes of the film in which the major claims of the movie are presented in a condensed fashion before they are then more fully developed in the rest of the film.

	Screenshots	Audio	Analysis
11:56 – 12:14		No voice-over. Airplane noise fades in and then out.	The Pentagon sequence begins with a quote by then secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, taken from a telephone interview with <i>Parade</i> magazine on October 12, 2001. The quote reproduced in the film's characteristic fashion – white letters against a black background – is taken out of context. The passage from which the quote was taken is not explicitly about the attack on the Pentagon but about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in general and the role of intelligence in fighting them. Rumsfeld was not explicitly asked if he believed that it was an American Airline plane that flew into the Pentagon. Since it was an oral interview, it is highly possible that he made a simple slip of the tongue. It is also possible that he was speaking metaphorically, as an airplane flown with the intention of damaging or destroying a target serves the same purpose as a missile.

			<p>Technical difficulties that led to a faulty audio transcription could also offer an alternative explanation. On the Defense Department’s website, where the interview was reposted, Rumsfeld is quoted as saying, “Here we’re talking about plastic knives and using an American Airline flight filled with our citizens, and the missile to damage this building and similar [inaudible] that damaged the World Trade Center” (https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=3845). The note “inaudible” appears six times in the transcript. However, <i>Loose Change</i> deliberately leaves this part of the quotation out.</p> <p>Since conspiracy theorists do not believe in innocent mistakes and ascribe an interpretation to everything, Rumsfeld’s statement is presented as an accidental admission of a missile strike. <i>Loose Change</i> wants to make viewers believe that, for a moment, Rumsfeld dropped his facade and revealed the truth. The quote thus prepares the ground for the claim that a cruise missile hit the Pentagon, which is presented a few minutes later.</p> <p>However, if there had been a government conspiracy and Rumsfeld had been part of it, it is very unlikely that he would have revealed this in an interview with <i>Parade</i>. Moreover, to this day, Rumsfeld has never admitted to believing it was anything other than Flight 77 that hit the Pentagon.</p>
12:15 – 13:07		<p>12:18 9:38, Arlington Virginia. Hani Hanjour allegedly executes a 330 degree turn at 530 miles per hour, descending 7,000 feet in two and a half minutes to crash American Airlines Flight 77 into the ground floor of the Pentagon.</p> <p>12:28 <i>Russ Wittenberg</i>: The airplane could not possibly have flown at</p>	<p>The quotation is followed by an animated sequence that presents the official version of what happened. The voice-over narration bombards the viewer with numbers and technical terms, such as “high-speed stall” and “the G maneuver,” suggesting that the plane’s pilot performed an extremely complicated maneuver.</p> <p>In this sequence, the film, via the voice-over commentary, does not yet explicitly articulate a conspiracy theory. But it casts doubt on the official version by quoting an alleged expert, pilot</p>



those speeds which they said it did without going into what they call a high-speed stall. Airplane won't go that fast when you start pulling those high G maneuvers, those bankings...

12:53 Its final approach took it directly across Interstate 395, knocking light poles out of the ground and bouncing off of the lawn before impact.

Russ Wittenberg. Wittenberg is introduced as a "commercial pilot" who has flown "the planes used in the 9/11 attacks." He thus appears as somebody able to accurately evaluate the situation.

However, the documentary conceals his involvement in conspiracy-theory circles. A little research reveals that, after the 9/11 attacks, Wittenberg became involved in the 9/11 Truth movement and that he was also involved in the publication of the book *Painful Questions* (2002) by Holocaust denier Eric Hufschmid, one of the first books published questioning the official version of the events on 9/11

(http://grassrootsteapartyactivists.com/?tribe_events=captain-russ-wittenberg-candidate-us-congress-cd6). Wittenberg advised Hufschmid on questions of technical details. These circumstances are, of course, concealed in order to establish Wittenberg as an impartial person who only cares about the truth.

Finally, if one does a little digging it also transpires that a G maneuver is well within the capabilities of a Boeing 757 (<http://911research.wtc7.net/essays/pentagon/index.html#approach>).

It is also worth noting that the simulation of the attack that the film uses does not show the plane bouncing off the lawn before hitting the building. This is important because a few minutes later the film will argue that the absence of traces on the lawn suggests that the Pentagon was not hit by a plane.



13:07 First let's meet Hani Hanjour. Hanjour had come to Freeway Airport in Bowie, Maryland one month earlier seeking to rent a small plane. However, when Hanjour went on three test runs in the second week of August, he had trouble controlling and landing a single-engine Cessna 172.

13:27 Bernard: My name is Marcel Bernard and I'm the chief flight instructor here at Freeway. Hani Hanjour, well basically what happened with him is he showed up at the airport and wanted to get checked out in the aircraft. See he was already certified; he didn't come to us for flight training.

Avery: Yeah he already had a pilot's license.

Bernard: You know he earned his private instrument commercial at a school in Arizona, I don't remember the name of the school, but he already had certificates in hand and we sometimes occasionally have pilots that come to us that don't want flight training but just want to rent our aircraft.

Avery: Which is the case of Hani Hanjour.

Once the initial doubt has been cast on the official version, the film begins to provide a number of allegedly convincing counterarguments. Dylan Avery's enumeration, beginning here with "first," suggests that what the film presents is a coherent and logical argument.


After an "expert" has just explained that it is (nearly) impossible to fly the plane as it did according to the official version, a focus on the pilot almost suggests itself. The portrait photos of Hani do not only introduce him; they also emphasize how young he was – certainly not an experienced pilot.

The shots of Freeway Airport where he took flight lessons, by contrast, highlight the thorough research the filmmakers have undertaken. They have, it appears, visited the location and spoken to Hani's flight instructor.

The voice-over immediately casts doubts on his skills as a pilot, stressing that he had trouble controlling and landing even a considerably smaller plane. This suggests that he would have had even more problems with a big Boeing. However, this is wrong, as bigger planes are easier to control than small ones once they are in the air. And, importantly, Hani never intended to properly land the plane but to crash it into the Pentagon.

The interview with the flight instructor is supposed to cast further doubts on Hani's skills as a pilot. However, if one listens closely to what the instructor has to say, this attempt is rather unsuccessful. While he describes Hani's piloting skills as "average or below average" he never questions Hani's ability to fly a plane.

But, maybe in order to keep the audience from realizing what the instructor is actually saying, dramatic music sets in as he is speaking his final sentences, building a sound bridge to the next argument against the official version.

		<p><i>Bernard:</i> Which is the case with Hani. He wanted to get checked out as we call to rent our aircraft and our insurance requires that he flies with one of our instructors to be found competent to rent, and that was the process that he was going through. The consensus was that he was very quiet, average or below average piloting skills, English was very poor. So I don't know where to, that's about the best description I can get, give you for his demeanor. A time very uneventful from our perspective.</p>	
<p>14:41 – 14:50</p>		<p>14:41 Regardless, air traffic controllers at Dulles International Airport that were tracking flight 77 all thought that it was a military plane.</p>	<p>The voice-over's stressing that air controllers thought it was a military plane casts further doubt on the official version, and it renders Hani unimportant because he did not have access to such a plane.</p> <p>Once again, however, it is easy to debunk this claim. Air traffic control thought it was a military machine because normally passenger aircrafts would not perform such risky manoeuvres, not because passenger planes cannot do them (https://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=123822&page=1). Moreover, Collins, the air controller quoted on screen, later clarified her statement, stressing that it was merely the plane's flight pattern that led her and others to this conclusion (http://www.911myths.com/images/5/50/OBriensLetter.pdf).</p>
<p>14:41 – 15:23</p>		<p>14:41 Regardless, air traffic controllers at Dulles International Airport that were tracking flight 77 all thought that it was a military plane.</p>	<p>The film suggests next that the plane could not have damaged several light poles and continued its flight to hit the Pentagon. To "prove" this point, the film brings up the example of an accident a few years earlier, when a plane with President George H.W. Bush onboard hit a light pole prior to landing and crashed.</p>






14:50 Second, the light poles. On November 22nd 2004, a private jet en route to Houston to pick up George Bush Senior, clipped a single light pole and crashed a minute away from landing at Houston's Hobby airport. The wing ripped off upon impact, scattering debris over a hundred yards and yet, Flight 77 managed to tear five light poles completely out of the ground, without damaging either the wings or the light poles themselves. Instead, they seem to have just popped out of the ground.

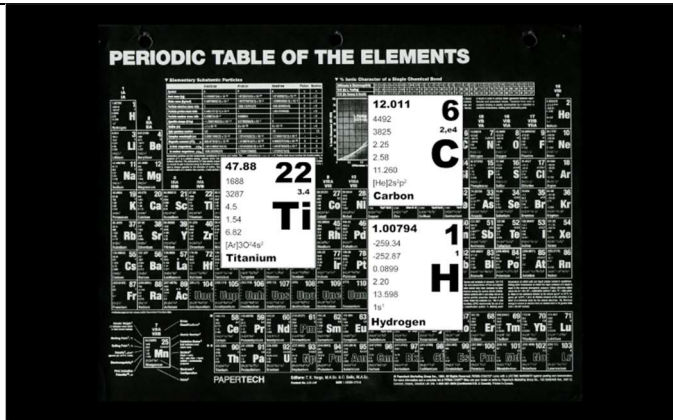
This crash happened but the analogy is false. It does not allow one to draw the conclusion that the voice-over draws. First, the plane was probably not "a minute away from landing," as claimed by the voice-over because it would have flown then much too high to hit a light pole. More likely, it hit the pole seconds before landing and thus at a much lower speed than the plane heading for the Pentagon was flying when it hit the poles.

Second, the plane was a Gulfstream II, which is a small plane with a capacity of 19 passengers and a wingspan of 68ft 10in. The plane that crashed into the Pentagon was a Boeing 757-200 with a capacity of 239 passengers and a wingspan of 124ft 10in. This means that those planes are in no way comparable and would have a very different impact when hitting objects.

Third, the voice-over claims that the light poles did not damage the wings. How would Avery know that if there are no traces of the plane, as he claims later. Quite typical for conspiracy theorists, he is contradicting himself here.

			
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">15:24 – 15:47</p>		<p>15:24 Third, you only have to look at the photos from that day to realize that whatever hit the Pentagon did not bounce off the lawn. If Flight 77 had crashed landed and skidded into the Pentagon it would have looked like this.</p> <p>15:41 Instead, it looked like this without a single scratch on the lawn.</p>	<p>The next argument the film presents is similarly feeble. The voice-over now suggests that the official version claims that the plane that hit the Pentagon “bounced off the lawn.” Based on this assumption, he claims that this cannot be true because there are no marks left on the lawn. Once again, he argues by way of analogy, presenting images from another plane crash and juxtaposing them with footage from outside the Pentagon after attacks.</p> <p>However, nobody ever claimed that the plane hit the lawn and then slid into the Pentagon. In fact, even the animated simulation of the impact shown at the beginning of the Pentagon sequences shows the plane hitting the building directly. Thus, it is not surprising that there are no marks on the lawn.</p> <p>Moreover, even if the plane had hit the lawn first, it is very likely to have left traces much different than the ones presented here as typical. The other plane crash shown here happened in Detroit in 1987 right after take-off. Thus, the landing gear must have still been out. By contrast, the landing gear was not out on the plane that hit the Pentagon because the terrorists never intended to land the plane.</p>

<p>15:48– 16:08</p>		<p>15:48 Fourth, why is there absolutely no trace of Flight 77? The official explanation is that the intense heat from the jet fuel vaporized the entire plane.</p> <p>16:01 Indeed, from these pictures it seems that there is absolutely no trace of a Boeing 757.</p>	<p>Next, the voice-over sets up a new line of argument, namely that there is nothing left of the plane that allegedly hit the Pentagon. This move prepares the ground for the eventual claim that it was a cruise missile and not a plane that hit the building.</p>
<p>16:09– 17:03</p>	<p>Operation Noble Eagle: AFIP Responds to September 11th Pentagon Terrorist Attacks</p> <p><i>by Christopher C. Ealy AFIP Public Affairs Director</i></p> <p>A multidisciplinary team of over 50 forensic specialists, scientists, and support personnel from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) played a major role in one of the most comprehensive forensic investigations in US history following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack at the Pentagon. Code named <i>Operation Noble Eagle</i>, AFIP's team of forensic pathologists, odontologists, a forensic anthropologist, DNA experts, investigators, and support personnel worked for over 2 weeks at the Dover</p> <p>AFB (Delaware) Port Mortuary to identify the 188 victims of the attack. "Our staff represented every branch of the service," said AFIP Director Glenn N. Wagner, CAPT, MC, USN, who served as the senior officer during the operation. "We also received tremendous support from the doctors, nurses, and technicians stationed at Dover who participated in the investigation."</p> <p>The investigation mobilized AFIP assets in many ways. In the hours following the crash of American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon, the acting Armed Forces Medical Examiner, AbuBakr Marzouk, Col, USAF, MC, worked with FBI and local Virginia law enforcement officials to create an effective plan for recovering and identifying victims. At the same time, personnel from the Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner (OAFME) positioned and staged equipment to</p> <p><small>AFIP Director Glenn N. Wagner, CAPT, MC, USN (center) describes the forensic investigations taking place in the morgue during Operation Noble Eagle to the Army Surgeon General, James B. Peake, LTG, MC, USA. Looking on are Flavio G. Mallick, MD, SES, SrD, AFIP Principal Deputy Director and Col Joe Drobosko, the 416th Support Group Commander, Dover AFB. On the far right facing the morgue table is Andrew Baker, Maj, USAF, MC, chief deputy medical examiner. Also in the table is Tom Hekland (in the board), a forensic anthropologist from the Army's Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii (CILM).</small></p>	<p>16:09 But, if the fire was hot enough to incinerate a jumbo jet, then how can investigators identify 184 out of 189 people found at the Pentagon? The Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory, which was responsible for the task, was also responsible for identifying the dead in Shanksville.</p> <p>16:28 Titanium has a melting point of 1688 degrees Celsius. Jet fuel, also known as kerosene, is a hydrocarbon, which can retain a constant temperature of 1120 degrees Celsius after 40 minutes, but only if the fuel is maintained. The fuel would have burned off immediately upon impact. Therefore, it is scientifically impossible that 12 tons of steel and titanium was vaporized by kerosene. Likewise, the two engines should have been found relatively</p>	<p>The voice-over employs two important strategies of conspiracist discourse here. First, Avery asks a rhetorical question, casting doubt on the claim that most of the passengers could be identified by DNA analysis after their plane had vaporized. To cast even more doubt on this claim, he links the government agency that performed the identifications to another plane crash that day, the one at Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In a later section, the film will question the official narrative of that crash – that passengers brought down the plane, which was maybe heading for the White House – as well, and will suggest that the plane landed safely at an airport nearby.</p> <p>Secondly, he once again bombards the audience with numbers, assisted by an image of the periodic system, to suggest that it is “scientifically impossible” that the plane vaporized on impact. However, what he suggests here is that the plane consisted of 12 tons of Titanium or steel. In reality, the Boeing 757-223 (Flight 77’s model) was made of 78% aluminium and only 6% titanium. As the melting point of aluminium is lower than the temperature at which kerosene burns, it makes sense that most of the plane disappeared.</p>



intact at the Pentagon. Instead, there was a single turbo jet engine approximately three feet in diameter found inside the building.

17:04– 17:49






The second identifiable piece of debris was allegedly a piece of the fuselage. Skeptics have claimed that this is proof that Flight 77 hit the Pentagon but this piece could have come from any American Airlines plane. And why is it not singed or scratched after a 530 mile per hour impact and the subsequent fireball?



17:28 The third piece of debris was a diffuser case. Let's look a little closer at the diffuser case of a 757.

The voice-over now discusses the only pieces of debris allegedly found at the crash site and tries to cast doubt on the authenticity of each piece. The debris found outside the Pentagon is not damaged enough to come from the plane involved in the crash, it argues, suggesting that it was placed there by the conspirators to deceive the public into believing that a plane hit the Pentagon.

By the same token, the voice-over claims that the diffuser case found is not the one used in a plane of that type. However, the image of the one found on site is shown far too shortly to verify the claim. The audience must rely on the voice-over narrator, who is once again spinning the truth. On the one hand, the

	 	<p>Do you see the triangular bezels around the openings? Those are nowhere to be found on the case found at the Pentagon.</p> <p>17:43 The remainder of the debris was light enough to have been carried by hand. If Flight 77 was vaporized on impact, it would be the first time in aviation history.</p>	<p>diffusor case found on site is heavily damaged; on the other, such cases come in many different models. It is not at all certain that the one with “triangular bezzles” was used in this particular plane.</p>
<p>17:50– 18:22</p>		<p>17:55 For example, August 15th 2005, Helios airways flight 522, a Boeing 737 en route to Athens, Greece crashed into a hillside at full speed. 121 passengers all dead. Fire. Tail sections. Wing sections. Engines. Cockpit. Bodies.</p>	<p>The voice-over now wraps-up this line of argumentation. His claim that it would have been “the first time in aviation history” that a plane vaporized on impact aims at making the official version completely unbelievable. However, nobody ever claimed that the whole plane had vaporized; and the film itself draws attention to several pieces of debris found in the open.</p> <p>Moreover, the comparison with the plane that crashed near Athens, Greece in 2005 is once again misleading. As a quick internet search reveals, the plane, which had departed from Cyprus, eventually crashed because it ran out of fuel. Thus, it is not surprising that so many pieces of debris could be found. By</p>

			<p>contrast, the plane that hit the Pentagon had only taken off less than an hour before impact and carried enough fuel for a flight across the continent.</p>
<p>18:23– 20:05</p>	 	<p>18:22 Fifth, why is the damage to the Pentagon completely inconsistent with a Boeing 757?</p> <p>18:30 <i>*Music and crash sounds*</i></p> <p>18:40 These photos were taken before the roof of the outer ring had collapsed. The only damage to the outer wall is a single hole no more than 16 feet in diameter. A Boeing 757 is 155 feet long, 44 feet high. It has a 124-foot wingspan and weighs almost 100 tons. Are we supposed to believe that it disappeared into this hole without leaving any wreckage on the outside?</p> <p>19:12 Why is there no damage from where the wings, or the vertical stabilizer, or the engines would have slammed into the building? Remember how big the engines were? If six tons of steel and</p>	<p>The final way in which the section casts doubt on the official version is by claiming that the damage to the building is “completely inconsistent” with being hit by a plane. Once again, that this is indeed the case is implicitly taken as given by framing it as a rhetorical question. The answer of course is supposed to be clear: No plane hit the Pentagon. In fact, as in many other parts of this sequence and the film as a whole, rhetorical question is followed by rhetorical question so quickly that the average viewer has no time to think critically about what the questions entail.</p> <p>The animation, which highlights parts of the plane, suggests that the hole in the wall should be shaped accordingly. The film never ponders the possibility that the wings broke off and partly disappeared in the hole the plane ripped into the building, but this is exactly what happened (https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/a5659/debunking-911-myths-pentagon/). The plane did not cut a hole into the wall that has the shape of a plane, as happens in cartoons. Moreover, the outer wall collapsed after ca. 20 minutes, creating a much bigger hole. The film downplays this fact and uses images (like the third one reproduced on the left) that show a different building to mislead its audience. That this image was not taken at the Pentagon is actually rather obvious</p>

		<p>titanium slammed into the Pentagon at 530 miles per hour, they would bury themselves inside the building, leaving two very distinct imprints and yet, the only damage on the outside of the Pentagon is this single hole with no damage from where the engines would have hit. Why are the windows next to the hole completely intact? Why are the cable spools directly in front of the hole completely untouched? <i>*music fades out*</i> And as for the inside of the Pentagon, there's another hole approximately 16 feet in diameter, found on the other side of the C ring, three rings from the impact. For that hole to have been caused by Flight 77, the Boeing would have had to smash through nine feet of steel reinforced concrete.</p>	<p>because there was no parking space directly before the wall, and there was no graffiti on the walls of the Pentagon. But since the image is shown only for a moment during which the audience also has to listen to the voice-over commentary to follow the argument, one is bound to miss this when watching the film only once.</p>
<p>20:06 – 20:23</p>		<p>20:06 The nose of a commercial airliner is composed of lightweight carbon. This is what usually happens to the nose of a commercial airliner in a plane crash. If the nose caused this hole, where's the rest of the debris from the plane?</p>	<p>The voice-over continues to rely on rhetorical questions and once again misleads the audience. First, it does not make sense to compare the nose of a plane that was weaponized and aimed directly into the wall of the Pentagon to the nose of a plane that crashed during an emergency landing and did not hit a wall directly. Second, nobody ever claimed that the nose itself caused all the damage to the building – and, once again, the image not taken at the Pentagon is used. Obviously, it was the rest of the plane attached to the nose that pushed it into the wall and damaged it severely.</p>



20:24 – 20:48



20:23 So what could blow a 16 foot hole in the outer ring of the Pentagon, smash through nine feet of steel reinforced concrete, and leave another sixteen foot hole? A cruise missile. This is what Slobodan Milošević’s residence in Belgrade looked like after a Tomahawk cruise missile had hit it. See any similarities?

Finally, the voice-over commentary moves from casting doubt on the official version to providing an alternative. The rhetorical strategies, however, remain largely the same. The film makes use of rhetorical questions and relies on a juxtaposition, only that this time it emphasizes the similarities and not the differences between images from two different sites and events.

However, that the holes in two buildings look similar does not prove at all that they were damaged in the same way – especially since it is not always clear when the images from the Pentagon site were taken and some of the images presented as showing the Pentagon show different buildings. In addition,



when Avery mentions a cruise missile, the image track shows us a bazooka. And – to use a rhetorical question for once – how could a cruise missile have damaged the light poles that were discussed just a few minutes earlier? Accordingly, the claim that the building was hit not by a commercial airliner but by a cruise missile is baseless.