

Documentary Studies: Project #2

Blackfish vs. The Cove

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The Cove vs. Blackfish

Blackfish and *The Cove* are two documentaries that discuss and enlighten people on the way that marine mammals are treated by people. The topics that are debated in both films are ones that not many people have the full story on. These documentaries take a similar subject—marine mammals—and garner respect and attention to two practices that are not morally just. These documentaries draw attention to practices that have been very common for many years, and are controversial because of the way that they raise awareness for an industry that makes some people a lot of money. Although both documentaries represent and shed light on similar controversial subject matters, they do it in different ways, but both are successful in their own way.

The Cove is a documentary about the merciless abuse and slaughter of thousands of dolphins off the coast of a small town in Japan called Taiji. This town regularly, but very discreetly captures and kills dolphins for either training purposes or for their meat (which coincidentally has mercury poisoning anyways). They do not allow video documentation of what they are doing, and they have a hidden cove that they do the slaughtering in. This documentary primarily follows activist Ric O'Barry as he actively tries to shine light on what the fishermen are doing to the dolphins. In his younger years, he was the trainer for the *Flipper* TV show dolphins, and once he realized how miserable they were in captivity, he immediately transitioned into an activist as he tried to protect these marine mammals more than anyone else would (Psihoyos). The transition happened when his primary dolphin that he worked with committed "suicide" as he put it, due to its extreme misery with its living conditions. He said the dolphin literally swam to the bottom of the pool and did not come back up again for air, and since dolphins have to

consciously think about every single breath they take, he felt that it was conscious decision for that dolphin to end its life. That moment is when he realized that those animals did not belong in captivity, and he switched into the activism mode that we see throughout *The Cove*.

Blackfish approached a different, albeit similar issue with marine mammals, but instead of dolphins, it focuses on Orcas/Killer Whales. The way these animals are captured and torn from their families in the wild, kept contained in swimming pools that are much too small for them, and not given nearly enough stimulation with others of their own breed are some of the primary issues that this documentary presents. These issues lead to aggressive behavior in killer whales, and have resulted in the deaths of killer whale trainers at parks with shows based around this powerful mammal (Cowperthwaite).

The Cove presents the information and footage in a fairly unique way. There are no labels for the people who are interviewed, but there are really only 3-4 people who are interviewed throughout the entirety of the film. One thing that is unique about this documentary is that a lot of the truly compelling footage was obtained through ways that were not entirely ethical and jeopardizes the integrity of the entire film. They had to hide cameras in rocks and use a camera on a balloon in order to get footage of what was really going on in the cove that was used for dolphin slaughtering. Granted, it was very compelling footage and objectively, the shots of the ocean water dyed red with blood water justify its less than ethical procurement. The entire film is spent documenting O'Barry's quest to expose what is really happening off the coast of this small town in Japan, and it builds up until him and his group finally succeed in documenting what is happening. While simultaneously hearing the screams of the dolphins and seeing them

get brutally killed, “the intensity of the music combined with the images of the red sea creates a surge of emotion because of the dissonance and unpleasantness of the sounds” (Hackley, 2012). Once viewers finally get to see the cruelty, the documentary gets much more powerful. The viewers get to finally see and hear what is really going on and they can begin to understand the severity of the situation. In those moments, the film gains immense validity.

In *Blackfish*, the film immediately starts with a recording of a 911 call regarding a trainer killed by a killer whale during a show at SeaWorld. This documentary starts to pull at your emotions from the start of the film and continues doing so for the whole thing. You get the sense that something is wrong with the way that these animals are behaving. The presentation of information is designed to convey the viewpoint that SeaWorld is unethically procuring these animals and that they are miserable. As a result of their misery, they are violent and unpredictable. ““Like any documentary, it is trying to give you a shock factor,” Erhart said. “And for a lot of people, they don't think about documentaries in a sense of who is making them and what their intentions are.”” (‘Blackfish’ film stirs up debate among students, 2014). One drastic difference between *Blackfish* and *The Cove* is *Blackfish*’s use of interviews throughout the film. As aforementioned, *The Cove* only used a few interviews, but *Blackfish* used more than 10 interviews to further the filmmaker’s opinion on the topic. Interviews with people ranging from a variety of former trainers, an OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) expert witness, an orca researcher, the director at the Center for Whale Research, and a neuroscientist were used throughout the film. This surplus of interviews give the movie credibility because they are all conducted on people who appear to be

very knowledgeable about whatever they are talking about. They also provide evidence of the exact thing the filmmaker is trying to depict—the unsatisfactory treatment of orcas.

The Cove does not have to spend a lot of time working to get its viewers attention. Instead, it primarily focuses on how the group is going to reveal what is going on and their passion to succeed is what primarily keeps the viewers' attention. Of course, there are emotional moments in which you feel deep sympathy for the dolphins, but compared to *Blackfish*, the emotional pulls are not nearly as strong. *Blackfish* is an emotional rollercoaster of a documentary and there is something tragic happening regularly, whether it be another death by killer whale, or just showing how these animals are not happy in their captive environments. “Without a doubt, [*Blackfish*] has changed how people view animals in captivity compared to their wild counterparts” (Remembering Tilikum, 2017).

Both of these documentaries employ the majority of the 4 fundamental tendencies of documentary. *The Cove* and *Blackfish* both have a goal of recording and revealing what is happening with these marine mammals. Persuasion is also another key factor. The primary functions of these documentaries is essentially to convince their audiences that what is being done to these animals is wrong and needs to be stopped. Encouraging an active response is also the goal of these films, and *The Cove* is the one that more obviously tries to elicit a response. At the end, there is a part where there are a few websites that appear on the screen that all have something to do with getting involved with the issue in Japan. After further investigation, two of the three websites are no longer active, but one leads to page that is still trying to gather over 100,000 signatures on a petition to help stop the dolphin genocide. *Blackfish* has no such information

included in the movie, but it does subtly try to dissuade people from visiting places like SeaWorld. Lastly, both of these documentaries express something. The filmmakers both made sure that their distaste for what is happening around them is clearly depicted throughout.

Blackfish and *The Cove* are both documentaries whose goal is to inspire and promote change in people, and they go about encouraging that in different ways. Objectively, *Blackfish* resulted in more change happening than *The Cove* did after it was released into the world. The surplus of informational interviews used throughout *Blackfish* help to give the film some validity and give people something more to relate to. Also, since *Blackfish* so blatantly attacked Sea World and their franchise, people reacted pretty drastically. Sea World is somewhere that most people have heard of, if not visited, so they could directly get involved with what was going on there. *The Cove*, on the other hand, is about an issue in a small town in Japan that most people have probably never heard of. Since people have more of an emotional connection to an issue that is more local to them, they are able to feel more strongly about that particular issue. *Blackfish* did not largely impact Sea World's sales profits, but it did cause a PR issue for them. This PR issue eventually led to Sea World agreeing to cease the breeding of killer whales and resign their shows from the parks. *Blackfish* resulted in a change, whereas the slaughter of dolphins in the cove in Japan is still happening today. Although *Blackfish* was slightly controversial because of the way that it attacked Sea World, its use of emotional appeals succeeded. Rather than using emotional and a surplus of credible sources, *The Cove* primarily used more observational interview footage. There was some formal footage that gave the film validity, but it was nowhere near the number that *Blackfish* presented.

The Cove is less emotional and that could be part of the reason that the issue in that Japanese cove is still continuing today. It also could be because, like already mentioned, Sea World is local and Japan is not. People cannot always get behind something they cannot see.

Blackfish and *The Cove* are both documentaries whose central purpose is to shine a light on the unfair treatment of these intelligent marine mammals (dolphins and killer whales). Although they both approach the representation of the subject differently, they are both successful in eliciting an emotional response and encouraging action from their audiences. *Blackfish* has resulted in SeaWorld saying that they are going to stop breeding their killer whales to filter out their performances from their programs. *The Cove* has had less of an impact, but it has had one nonetheless. The website encouraging people to sign a petition nearly has 100,000 signatures and there are people actively trying to stop the killing in the cove. *Blackfish*'s greater success in stimulating change could possibly be attributed to its larger audience since a much larger production company than *The Cove*—CNN, produced it. The voices of both of these documentaries are very powerful though, regardless of their production companies and audiences. They both show something that is critically wrong in our world and the passion to fix the problem shown by those featured in the film is clearly delivered to the viewers. Especially in *The Cove*, the work that the film crew has to go through in order to expose what is happening is inspiring.

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