

Pitzer College

Creating Anxiety and Attitude Changes in Captive Animal Documentary

submitted to
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Personal Background

My love of animals was born the first time my parents took me to a Seattle zoo when I was two years old. This passion has stuck with me my whole life and prompted me to explore animal care as a career path and pursue internships in the marine field. In 2018, I was given the opportunity to work with dolphins and sea lions at a marine park called Sea Life Park in Hawaii. The thought of coming into contact with these incredibly majestic creatures seemed like a dream come true.

I had watched *Blackfish*, a film condemning marine parks, before accepting the internship and the injustices that I witnessed on-screen at a similar park weighed heavily on my mind. I truly hoped that the inhumanity displayed in SeaWorld through the film would not be a reality at the park in Oahu. During my time at Sea Life Park, I was often caught off-guard by interactions when I was wearing my uniform with the marine park logo outside of the park. People often felt the urge to approach me and other employees to express their disgust that we would work at a place that supports dolphins in captivity. This happened so much that I questioned my own morals and even considered quitting. I loved interacting with the animals but did not want it to come at the cost of my integrity. In the end, I completed the internship but decided against a career in animal care. The experience made it clear that there is ambivalence surrounding animals in captivity; it is not black and white. The main reason I chose to write this capstone about captive animal documentaries is that I was hyper-aware of the impact that films like *Blackfish* had on people.

Animal documentary directors have a powerful way of representing a specific narrative to the public. These films employ different cinematic strategies that produce persuasive effects on viewers to change their attitudes toward animals in captivity. This paper explores this

phenomenon through an in-depth analysis of three successful films in the animal captivity genre: *Nénette* (2010, Philibert), *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (2013, Marshall), and *Blackfish* (2013, Cowperthwaite).

A Brief History of Captivity

As early as 2500 BCE, wall carvings in Mesopotamia and Egypt depicted rulers and their private animal collections which included giraffes, elephants, bears, dolphins and birds kept in captivity. There is also evidence that ancient zoo owners hired animal handlers in order to make sure the animals thrived and gave birth to offspring properly; the earliest form of zookeepers.

The concept of the modern zoo was created by the wealthy as private collections to showcase their power, then known as *menageries* during the sixteenth century¹. The “public” zoo that we are familiar with today became popularized in the 18th century during the Age of Enlightenment which was a period in Europe when science, reason and logic were ideals of government and society. This focus on science propelled the field of zoology, as researchers aimed to study animal behavior and anatomy. In order to do this effectively, scientists and zookeepers had to keep animals in a controlled and enclosed space where the environment resembled their natural habitats. This scientific research gave way to the first modern zoo built in 1793 in Paris, France, which is still active and popular today.

Scientific development went hand in hand with imperial growth during this period, and the latter profoundly shaped zoos². As Europeans traveled the world and encountered new

¹ National Geographic Society. (2012, October 09). Zoo. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/zoo/>

² Karl, B. *Philanthropy and the Maintenance of Democratic Elite*. 207-220, 1997.

landscapes, cultures, animal and plant species, they engaged in a collecting frenzy—an obsession with categorizing according to their newfound scientific classification systems.

In his book *Colonising Egypt*,³ Timothy Mitchell uses the representation of Egypt at the 1851 Crystal Palace World Exhibition to draw connections between European imperialism, orientalism and the gaze. He outlines the European tendency to “stand and stare”, a unique trait of the Europeans to display an intellectual curiosity towards strange people and places (Mitchell 5).

When a mass of people stops to stare at something they find interesting, a spectacle is born. The spectacle, according to Mitchell, dates back to the era of the modern world fair. Mitchell refers to his concept of ‘representation’: everything collected and arranged to stand for something, and to represent progress and history. The international exhibition was designed to showcase achievements of the nations. World fairs were viewed as edifying for the masses, as well as for educating the populace of the value of empire and imperial expansion. They exist to display technological advancements and represent developments from different parts of the world that people would not see otherwise. The tradition of publicly displaying unique objects for people to look at for as long as they desired began here. It created a new way of looking.

Mitchell argues that the representation of reality was always an exhibit set up for the observer, with museums being a prime example. Museums are rooted in deep political, sociological and ideological history that allow us to understand how the gaze has manifested. After all, museums are arranged “to demand the isolated gaze. The more the exhibit drew in and encircled the visitor, the more the gaze was set apart from it” (Mitchell 9). Mitchell also

³ Mitchell, T. *Colonising Egypt*, “Egypt at the exhibition”. University of California Press, 1991

acknowledges the glass panes that stand between valuable artwork in museums and the observer. “The glass panes insert themselves between the visitors and the goods on display, making the former into mere onlookers and endowing the goods with the distance that is the source of their objectness” (Mitchell 11). The sheet of glass draws the observer in. There is the sense of elitism in gazing at something worthy of protection, but the barrier has the transparency to invite the privileged gaze. Items on display beg to leave an emotional impact with room for interpretation. Ambiguity is often unsettling, but when it comes to art and installations, the expectation is that people will be detached, analytical and imaginative.

The gaze that is encouraged in world fairs and museums is the one that also manifests in zoos. Like world fairs and museums, zoos are monetized attractions where the object of our stare is behind glass (or bars), encouraging spectacle. They are split into regional sections, forming a microcosm of the world. This is the gaze shaped by European curiosity and the need for superiority and control.

At a zoo, there is a unique element of interspecies looking. Difference is interesting, but unpredictable and scary. Difference makes us want to contain the other for a reassurance of control. Humans push away difference and resolve this mental unrest by rationalizing animals as something we can enjoy but want to contain. We want to look, but we also unconsciously want safety and authority. The way we look at animals is naturalized, but there is a historical imperial gaze. Understanding the history of objectness and the gaze provides a foundation for the circumstances in which looking is a form of power in control, demonstrated firsthand in captive animal documentaries.

The earliest zoo exhibits showed parallels to victims of conquest. Menageries owned by the rich were part of the colonial-era education to expose Westerners to other regions of the

world. Zoos engage visitors in an act typical of a western controlled society... teaching people to stare at exotic creatures for enjoyment. We crave to be in close proximity with a wild animal in a foreign place, as long as it is on our own terms. We may consider ourselves to have moved past times of colonialism, but colonial narratives persist to give insight on the world and its inhabitants. While it is largely the intention of zoos to educate the public about animals and their conservation, it is prudent to be aware of the hidden consequences of what a zoo represents.

Along with acknowledging the history and development of zoos, it is also important to unpack the ways in which they function on a symbolic level and the ways they make us look and see. Perhaps the practices of zoos and aquariums is so troubling because these traditions trace back to 19th century colonial power. The capturing of animals is a symbolic representation of the conquest of exotic lands. John Berger claims that “like every other 19th century public institution, the zoo, however supportive of the ideology of imperialism, had to claim an independent and civic function: to further knowledge and public enlightenment⁴” (Berger 21). Animals that are held captive in zoos are representative of man’s power over “other” men, man’s power over nature, and man’s power over non-humans. Animals are beneath us, and we must protect them but also be able to control them.

Wild animals have been displayed in captivity for thousands of years. Despite their wide popularity and efforts to act as an educational tool, zoos have continually been questioned on ethical grounds. As the public has become more sensitive to welfare and conservation due to the media coverage surrounding the topic, the capturing and incarceration of wild animals has caused distress.

⁴ Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin.

After watching captive animal documentaries, people may be horrified by what they have learned and be prompted to donate money to animal conservation organizations to support their cause. However, these same people will take their families to the zoo months later because they are more concerned with wanting their children to see the animals. They will rationalize their actions because they believe they did their part to help, but in reality, they are absolving themselves from guilt.

The Interspecies Gaze

When a human shares a look with an animal other, the interspecies gaze is created. Imagine life as a zoo animal in which life consists of a different species gawking at you for eight hours a day. In 1943, Jean-Paul Sartre described “the look” that occurs when a consciousness is forced to recognize that it exists not only as the center of its own being gazing outward, but also as a mere object in the world of others⁵. Building on Sartre, Michel Foucault then developed “the gaze” in 1975 to illustrate power relations between the observer and the subject. In critical theory and psychoanalysis, the gaze is an individual or group’s awareness of other individuals, other groups, or oneself⁶. The prolonged gaze can be a sign of love, or it can push the boundaries of discomfort if unwanted by one party. The gaze is often the manifestation of desire: we crave the act of looking at things we admire, especially at things that are rare to see such as an exotic creature.

It is important to distinguish between the look of animals in their natural habitats, in captivity, and through animal films, which allow us to look at animals unencumbered. In zoos, the gaze relies on the transparency of the exhibit’s glass and the inability of one member of the

⁵ Krebs, S. L. (1965). *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*.

⁶ Saper, C. *A Nervous Theory: The Troubling Gaze of Psychoanalysis in Media Studies*

gazing pair to escape. Zoos thrive off of the in-person gaze, which is much more thrilling than a gaze through a television screen. It is likely that you have heard someone say they feel like a “zoo animal on display” when all of the attention is directed towards them and it makes them feel uneasy. This is the great appeal of going to zoos and aquariums. There is a guarantee to view animals that we may never get to see in the flesh because they are unreachable, because they would walk away, or because they would be too dangerous to be observed without a barrier.

There is a moment of elation when an animal returns your look, as there is the feeling of mutual connection and understanding. While this returned gaze can be a special moment between human and animal, it is fleeting. John Berger sees this as a disappointment, because the purpose of zoos is to offer guests the chance to look at animals. At best, “the animal’s gaze flickers and passes on” (Berger 28). The act of interspecies looking in zoos can be interpreted as gratifying, but this is also due to the comfort we feel that there is fifteen-millimeter-thick glass between human and creature. If one came across that same animal in the wild, would that same loving gaze occur? Or perhaps one of terror from one party, and one of focus from the other in order to attack? The gaze between species is cherished, as long as the animal is behind a barrier or digitalized on the screen where humans are protected and have control. The gaze between human and animal can be one of love, but also one of oppression and power.

One phenomenon that has divided scientists and scholars is anthropomorphism, the representation of non-human animals as having human form, thoughts and intentions⁷. Scholars have yet to come to agreement on whether anthropomorphizing is inevitable and hardwired into our brains for understanding other creatures. Derek Bousé believes that while this practice does

⁷ *DK illustrated Oxford dictionary*. (2003). London: Dorling Kindersley.

not actually help us understand animals' behavior, it is an "almost automatic human response" which involves "application of *self-knowledge* and *role-taking*, which social psychologists have identified as normal parts of our everyday attempts to make sense of the actions of others and divine their motivations" (Bousé 92). It may truly be a default of the human mind.

This begins in early childhood, for child media is replete with anthropomorphized animals. Animated films such as *Bambi* (1942) and *Dumbo* (1940) are important in attitude development because they foster a loving and comforting association with wild animals. They foster anthropomorphism because animators can give animals human-like expressions that they may not actually be able to express in real life. This causes us to normalize associating human actions and emotions to animals from a young age and continues into adulthood when analyzing real animals.

Alexa Weik von Mossner notes that this phenomenon is one of the crucial ways that documentary filmmakers play to our emotions, by "othering" or "saming" to emotionally engage their audiences⁸ (von Mossner 10). One of the main reasons that humans are inclined to associate human emotions to animals is because it is comforting and intriguing to identify with a beautiful exotic creature. We wish to feel close to animals that are not able express their wants, needs and desires in a language we can interpret. In turn, our coping mechanism to deal with this uncertainty is to treat them as if they were human and relate to them on a deeper level. It is true that animals are similar to us, which is why it is convenient to assume certain behaviors mean they are feeling or thinking a way that we are used to feeling or thinking. However, animals are

⁸ Mossner, A. W. (2014). *Moving environments: Affect, emotion, ecology, and film*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

very different from us in numerous ways. They cannot communicate or analyze the world in critical ways. In this respect animals are like a lesser human, comparable to an infant.

Gioia Barnbrook acknowledges that relating to animals can be helpful and inevitable, but also asserts that it can have “real political implications⁹” (Barnbrook 530). In the twentieth century, anthropomorphism was deemed a “dangerous pit” and even a form of mental disorder (Welling 81). While some scholars such as Barnbrook point out the deeply problematic nature of anthropomorphizing, Bousé argues that concern for animal welfare is closely tied to, if not dependent on, anthropomorphism because “sympathy for animal “others” depended then, as now, on being able to see bits of ourselves reflected in them- even if it meant projecting ourselves there in the first place” (Bousé 99).

If humans want to witness an animal, the easiest way to see and learn about them is on the screen. Animal media includes a broad range of genres such as Disney animation films, live action feature films, animation series, and more. One such genre—animal documentaries—can itself be divided into subgenres, several of which will be discussed here. The earliest of these is the subgenre of wildlife films, which allow people the opportunity to see wild animals they would not otherwise be able to witness. Wildlife films have changed the way that people view animals and the world; they show beautiful locations in the world where nature is abundant and bring unimaginable or even impossible interactions to our living rooms and smartphones.

Today, wildlife films are known as alluring and educational art forms. Despite their current influence on viewers, it took a long time for wildlife films to be considered a true documentary form by film scholars because of their reputation for an “obsession with audience

⁹ Barnbrook, G. (2016). *Returning the look: Emotion, encounter, and inter-subjectivity in wildlife films*. Society & Animals. Retrieved from https://brill.com/view/journals/soan/24/6/article-p523_1.xml

deception” (Richards 2014). Some have struggled to put wildlife films in any category and concluded that they may be in a field of their own. John Grierson takes the humanist stance in his work that there is an unquestionable superiority of homo sapiens relative to other species, and therefore wildlife films are unworthy of scholarly attention (Bousé 21). Bousé counters this view to argue that wildlife films should earn the respect they deserve in scholarly film discussion because of their environmental policy reform, natural resource conservation, building sustainable societies in closer harmony with nature and frequent calls to citizen action (Bousé 23).

A second subgenre of animal documentary is eco-documentaries, which are concerned with environmental advocacy, cemented themselves in the category of documentary and were willing to be analyzed by film scholars well before wildlife films because they were generally interpreted as straightforward educational programs. The respect that eco-documentaries built up made the entrance for wildlife films much easier since they fit within the larger genre.

A third, more recent subgenre is captive animal films. These have caused a sense of ambivalence among viewers, as some are horrified at some of the hidden realities that animals in the possession of humans face, or they feel inspired to change the world we live in to make it safer for all living beings. Now, there are over one hundred captive animal documentaries in existence and counting, and their emergence as a subgenre has had a highly significant contribution within the larger genre of animal documentary. Some notable films in this category include *Maximum Tolerated Dose* (2012), *Nénette* (2010), *Long Gone Wild* (2019), *Earthlings* (2005), *Land of Hope and Glory* (2017), *Blackfish* (2013), *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (2013), *Forks Over Knives* (2011), *An Apology to Elephants* (2013), and *The Cove* (2009).

I focus on animal captivity documentaries to explore how directors of these films create a connection between human viewer and animal subject. In this paper I will be analyzing three

films to examine how captive animal documentaries construct attitude change and mirror historical events: *Nénette*, *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, and *Blackfish*.

Nénette

From the moment the camera focuses on the wrinkled face of the red-haired orangutan and we hear the whisper of a child say, “Nénette!”, the audience is captivated. *Nénette* is a 2010 documentary directed by French filmmaker Nicolas Philibert, who gives us an in-depth experience in only seventy minutes of the elderly ape who has spent almost all of her forty years behind glass at the Jardin des Plantes zoo in Paris, France. Produced by Serge Lalou, the film received positive reviews from critics who have praised the careful attention to the animal and the questions the film raises regarding her life and captivity. Distributed by Les Films du Losange, the film opened in one theater, played in three theaters, and grossed \$18,009 in domestic box office.

Nénette is an observational documentary, which Bill Nichols identifies as a “fly on the wall” observation of the subject through an unobtrusive camera¹⁰. In this mode, the filmmaker is the unassuming, unnoticed fly on the wall. The subject eventually forgets the presence of the camera and is able to act more naturally, so the audience can get a sense of genuine and organic thoughts and actions¹¹. Pure observational documentaries adhere to a particular definition of cinematic purity and “truth” by conforming to the following guidelines: no music, no interviews, no voiceover, no scene arrangement, long takes, minimal editing, and diegetic sound. The subject

¹⁰ Nichols, B. (2010). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press.

¹¹ Nichols presents these assumptions tongue in cheek and does not assume that human filmmakers can ever disappear not human subjects forget their presence.

and his or her environment should be allowed to unfold in its “natural” temporal continuity to the extent possible¹².

Working in the observational mode, there is never an acknowledgement of the camera and Philibert never inserts himself into the narrative. Philibert makes several key decisions which construct the “truth” of his film. Visually, he never includes a single human appearance. The camera is trained on the orangutans in the exhibit and never leaves. Aurally, all that can be heard are the voices of the zoo visitors commenting on Nénette and her son, the zookeepers, and the diegetic sounds of the zoo. Nénette occupies each frame, but people still speak for her.

The Gaze

Through Philibert’s strategic choice to train the camera on the animals and only include human audio, the orangutans visually look but are looked at orally through bodiless voices. In this twist on traditional documentary, the voiceless subject is given the spotlight and the human face is never visible. Only their voices are audible. We are watching Nénette the entirety of the film, but also watching the act of watching and being watched.

Since the camera never allows us to look away from Nénette, we become cognizant of her expressions, mannerisms, and eye movements. Throughout the film she is quiet and watchful, often propping her head up while leaned over to make us wonder what she is thinking. In one of the opening scenes, a woman asks why the orangutan isn’t acknowledging them, to which her husband replies “I know she can see us” (00:03:40). Immediately this reveals the entitlement of the human race, as if Nénette owes the family a show solely due to the fact that she is able to see them through the glass.

¹² Of course, as Nichols points out, the filmmaker is always making decisions about what and when to shoot, where to aim the camera, and when to turn away, and the same, of course is happening in post-production.

There are several instances where Philibert films the zookeepers carefully scrubbing the viewing glass in Nénette's exhibit to be sparkling clean, which serves as a reminder that the glass is tended to so that the humans' gaze is not hindered to view the contents inside. Numerous times, we see Nénette and the reflection of all the people lingering around her. This gives a sense of what her normal day entails: to be gawked at with no way to avoid the watchful eyes. The film reveals as much about the orangutan as it does about the people that come to visit her. In one powerful conversation between two guests, one French man can be heard commenting,

“A life in captivity. There's the thickness of her glass, it's in proportion to our fear of getting closer, which could be to our disadvantage. She seems familiar to us because we're protected. If the glass were to break all of a sudden, it would be panic. You wouldn't hear 'there's my sweet Nénette', you'd only hear, 'Run for your lives!'” (1:03:17).

This causes us to consider the gaze towards an animal through the different mediums of a screen, a glass exhibit or their natural environments with no barrier between human and animal. The screen and glass are containments that allow us to have the power to be the looker and them to be looked at. If we were on the animals' turf, this power would not exist.

Some of the most remarkable commentary comes from the open and honest zookeepers that have previously or currently work with Nénette on a daily basis. While reflecting on her multiple-year journey up to that point as Nénette's keeper, one zoo employee explains to a colleague that Nénette is very particular about the humans who care for her and only had a special connection with the head male keeper who raised her. She comments, “I was always told that you can tell her mood from the look in her eyes, but I had never seen that” (00:10:33). Everyone has heard the saying that the eyes are the window to the soul, and this is especially true for interactions between two species that are not able to communicate verbally. Often, eye

contact is a form of body language that can speak even more effectively than words. In western cultures, eye contact between two people can be a sign of attention, respect, and understanding.

Eventually, the female keeper says that after several years of working with Nénette, she could “see in her eyes that she was very gentle and calm” (10:40). The look between a human and animal can convey a sense of trust between the two, which can be the most powerful effect of the shared look between species. The keeper did not mention anything about Nénette’s behavior that brought her comfort, but rather the look in her eyes was more revealing of the bond between them. In another conversation, one of Nénette’s prior keepers lovingly reminisces with a colleague about just how she might sit atop a tree in the wild “watching the world”, Nénette “watches the public... they spend their time watching, as they would in the wild” (41:32). Who is looking, who is being looked at, and who has the power to look away? These are some of the questions Philibert poses in this thoughtful use of the observational mode.

There is great power in the gaze, and Laura Mulvey uses the term *too-be-looked-at-ness* to describe the nature of being the gaze’s subject¹³ (62). For Mulvey, the definition of the male gaze is the act of depicting women in the world from a masculine perspective that presents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer. While her feminist theory references the gaze of the human male on a human female, the ideas are transferrable to the gaze of a human onto an animal. Nénette is a female creature both on- and behind-screen for the humans’ viewing pleasure, and the camera captures her reality as a captive animal where guests pay admission to the Paris zoo to stare at her. Philibert uses techniques to make us very aware of this dynamic, such as frequent close-ups of Nénette staring back at the guests, and of Nénette’s eyes flitting around her space as if trying to avoid the stares from outside the exhibit. This

¹³ Mulvey, L. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

represents the inescapable gaze from those who have the power to look, and one who does not have the power to prevent being looked at.

Anthropomorphism

As previously mentioned, Derek Bouse believes anthropomorphism to be an almost automatic human response. Throughout the film we see this phenomenon in action very frequently, with the majority of the commentary on the orangutans relating to human behaviors and emotions. Philibert's choice to use the observational mode captures a range of opinions and commentary from the people that visit Nénette's exhibit. We hear the voices of mothers, fathers, friends, children, couples, friends, former and current zookeepers. There are mixed reactions of excitement, indifference, rudeness and enchantment. In the voice-over, people constantly assume Nénette's mental state, sociality, marital status, and role as a mother. They are engaging in *scopophilia*, which means to derive pleasure from looking. Mulvey says that the scopophilic aspect arises from "pleasure in using another person as an object of stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen" (61). This observation is a fitting combination of the media and guests' behavior of enjoying the sight of the orangutans, and also egotistically anthropomorphizing them to help relate to the animal. One zookeeper reports that she found holding Nénette to be more rewarding than holding her own children. We enjoy looking and connecting to things that bring us pleasure, and scholars are divided whether this is harmless, or if we are blind to the repercussions. These repercussions can include inaccurate understandings of nature, inappropriate behavior towards wild animals, or misinterpreting the actions of wild animals.

Due to animals' inability to verbally communicate with us, humans often see them as an enigma and attempt to resolve this discomfort by inferring thoughts and emotions to relate more closely to them. We cannot know what they are thinking or saying but expressions, body language and actions are a universal language. This also applies when two people who speak different languages interact. Observing expressions and behaviors is often the next best thing to know what is going through the other's mind, and this is true for humans when evaluating animals. As Nénette is seen hunched over in a seated position, a young woman quietly asks in solidarity, "She's just bored, right? Maybe she misses the country she came from. I miss mine too" (4:17). In one of the more memorable moments from the film, a keeper informs a guest that there are some people who visit the zoo almost every day to see Nénette. The guest is shocked by this and compares it to visiting a sibling or relative often who is in prison (31:43). She has spent so much of her life behind glass being stared at and analyzed by the public, and many reactions are those of sympathy for her. The mental state of Nénette is the most commonly assumed trait in the film, and there is a mix of positive and negative reactions to her captive state.

In one instance, Nénette is seen lying down in her exhibit and a female guest can be heard whispering, "I think she's depressed, totally depressed. Maybe her husband's already dead" (00:15:02). Many people seem to be concerned with Nénette's marital status, and not once does anyone refer to a male counterpart as a "mate". In one exchange between keepers, one sadly reflects, "It's hard for an old female to see new [orangutans] turn up... her children have gone, her husbands have died, it's not easy for her..." (00:43:03). Animal enthusiasts have a tendency to romanticize animal relationships. Drawing back to representations of animals in cartoons, it brings people comfort to create intimate relationships between a male and female. From a scientific perspective, male and female animals of the same species come into contact for the

specific purpose of procreating to maintain and sometimes help recover healthy animal populations.

Stance

While several keepers comment that Nénette has spent all but three years in captivity at the Parisian zoo, Philibert's work is not anti-zoo. His minimalist approach allows room for ambiguity surrounding the captive animal. Philibert's film never visually shows a human, but orally people still speak for her and about her, thus objectifying her. The film is unique in the way that it gives as much agency to the animal as possible, but ultimately the animal is voiceless and cannot truly have an impact that is felt as strongly as the guests' voices in the narrative. In his documentary, it is unclear what stance Philibert takes regarding the captivity of the old orangutan. He does not noticeably criticize Nénette's living conditions, but at times we see her sit idly in her limiting enclosure and feel a sense of concern for her well-being. Overall, perceptions of Philibert's film will most likely reflect personal views of animal captivity. Some will see it as a criticism of animal institutions and their cruel confinement of wild animals, while others will see it as a lovely tribute to a beautiful animal. For film scholars, the film is a fascinating exploration of the powerful way the gaze operates even when humans are not shown in the frame.

The Ghosts in Our Machine

The Ghosts in Our Machine (2013) follows the mission of photographer Jo-Anne McArthur, who defines herself as an activist and war photographer. However, she is not a war photographer in the traditional sense; she spends her life documenting the metaphorical war against animals. Liz Marshall, the film's director/producer, was prompted to create *The Ghosts in*

Our Machine to “give a voice to the non-human world¹⁴.” McArthur has dedicated the past ten years of her life traveling the world and photographing the horrors that animals held captive for their fur and meat are subjected to that the public would never see, hear, or know. The 92-minute-long film was distributed by Ghosts Media Inc., and the domestic box office was \$20,700 after earning 42.3% of its total gross during opening weekend.

The Ghosts in Our Machine illuminates the cruelty faced by animals living within and rescued from the machine of our modern world. Through the heart and lens of Jo-Anne McArthur and director Liz Marshall, viewers become educated on this hidden topic through a non-human cast. From undercover investigations to joyful rescue missions, each photograph and video clip is a window into global animal industries such as food, fashion, entertainment and research. Some critics found the film’s rendition of animal cruelty incredibly difficult to watch, while others took note of its more tolerable approach to the subject as opposed to other similar animal cruelty documentaries.

Cinematography and Audio to Portray Activism as Action Hero

Marshall makes it clear during interviews that the animals are the stars of the documentary, but inspirational and persistent animal activist McArthur serves as the human hero to help communicate this. Speaking on her choice to include McArthur’s journey in her film, Marshall said, “it became increasingly clear that I needed a central human narrative to help anchor the animal stories, and Jo was that natural fit for me¹⁵.” The aim was always to focus on the animals used for human profit and consumption, and McArthur aided this message with her

¹⁴ Singer, J. (2011). "The Unfolding Narrative of The Ghosts in Our Machine". *Our Hen House*.

¹⁵ Singer, J. (2011). "The Latest From Liz Marshall of The Ghosts in Our Machine". *Our Hen House*.

photography campaigns. She serves as a sympathetic and relatable human subject to anchor the social issues, and her presence is a powerful narrative device to access the emotions and predicaments of the caged animals.

One specific storyline that supports this is the journey that McArthur goes on to ensure that the animals are represented accurately in the media to increase awareness. As time passes and McArthur continues to struggle to get her work published due to its graphic nature, she decides to travel with another activist to a fur farm and later to a larger facility housing mink. The other accompanying activist warns that sneaking in and photographing these sites is more punishable than if they simply vandalized the place, so they must be extremely careful to leave no trace and not attract attention. This creates a sense of suspense, as the pair puts on camouflage outfits and pack up their camera equipment. In the background, music that would typically be heard in an action movie plays. This heightens the viewer's worry that the two are entering dangerous territory, and one cannot help imagining the repercussions if they are caught.

McArthur serves as the perfect photographer as a proxy for Marshall's persuasive documentary mission. Once the mission is complete and they make it back to the hotel safely, McArthur explains, "My job is to document them, not liberate them. As much as I'd like to set them free from their cages, that's not going to change the system. My role is to educate people so there won't be future generations of those animals" (0:25:48). In this instance, the ability of the sound editor to elevate the emotions felt by the viewer through music is more effective than a still photograph.

Cinema Versus Still Photo

Marshall's choice to use mixed media with video and photography is effective to encourage change in viewers' attitudes and behaviors by changing their affect. Throughout the

film, the interwoven mediums of Marshall's masterful film techniques and McArthur's jarring photography are the perfect marriage but serve different purposes. McArthur's images invite us to see the animals as individuals. They depict the wide-eyed furry creatures, many with wounds and scars. The close-up still photographs force the viewer to lock eyes with the pleading animal and recognize it as a creature with emotions. Marshall echoes this photographic use of close-ups by incorporating shots of different animals' eyes to cause the viewer to infer their mental state. A wide-open, bulging eye that darts around is associated with animals in distress. A blinking and relaxed but curious eye signifies a content animal. Animals are almost always shot at eye level with towering humans cropped, which individualizes and humanizes the animal.

While McArthur relies more on the close-up with her photography, Marshall also relies on wide spanning shots to illustrate the vast expanses of cages which conceal innocent animals that are being exploited for their fur. Wide shots of the hundreds of rusty cages shoved together creates an unsettling realization of how many innocent creatures are being held prisoner. It represents the animals as a mass unit, whereas close-ups seek to center one animal's story. In contrast, a wide shot is used at the farm sanctuary to show the vibrant green grass and rolling hills, effective to illustrate the unlimited amount of space for the liberated animals that live there to roam. Close-ups are used to show individual experience, and wide shots reveal institutional horrors for space awareness.

The sound design in the film is very intricate, and there are multiple instances where there is no artificial sound added so the rich aural experience can be felt more deeply. The opening and closing sequences of the film are accompanied by a minimalist soundscape, including disembodied voice-overs from scientists, lawyers, professors, and activists to assert credibility. When the photographers enter the abusive facilities, there are a variety of sounds

from the animals that will inevitably cause emotional unrest. Some animals are so weak and mistreated that they could barely manage a yelp. At another fur farm, the howling of the caged animals is enough to reappear in your nightmares. The voiceless animals are given a voice by the haunting noises emitting from the cages. At the farm sanctuary, all original sounds are used that are emitted from the animals to give them a sense of voice, with the most memorable sound from the sanctuary being a giant pig snoring under a blanket on a cold day. Through sound, the emotions of the animals in the separate environments display either pain or peace.

Editing

The careful and purposeful editing of the film as a whole is very strategic about including imagery that will deter people from animal mistreatment. At the end of the film, McArthur enters a ghastly fur farm with lines of caged crying mink. Immediately after, there is a jump cut to McArthur strolling through a shopping center with window displays of grand fur coats and accessories. Suddenly, the idea of a fur coat feels extremely undesirable. Editing in this way creates a negative association with objects we did not previously have an aversion to, which effectively creates attitude and behavioral change.

Montages are also used throughout to convey knowledge about the different types of animals that experience abuse. By flashing the animals one by one, one after the other, their fleeting time on screen gives pangs of empathy for each one and represents their short time on earth due to their exploitation. The animal montages, all medium shots, enable Marshall to pack a great amount of information to viewers over a compressed time through editing. There are also times when she uses match cuts to blend a montage shot at the end with the same animal in an abusive predicament. This creates a desire for all animals to be freed from their human-run prisons.

Marshall's skillful film techniques and McArthur's impactful photography blend their influences to create a cohesive voice. McArthur says that when people guess how many of McArthur's stills are used in the film, almost everyone underestimates. This is a testament to the seamless manner in which the photographs are incorporated into the film to support the video. The women show dramatic cruelty, but then lessen its painful impact by showing the opposite farm. The choice to include the graphic footage of humans abusing animals for their products represents the ever-present fact that humans have sought control over lesser beings since times of colonialism.

Just when the footage of caged animals wailing for help seems unbearable, the documentary switches to a much more uplifting narrative. McArthur visits Farm Sanctuary, which is an enormous farm in New York with hundreds of acres of open fields for farm animals to roam, graze and socialize. The sanctuary's director, Susie Coston, spends her life rescuing farm animals from institutions very much like the ones that McArthur photographs in order to rehabilitate them and provide a new life filled with love and care. The farm sanctuary acts as a safe haven, and the owner's mission embodies President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation to free the enslaved beings. There is an immediate realization of the juxtaposition between the prison-like institutions that McArthur has spent a decade documenting and the lush, green farm with an excess of space for the animals to roam and be free. The director says that people tell her that she's losing money by running her farm in this way and believes people have lost sight of the individual animals and their emotions (0:31:44). McArthur notes that she goes to the New York sanctuary to reset from her taxing work, so she can spend time with the "happy" animals as opposed to the "sad" ones that she takes photos of in abusive institutions.

By incorporating the segments that follow the Farm Sanctuary, *The Ghosts in Our Machine* provides a large sense of relief from the distressing content that McArthur collects. Marshall's choice to incorporate the uplifting content with the upsetting content is very effective. If the entire documentary had focused on the horrors of the invisible fur and meat industry, this would have felt too distressing and almost impossible to watch in a single sitting. To an extent, it is also necessary for people to watch the difficult content because this is the reality that many are unaware of. The mixed media of Marshall's video and McArthur's photography combine to assert this point in a striking manner.

Stance

Toward the end of the film, McArthur goes to a high school to give a presentation about her work. She tells the crowd, "As we know, a picture speaks a thousand words. If we can document something from the point of view of the animal and show what they go through, that will change the hearts and minds of people" (1:22:12). She goes on to say that people prefer to see animals that they "want to see", like wildlife and pets, because it's "comfortable" and inspires feelings of happiness and familiarity. The ones that aren't as popular are the animals objectified in zoos and those that we eat and wear (1:24:05). While it is enjoyable to view content that is "comfortable", this does not inspire attitudinal change. In order to disrupt a static mindset, the public needs to consume material that challenges current beliefs to create change. The film succeeds in removing people's blinders to reveal the "ghosts", who are the billions of animals hidden from the public eye that are abused and exploited for their bodies or fur.

An Alternative to Anthropomorphism: Interspeciality

The film switches between including anthropomorphic elements and acknowledging the differences between humans and animals. One disembodied voice echoes that "Humans are

animals, and we share the basic property of emotion, pleasure and pain” (0:01:45). Less than a minute later, a different voice chimes in, “Animals definitely have emotions, but that doesn’t mean that they’re people. Intellect is what separates people from animals, not emotions” (0:02:35). Each animal that lives at the sanctuary is given a name, which humanizes them and makes the viewer more invested in their happiness. The animals in cages exploited for their fur only had number tags punched into their ears to identify them. Duality of vision adds credibility to the film, because it is apparent that the director includes both her own emotional experience and agreed-upon scientific facts. This foreshadows a more scientific approach to the investigation into the world of animal cruelty.

As the camera shows close-ups of different animals’ eyes, an eerie narration by Antoine Goetschel says, “I believe animal and human rights work together. If we were talking about slavery or suffrage two hundred years ago, people would argue that it was natural for humans to hold other humans as slaves...” (1:23:46). In school, we are taught that slavery existed widely during the 1800s, but now view it as a despicable and disturbing act. Marshall has related what thousands of animals go through to a period in history that terrifies most people today. If it is unlawful for humans to keep humans as slaves, why should humans be allowed to keep animals as slaves against their will? Any person with a conscience will say that slavery is ethically wrong. We have no problem recognizing this, but many people who say this will do so while wearing a fur coat. The animals that it took to make that fur coat were held prisoner, just as slaves once were. A person in this circumstance may try to rationalize that animals cannot be compared to human slaves because they do not have emotions and ways to communicate like we do. However, the documentary makes the argument that they do. This serves as a reminder that above all, humans have one goal: to conquer and control lesser beings.

Finally, the film addresses the inevitable feeling of mental discomfort that the viewer experiences. In the case of *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, the film is attempting to persuade people that consuming animal products where creatures were abused in the process is unethical and should be boycotted. Mirroring the way the film began, we see a montage of different close-ups of animal eyes. As the screen fades to black, white text appears offering resources to visit for further information and a call to action to stop the consumption of all fur products. The film executes an effective technique of presenting both graphic and comforting images, and then offering a solution to resolve internal unrest.

Many activist documentaries claim to change the minds and actions of viewers, but where is the proof? Director Liz Marshall decided to measure the effectiveness of changing prior attitudes after watching *TGIOM* by designing a study after the film's release, which was approved by the Humane Research Council. Prior to the film's screening, there was mixed knowledge regarding the treatment of animals in labs, zoos and aquariums. Fifty-four percent considered themselves "very" knowledgeable, 44 percent said they were "somewhat" knowledgeable, and 3 percent were "not at all" knowledgeable of the issues. After watching *Ghosts*, 96 percent said animal rights is an important social justice issue, 85 percent said the film had a "great deal" of influence on them, and 92 percent of viewers said afterward that they believed nonhuman animals are conscious and capable of feeling pleasure, pain, and attachment. Speaking on her choice to execute the follow-up study, Marshall says,

The old distribution model is to make a film and walk away and allow distributors to handle its dissemination. What we are facing today is a very different, more engaged model. With *Ghosts*, it wasn't enough to just make the film and to fulfill a global outreach and engagement distribution campaign. I felt it was equally important to gauge the film's impact on audiences. Producing a formal evidence-based Impact Report is a tangible way to present our findings. We now understand to what extent *The Ghosts in Our Machine* is helping to change the world for animals.

Changing the world starts with changing the attitudes and behaviors of the human population for the better, and to that objective, she succeeded.

Blackfish

The aquatic theme park SeaWorld is a household name and has a famous reputation for its close-up animal encounters with killer whales, dolphins and sea lions. There is a sense of thrill when trainers guide the animals through complex “waterworks” behaviors and performances to the delight of a screaming crowd. Families have cherished visiting the marine park franchise since 1959 and come back repeatedly for its educational and theatrical animal experiences. Due to its popularity, a film which condemned the marine park made headlines and caused a media frenzy. *Blackfish*, a documentary released by Netflix in 2013, garnered widespread attention with its scathing review of SeaWorld as the main perpetrator of orca whale mistreatment. In its 83-minute runtime, director Gabriela Cowperthwaite is able to pack in an incredible amount of emotionally powerful evidence about the repercussions of keeping orcas in captivity. The critical response to the film was positive; it is even considered one of the most impactful and successful captive animal documentaries¹⁶.

Blackfish follows the journey of Tilikum, an orca that has lived the majority of his life at SeaWorld and was involved in three human deaths. The film uses the tragedies caused by Tilikum to focus on the controversy and repercussions of holding orcas in captivity. Through archival footage, security footage, home videos at the parks and interviews with former trainers and scientists, Cowperthwaite asserts that orcas do not belong in tanks and the only reason they show aggression is due to human intervention. The film was created following a lawsuit by the

¹⁶ O'Sullivan, Michael. *Blackfish' Movie Review*. The Washington Post, July 2013.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 2010 that revolutionized the marine mammal performance industry by prohibiting trainers from entering the water with the whales. Since *Blackfish* includes speakers who acknowledge the camera and speak directly to the audience, it is considered to be a mix of the expository and participatory documentary modes¹⁷

Audio

Audio plays a key role in building a negative mood and tone in the film. Through original music composition and the recorded audio tracks from 911 phone calls, negative feelings towards captive animals are able to impact the viewer more deeply and leave a lasting impression.

Some of the most alarming instances in the film are the archival emergency phone calls and news reports following accidents at SeaWorld involving whales aggressing toward human trainers. These make viewers crave more information. After the opening credits, an audio track is played from a recorded 911 call. A frantic voice is heard saying a whale ate one of the trainers and they need assistance, to the dispatcher's disbelief (0:01:07). Immediately, there is a sense of unease and nervous anticipation of what horrors may be revealed in the film that were previously hidden from the public eye.

While the film gives several accounts of people who were injured or killed within the gates of different marine parks, it centers the death of a young female trainer named Dawn Brancheau. Before the viewer learns the details of her passing, audio from a detective's interrogation is heard. A male witness recounts, "She was scalped and there was no blood, and we knew the heart wasn't beating. He never let go of her arm... This was violent behavior that was anything but play. He completely mutilated that poor girl." (0:07:16). Instantly, there is

¹⁷ Nichols, B. (2017). *Introduction to documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

negative feeling arousal as the more detailed account of the gruesome death is previewed. With the decision not to accompany the initial audio recordings with B-Roll, the viewer is able to hold a sharp focus on what is being said. The alarmed tone of voice and emotional state is the main focus, which the viewer then internalizes.

The film uses instrumental background music, but sparingly. Jeff Beal, the composer for the soundtracks, relies on piano and violin to accentuate the drama. The credits open with accompanying ominous music. When the orcas are shown in the wild, the soundtrack is energetic and comforting to associate the wild as a place where they are meant to be. In contrast, often when there is a break in narration while the whales are in the tanks, the music tempo becomes slower and more haunting to mimic their uninterested demeanors.

Interviews

Interviews are a key methodology that the film employs, relying heavily on testimonies from people who were previously affiliated with the institutions or experts in the marine field. Expertise is used as “evidence”, where expositional images “illustrate, illuminate, evoke, or act in counterpoint to widely held beliefs” (Nichols 76). Interviews with former marine park employees, marine scientists, and others who had connections to the animals are pivotal for Cowperthwaite’s objectives in the film. Factual evidence as well as personal stories and reflections creates a balanced emotional and logical credibility. This account demonstrates the historical significance of how long abuse toward orcas has existed and sets the scene perfectly to transition from abuse in the wild to abuse inside marine parks. There is an extensive history of the human control of animals which can be linked to the chilling human history of imperialism. Asserting power through brute force is proven to be second nature.

Cowperthwaite also utilizes interviews to assert that cruelty towards orcas is nothing new, thus positioning contemporary marine parks within a history of animal mistreatment. A man named John Crowe recounts his experiences as a young adult when he dedicated his life to capturing young orcas from the wild so they could be sent to marine park facilities. The film then shows footage from 1970 of several boats chasing orcas through the ocean. A marine researcher explains that capturers once used planes and speedboats with bombs that they threw in the water to herd the whales into coves. As traumatizing as this sounds, Crowe states this was not what he considered the worst part of it all. Since the mothers were sorted out from the young ones, they could have fled the scene. However, they stayed nearby and wailed for their babies that were being ripped away from them. Crowe says it was the worst sound he had ever heard and broke down in tears because he realized what he was truly doing in that moment.

Interspecies Relationships

In contrast to anthropomorphism which refers to assigning human emotions to animals, interspeciality refers to the emotional appeals that are made through personal testimonies from humans about their close relationships to an animal. In opposition to the “imperial” stance, the film utilizes interspecies relationships to create empathy for the animals. A trainer passionately expresses that “when you look into their eyes, you know someone’s home. They’re looking back. You form a very personal relationship with your animal” (00:05:46). We are able to see the “other” as one with emotions. This furthers the point that animals do have emotional awareness, which makes us hyper-aware when they are unhappy. To assert that the orcas have a high mental capacity, one marine researcher explains that they are very intelligent and use languages just like we do. The lab scanned an orca brain and found that they have a part of their brain that humans don’t have, called the paralimbic cleft which processes emotions. These are animals that have

elaborate emotional lives. They have a sense of self and social bonding; everything about them is social. They not only have a sense of self, but a sense of community like we do. These findings humanize them even further and make us want to fight to protect them.

The most jarring example of human cruelty and lack of empathy is when the parks breed the orcas in captivity and then separate the calf from the mother. After the baby was airlifted out of the tank, the mothers isolated themselves in the corner of the pool and cried out long-range vocals that had never been heard before by researchers. One trainer describes that one mother was “shaking, screeching and crying. There’s nothing you can call that besides grief” (00:32:30). This appeals most effectively to viewers who are parents because they cannot help but imagine if their child was snatched away from them as an infant. Including the whales’ distressing vocalizations is very uncomfortable and promotes sympathy for the grieving mothers. Taking a human baby away from its mother involuntarily would be inhumane, so why do humans put animals through this torture when we know the pain they feel is unimaginable?

Aside from the inhumanity of removing a newborn calf from its mother, there are countless other arguments that support instances of cruelty. A marine specialist states that the insufficient environments “lead to psychosis where if triggered, [the whales] would kill. They’re all emotionally destroyed. They’re all psychologically traumatized. They’re ticking time bombs. If you were in a bathtub for twenty-five years don’t you think you’d be a little agitated, angry, maybe a little psychotic?” (00:08:12). Comparing the situation of the captive whales in human terms creates an interspecies connection. In a similar manner that people watching the film would never want to see a close friend or family member go through such mental distress, they would not want an animal to experience it, either.

One trainer breaks down in tears and acknowledges, “You’re depriving them of mental stimulation... there’s something wrong. When you have a relationship with an animal, you understand that he’s killing not to be a savage, not because he’s crazy, not because he doesn’t know what he’s doing. He’s killing because he’s frustrated. He’s aggravated and doesn’t have an outlet for it” (1:24:52). The trainer is assuming how the animal feels, which is frowned upon in the scientific community. However, this is an emotionally impactful way of framing the bonds that humans can develop with these intelligent captive animals. One comment from a former SeaWorld trainer is unique in the way that he is careful to avoid anthropomorphizing. When speaking about one orca, he describes that “he was always happy to see you in the morning, maybe because he was alone, hungry, maybe he just liked you. Who knows what was going on in his head?” (00:25:06). This lack of anthropomorphism gives credibility to the trainer because he acknowledges that we do not know what they’re thinking as opposed to the more common practice of assumption. The combination of these emotions is sure to cause varying degrees of attitudinal change about how we view captive animal institutions.

Cinema Verité

Following distressing content, there is often a jump cut transition to home-movies taken by park guests of whales swimming around the pools and soaking the audience, met by screams of delight. Despite its lighthearted nature and welcomed intermission from the troubling content, there is still an eerie sense that the break is going to elevate the impact of the cruelty to come. There is a binary opposition with the scary nature of the 911 calls and revealing interviews, showing how the fantasy world that SeaWorld projects actually masks dark realities behind the scenes. One memorable home video shows a trainer being pulled around the pool, clearly not choreographed for the show, and emerges with his face dripping with blood. Another trainer was

repeatedly dragged to the depths of the pool for a minute at a time, and after finally sprinting out of the pool is met with an oxygen mask. Cowperthwaite uses the appeal of cinéma-vérité, a style of filmmaking which uses realistic footage with simple equipment that is not altered by artistic effect¹⁸ There is a rawer depiction and emphasizes that there is nothing about the situation being dramatized; these tragedies are caught on camera by unsuspecting park guests.

Graphics

Cowperthwaite mixes multiple modalities to make the film visually dynamic, combining professionally shot footage, home-movie style clips from park guests, and animation. It is assumed that cameras were not permitted in the OSHA lawsuit courtroom, so the event was represented through simple line-drawing animations. One animated scene depicts SeaWorld head trainer Kelly Clarke giving her testimony in court, while her dialogue is displayed in a typewriter font over her head. In doing so, Clarke is seemingly robotic, soulless and emotionally vacant. Another animated sequence explains that Tilikum, an orca with a history of killing humans, is bred extensively at SeaWorld. An animated family tree is projected of all the animals that Tilikum has given sperm to and fathered, which heightens the viewers awareness that SeaWorld is a greedy institution with eyes only for profit. Tilikum is treated as a commodified body, much as human bodies were treated under imperial systems. This graphic creates a sense of worry that there may be a future aggressive bloodline at the marine park. Lastly, when a marine neuroscientist is describing a part of an orca's brain that humans do not have, an animated graphic appears to identify the location and function of it. Animations are effective to create a

¹⁸ Hillier, J. (1992). *Cahiers du cinéma: 1960-1968--new wave, new cinema, reevaluating Hollywood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

break in the real footage to show what live action cannot, and to provide information in a digestible format for viewers of different ages to understand.

The Blackfish Effect

The trends seen at SeaWorld following its release made it apparent that the film had a monumental impact on visitors. While the budget for the film was only \$1.5 million, the financial repercussions of the film for SeaWorld were much greater. In 2014, SeaWorld announced that it had suffered \$15.9 million in losses. Overall attendance at the parks declined by 5% the first nine months of 2013, likely coinciding with the release of the Netflix film. Business deals with the park were quickly terminated, and a hoard of celebrities and singers cancelled their appearances at SeaWorld's infamous annual concert event in Orlando. In November 2014, SeaWorld stock dropped by 50% from the previous year^[2].

The term "Blackfish effect" was given to this downward spiral following the film and referred to the public outcry and financial struggles that SeaWorld faced¹⁹. The Blackfish effect is a testament to the power a well-made documentary like *Blackfish* and a distribution platform like Netflix can have. It is also proof of the behavioral changes spurred from attitudinal shifts caused by the censored film. After the closing credits of *Blackfish*, it is likely that many people experienced great bouts of mental unrest. Viewers come to the realization that they no longer support the practices and cruelty that SeaWorld displayed in the film, and feel guilt looking back on the many previous family visits to the marine park. This dissonance was resolved by not returning to the marine park... for a certain amount of time.

¹⁹ Chattoo, C. (2016). Anatomy of "The Blackfish Effect". Retrieved December 04, 2020, from <https://www.documentary.org/online-feature/anatomy-blackfish-effect>

Years later, the declining numbers from SeaWorld's financial reports had recovered. Attendance had slowly crept back up, and their net income was also climbing in the tens of millions as opposed to their hundred-million-dollar losses following the film's peak popularity. While it is easy to make changes to assure harmony in thoughts and behavior immediately after the fact, the recovering numbers show that the behavioral change caused by the film was not sustainable over time. There may also have been social pressure to not attend SeaWorld when social media posts about the film were plastered all over the internet, but once the initial outcry died down, people felt that there will not be as much judgement to go back. The film was successful in changing behavior for a short amount of time, but its effects were not permanent.

Conclusion

While the films take differing approaches to how they frame animals in captivity, common theoretical concepts are incorporated by all three. In *Nénette*, director Nicolas Philibert uses a flaming-haired non-human star to explore the enigma that is animal captivity. "Nénette is like the Mona Lisa," he says, "People think they'll see a monkey and have fun. But after half a minute here, they stop looking because they are struck by something tragic. They start thinking about the situation of these animals in the wild and about what we are doing with our planet." *The Ghosts in Our Machine* director Liz Marshall says, "*Ghosts* helps people reflect on this globalized transnational voracious consumer-driven machine that uses animals by the billions and has reduced them as bits and parts and ingredients. It causes people to consider their own behavior and contribution to this flawed system that we live in²⁰." The same patterns persist

²⁰ Interview with Liz Marshall: *The Ghosts In Our Machine*. (2011). Retrieved November 29, 2020, from <https://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/anita-krajnc/2011/06/interview-liz-marshall-ghosts-our-machine>

throughout history. For colonizers, the only concern was money and power. There was no sense of reason or empathy for other living beings. Filmmakers such as Marshall are doing important work of activism and giving voices to subjects that have been permanently silenced.

While speaking on her intentions in making *Blackfish*, director Gabriela Cowperthwaite says, “I don’t know if it will change the way you feel about animals in entertainment parks. I didn’t intend for it to do so. I just wanted to tell their real story. And I trust that once audiences are armed with the truth, they will make the best decisions by themselves and their families²¹.” While it seems respectable that Cowperthwaite is urging the viewer to form their own opinion of animals in captivity after watching *Blackfish*, she is also appealing to the innate sense of control that people want to feel that they have over their attitudes and decisions. While she can say she was not intending to change attitudes, the narrative she frames in the film seems to say otherwise. Whatever ambiguity these filmmakers entered with while making these films, they had a very clear stance by the time they finished: animal captivity is cruel, in line with the most despicable acts from our past. These are not parts of history that we wish to repeat... they are the parts in which humans asserted their dominance over all lesser beings and stopped at nothing to do so.

In *Nénette*, I remember the great orangutan covered in blankets in the corner of her exhibit peering out blankly at the crowd through the glass. In *Ghosts*, I remember the echoes of the howling foxes and mink at the fur farm begging for mercy. In *Blackfish*, I remember the shrieks of grief from the mother orcas as their babies were taken out of the tanks with a crane.

²¹ O'Sullivan, M. (2013, July 25). 'Blackfish' movie review. Retrieved November 27, 2020, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/blackfish-movie-review/2013/07/24/63e20c48-f0b8-11e2-a1f9-ea873b7e0424_story.html

The seamless incorporations of mirroring historical atrocities prove that humans will stop at nothing to be in control. We strive to be in control of ourselves, others, and especially of those who do not have the ability to resist.

The Gaze and Interspecies Looking

As indicated by Timothy Mitchell, spectacle exists because humans have fostered a fascination with looking at things we admire. This began with lifeless objects such as cultural tokens at the world fair, priceless artwork in museums, and then transitioned to live spectacles where people pay to look at the “other”. In *Nénette*, the camera never visually shows the thousands of bodies and eyes that gawk at her each day. She owns the frame, but the narrations heard from the opposite side of the glass represent the spectacle that Nénette creates. By rendering the human spectator invisible and allowing Nénette to gaze out at her onlookers, Philibert creates a space for Nénette to become the subject. The animal is objectified by the human gaze, much like the ways in which women are objectified in film. As the viewer, her stare towards the camera lens makes us aware of being looked at as well. She is an enigma, and people are drawn to things they do not fully understand.

SeaWorld is another franchise that has built a multiple billion-dollar empire thanks to the appeal of the gaze and spectacle. Five million people enter the park each year and find pleasure in sitting and watching a group of orcas jump through the air and tow a trainer around the pool. Cowperthwaite takes this concept to transform it into an experience we should avoid due to the cruelty that goes into creating the spectacle. One film critic comments, “Rather than maintaining a distanced gaze through which we ignore atrocities, witnessing *Blackfish* suggests we need to

explore ‘what we are trained to overlook²².’” This commentary indicates that we must not only be aware of the implications of watching these captive animals perform at the marine park, but also the implications of what we choose to digest from information we are presented with regarding uncomfortable topics.

In *Ghosts*, viewers of the documentary are able to look through the lens of Mitchell’s video camera as well as McArthur’s photo camera. *Ghosts* explores a different aspect than the other two films: one of invisible cruelty. Mitchell uses her film to allow the public access to look at predicaments and institutions that are not normally seen, nor desired to be seen. There is a different approach from the other two films in that the viewer is given access to look at something that we do not go out of our way or pay money to see, but these are the animals that beg to be looked at because awareness needs to be brought to this reality.

Anthropomorphism and Interspecies Relationships

Anthropomorphism has persisted and will continue to persist for as long as we attempt to understand animals. As Bouse states, this is an automatic human response. *Nenette* is the film of the three examples that includes the most prominent examples of anthropomorphism in daily life. The zoo guests make every assumption about the orangutan imaginable. People say she is bored, thoughtful, depressed, content, frustrated, happy, frightened, relaxed, and more. Truthfully, there is no way to know what she is actually thinking. It is our automatic response to assume because it is a way that we connect with a voiceless animal. Even using a documentary mode that visually

²² O'Sullivan, M. (2013, July 25). 'Blackfish' movie review. Retrieved November 27, 2020, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/blackfish-movie-review/2013/07/24/63e20c48-f0b8-11e2-a1f9-ea873b7e0424_story.html

centers the orangutan for the entirety of the film, it is clear that the real subject is *us*. Humans always find a way to center themselves in a narrative belonging to another.

Ghosts does not anthropomorphize but explores the interspecies relationship. Throughout the film, the viewer becomes aware of the deep bond that McArthur possesses with animals she has interacted with through her photography. In turn, the viewer cannot help but adopt her passion for the animals in her photos and on-screen and be prompted to want to help in some way. Marshall says that her intent was to illuminate the animals and present them as individuals that have agency. They are emotional beings. Through cinema, we want to help people to see them differently. Not as machines, not as ingredients, not as cogs in the machine. As individuals.”

In contrast to *Nenette* and *Ghosts*, *Blackfish* uses interspecies relationships, but makes an effort to avoid anthropomorphizing the whales. From the beginning, the film asserts scientific credibility by including interviews with experienced marine animal trainers and marine neuroscientists. One trainer even says that we can’t assume what the whales are thinking, which goes against the typical park guest’s initial instincts. The desire to understand animals has been a part of human storytelling since the beginning of human civilization. Audiences expect strong characters and interesting stories in narratives, including wildlife films. Anthropomorphism in captive animal films serves to dually socialize the viewer by drawing upon existing values and authenticating associations between animal symbols and the value systems that we adhere to.

Enslavement

Blackfish incorporates the most jarring examples of parallels to a haunting human history. SeaWorld’s policy of stripping a newborn calf from its mother is alarmingly reminiscent of enslaved children being separated from their families to be sent to other American plantations.

The montage of marine park staff repeatedly harvesting Tilikum's sperm to impregnate the female orcas is representative of forcing the powerless to reproduce and also strengthening the empire. While not implicitly stated, Tilikum's story and the questionable morals of the people who run the marine park parallel enslavement. The animals behind the glass work and perform tirelessly for no pay, while the owners reap the benefits from their unpaid labor. The animals are forced to reproduce to produce more commodified bodies for profit. When they give birth, animals are separated from their young, to be distributed as capital where they are needed.

Similarly, in *Nénette*, the zookeepers comment on the act of separating animals from their mothers for the purpose of moving them to other zoos. This is especially brutal for protective species like orangutans which have one of the strongest bonds in nature with their young. Mothers stay with their young until they are six years old, but the babies are known to visit their mother until they are sixteen years old which demonstrates the extraordinary bond of the mother-infant relationship. While Nénette and her son Tübo were able to stay in the same enclosure at the Paris zoo, many mothers and children taken into captivity are not as lucky. This separation of mother and child mirrors the way in which enslaved children were taken and sold to other slave owners with no thought to the psychological repercussions that this causes to families. There is no empathy for lesser beings as long as control is maintained by the powerful.

The tagline of *Ghosts* is, "Are animals property to be owned and used, or are they sentient beings deserving of rights?" This is eerily reminiscent of a question that a human rights activist might ask when fighting to end slavery in the 1800s. In its focus on fur farms, animals are literally treated as commodities while they are alive. They are stolen from their natural environments, shipped to the necessary location and used for their bodies. Their services are only needed for human benefit whether that be for clothing, food or labor and then they are discarded

as if they were garbage. *Ghosts* illuminates the inhumanity that is displayed for these animals that are ruthlessly exploited for our gain.

Personal Reflections

When I began the writing process for this paper, I was prepared to write about how captive animals misrepresent the predicaments that animals are in. After watching multiple films and doing extensive research about the history behind animals in captivity, I was enlightened about the apparent unnatural and unsettling nature of keeping animals in enclosed spaces for the viewing pleasure of humans. It is important to note that there are amazing benefits to certain captive animal institutions such as exceptional medical care, veterinary care, humane scientific research, preserving species from extinction, and educating the public about exotic animals so they will be motivated to protect them. Not all zoos and aquariums are corrupt. However, there are a greater proportion of animal institutions that are. If captive animal documentaries continue to bring awareness to the concerns that surround the problematic ones, this is a step in the right direction to inform the public and create a humane world for animals.

Will I still take my own children to zoos and aquariums one day? Absolutely. I want them to be exposed to these amazing animals so they will adopt the passion that I have had for them since I was a toddler. After watching these captive animal documentaries, I will be more cautious and selective about which institutions I will choose to go to and support. It is always valuable to become educated about controversial issues and have the confidence to form your own attitudes about them. This is the power of activist documentaries. While they may have varying degrees of graphic imagery, cinematic techniques, or subjects, if there is an opportunity to learn and contribute to a more informed society, everyone has won.

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