A Rhetorical Analysis of Blackfish

By Arjon Garg

The film Blackfish by Gabriela Cowperthwaite employs rhetorical strategies to convey the alarming misfortune that orca whales experience in captivity. The film follows the appalling story of the bull orca whale Tilikum and the three human fatalities he is responsible for. Ms. Cowperthwaite uses interviews with dismayed former trainers and whale experts as a vehicle to explore the gap between the conglomerate SeaWorld’s public image and its palpable reality. The wild orcas that researchers describe as highly socialized, gentle animals are juxtaposed with the creatures portrayed in footage from SeaWorld’s marine parks. The latter are abused, confined to dark cages, and live in small concrete pools that are nothing in comparison to the one hundred miles that they normally travel in a single day. To this day, many praise SeaWorld and its wide variety of aquatic creatures. But as someone who has actually been to SeaWorld multiple times, I can say from experience that the most amazing part are the orca whales shown in the Shamu show. Blackfish as a film takes on the hefty task of attempting to completely change viewers’ perceptions of SeaWorld and the use of orca whales. While the film Blackfish applies all three forms of rhetoric to successfully attain this undertaking, Ms. Cowperthwaite primarily appeals to the emotion of viewers, also called pathos, using a combination of interviews, and footage.

One way that the film successfully appeals to the pathos of viewers is by showing interviews that are overwhelming to even watch. In the film, John Crowe, a diver that assisted in the capture of orca whales, is introduced in a heart-wrenching interview. When Crowe talks about the orcas vocalizing as he separated the baby whales from the adults, he dejectedly reports that, “…I lost it. I mean I just started crying. I didn’t stop working, but you know I just couldn’t handle it. Just like kidnapping a little kid away from their mother.” Crowe is completely remorseful about the incident, although he was partly responsible for what happened. Crowe’s appearance as this macho tattooed man is contrasted with his tearful regret of capturing the whale calves in front of their own mothers. Most powerfully, Crowe tries to create a connection by comparing the event to if something of the same nature happened to a human. Any human mother would do whatever is possible to rescue her own child from being kidnapped. From listening to the high pitch shrieks of the mother orcas, it can be gathered that orcas have a similar relationship with their children. Such a comparison successfully creates an emotional connection between viewers and the very orcas that they are watching and hearing about.

The usage of violent encounters with orca whales serves the purpose of causing the viewers to ponder the reason that the orcas are behaving in such a way. One such moment is shown when trainer Ken Peters is pulled underwater several times by the orca whale Kasatka. The footage shows Kasatka taking Peter’s foot and dragging him to the bottom of the pool multiple times for periods that ranged between a minute and a minute and twenty seconds. The footage clearly displays that Kasatka was trying to drown Peters, but luckily with his calm demeanor, he is able to escape relatively unscathed. Dave Dufus, an OSHA expert witness and whale researcher, responds to the footage and states, “I would be scared shitless.” Immediately, viewers envision themselves in such a scenario and can only think of how helpless anyone would be. The strong nature of Dufus’s language adds to this effect. Ken Peters may have survived, but the vast majority of people would not have been able to remain as tranquil as he did. Each time Peters is dragged to the bottom of the pool, one cannot help but hope and pray that he will have another opportunity to come up for air. Seeing such a video makes viewers ask themselves why these animals are acting in such a way and even more specifically, what have we done to them to cause such terrible and unnatural behavior?

Footage from the film helps clearly portray the reasons why orcas react to human “oppression” in the way that they do. Early on in the film, a small enclosure is shown where whales apparently lived. According to Eric Walters, a former trainer at Sealand, this enclosure was, “twenty feet across and probably thirty feet deep… And the lights were all turned out, so there was really no stimulation. They’re just in this dark, metal twenty by thirty—foot pool for two-thirds of their life.” Following Eric’s description there is footage of an orca in the murky pool, so cramped that it can barely even move. Seeing the footage of this orca completely isolated in the dark pool evokes sadness in any viewer. Orcas are used to roaming the seas, travelling for thousands of miles per year. Yet this orca is all by itself, barely able to move an inch. Orcas are also highly socialized animals; the film states that orcas have a unique part of the brain that processes emotions in a highly developed capacity. Yet, the orca shown in the footage is completely by itself, isolated from any other whales. By abusing orcas and subjecting them to an unnatural environment how else could humans expect the orcas to react? Humans serve as oppressors, forcing the orcas to participate in shows and perform behaviors that they do not naturally perform in the wild. Seeing this poor orca all by itself evokes tremendous sympathy from viewers.

Together, the interviews and footage from Blackfish successfully evoke incredible emotion from the viewers. The film successfully utilizes visual rhetoric and causes viewers to question how humans treat orcas and the practice of keeping orcas in captivity. Watching the orca whales and their plight produces emotions ranging all the way from sympathy to anger. The film is powerful in that it provokes viewers to want to take action and perhaps even join efforts to help orcas in captivity worldwide.