Rhetorical Analysis of *Blackfish*

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**Note:** *Preforming a rhetorical analysis means evaluating how the author of an argument uses the rhetorical appeals to create an affective case. This means, dissecting the argument to analyze the logos, ethos, pathos, Kairos, and constraints within the piece. If done correctly, the use of these rhetorical appeals allows an argument to be persuasive, relevant, and engaging (Inventing Arguments). Blackfish, a documentary by Gabriela Cowperthwaite, makes the claim that killer whales should be freed from their captive enclosures in entertainment facilities due to the danger they pose towards humans and themselves. This film is a perfect example of how these rhetorical components are used to create an effective argument.*

The film, *Blackfish*, mainly targets an audience of the general public with an emphasis on the customers of SeaWorld. It is meant to inform viewers on the inhumane treatment and unlivable conditions of whales at amusement parks- namely SeaWorld. *Blackfish* uses logic in its claim that an orca is an intellectual being that is cognizant of its surroundings and human interactions. It uses this claim to help argue that the orcas in captivity at SeaWorld do not belong there and are suffering mentally. The film uses reasoning to support this claim by saying that orcas have a limbic system that is more complex than humans; researchers cannot explain the depths of the animals understanding because we can not relate to their brain structure. More specifically, *Blackfish* provides grounds to support its argument with the fact that scientists have proven them to be conscious of human-like relationships and feelings via MRI’s. Upon reviewing the MRI, researchers have found a development in the orca’s brain, which they cannot distinguish or explain.

*Blackfish* also logically claims that the separation of orca families and the living conditions they are put into away from their sea-home result in mental stress and aggravation. The claim further argues that said stress can be directly blamed for the violent outbursts of the orcas against the training staff. The film reasons that the orca’s animalistic culture closely resembles our own mother-and-child-relationship and that they are born to live in a family-like structure for their entire lives. It also argues that orcas suffer the emotional repercussions of separation, much like humans do. When whales are taken away from their families in the wild waters, they grieve the pain and suffering that is associated with that parting, thus making the whales an emotional time bomb. *Blackfish* provides grounds to support this argument by directly quoting SeaWorld, “Orcas live in cohesive long-term social units called pods,” and the “strongest association bonds in a pod are the mother/calf bonds” (SeaWorld).

The filmmakers of *Blackfish* carry out their argument throughout the movie with the warrant that the general public is unaware of the happenings behind the scenes of SeaWorld’s shows, with regards to the treatment of the orcas. It utilizes interviews with ex-trainers, and a very powerful interview by John Crowe, a man who previously caught whales for SeaWorld, on the “torturing” accounts of stealing orcas from their families in the ocean. The film also assumes that the public would not agree or endorse such treatment of these wild animals after learning the truth. *Blackfish* highly emphasizes its emotional and reasoning appeal with the effort to make SeaWorld suffer in financial downfall, hoping it will make them change their practices. The directors do not allow for much room in fallacies or exceptions to their claims, but during one of the interviews in the movie, it is mentioned that the specific attack by Tilikum to Dawn Brancheau could have been a result of a training error that could have upset the whale.

Since the documentary *Blackfish* was released, it has created massive amounts of hate towards SeaWorld and the treatment of whales in captivity. A large part of why people agree with the argument in *Blackfish* relates to the ethos, the credibility that the writer generates within the piece of the work. There are two forms of ethos: extrinsic, the reputation of the author outside of the intended argument and how it affects the credibility of the work and intrinsic, how the author creates trust within the speech (Inventing Arguments). First, the filmmaker, Gabriela Cowperthwaite, made sure to gather a team with experience and credibility, two things that create effective extrinsic ethos within the documentary. Gabriela Cowperthwaite is a documentary filmmaker who, for more than 12 years, has directed, produced and written for well-known companies such as ESPN, National Geographic, Animal Planet, and Discovery Channel. On her team she recruited an associate producer, Tim Zimmermann, who wrote an article on Dawn Brancheau, a SeaWorld trainer who was killed by the famous “Big Splash” orca, Tilikum. Cowperthwaite’s *Blackfish* documentary was also funded by CNN, a company that many audiences would find trustworthy due to their authority and reliability when it comes to reporting the news. During the documentary, there are four, former SeaWorld trainers who are interviewed: Samantha Berg, Jeffrey Ventre, Carol Ray, and John Hargrove. These are professionals who were not only employed at SeaWorld, the company that Blackfish is trying to build a case against, but who also worked next to Dawn Brancheau and many of the other orcas that have reacted violently towards their trainers. The fact that they are speaking out against the treatment of these whales immensely helps the ethos of the documentary because of the background and firsthand experience they have. Last, another extremely trustworthy source that appears numerous times throughout the documentary is OSHA, or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The people who work in this Administration have the mission to help employers and employees reduce job injuries, illnesses and deaths. They have also fought many lawsuits against SeaWorld because of the way the company treats their animals.

Blackfish also creates effective intrinsic ethos through the manner the information in the film is presented. First, Cowperthwaite does not just viciously start attacking SeaWorld. Instead, she goes back in history and uses real news reports and footage to show that the mistreatment of captive whales has lead to the deaths of trainers long before SeaWorld. By getting this view into the past, the audience is able to see that this issue is actually old news and that SeaWorld is outwardly putting its employees and animals in danger despite their previous knowledge. The use of real news footage, and clips of the violent incidents that have occurred during SeaWorld performances, also gives credibility to the documentary because it shows the legitimacy of the stories that are being retold. On the other hand, *Blackfish* does a poor job of creating effective ethos because of the way alternative views are treated during the documentary. An important part of creating effective intrinsic ethos is demonstrating fairness and courtesy to alternative views, in this case the views of SeaWorld. Because it is a documentary against the actions of SeaWorld, the company is depicted as the antagonist, and everything said by them is depicted as lies.

Pathos in Inventing Arguments is defined as the “focus of attention on values and beliefs of the intended audience”. The book also states that it is often associated with emotional appeal. Pathos is important in an argument or documentary because in order to grab the audience’s attention you want to appeal and connect to them in an emotional way. Also, to lead an audience to action you have to connect to a motivational part of them, most people are or can be motivated by their emotions.

Pathos is shown in *Blackfish* through the stories of former SeaWorld trainers, the footage of violent whale attacks, and the 9-1-1 voice recordings associated with the death of Dawn Brancheau. Listening to the personal, heartbreaking stories of former SeaWorld employees pulls at the heartstrings of the audience and allows viewers to connect emotionally with what the whales and their trainers have endured. Next, the director interviews individuals that were in the audience when the whales were misbehaving from stress and attacked their trainers; this is another example of the creation of emotional appeal in the documentary because it allows viewers to emphasize with the innocent civilians that were affected by these incidents. Lastly, the 9-1-1 call that reveals the frantic voices during Dawn’s attack is the final thing that truly grabs the audiences attention. The bone-chilling screams and heart wrenching cries of the frantic caller makes it impossible for listeners to not sympathize with Dawn and those who viewed her tragic death. The director effectively uses pathos to grab the audiences’ attention; just enough to convince them that SeaWorld is a terrible place that mistreats their animals and takes advantage of their trainers.

When analyzing the kairos and constraints of the documentary *Blackfish*, it is important to become familiarized with the concept. Kairos represents an issue’s timeliness or appropriateness in today’s society and it adds a sense of urgency to the argument. If an argument has no kairos, then there is no need for it to be addressed because it is not significant to the audience (Inventing Arguments).

The documentary, *Blackfish*, focuses on several deadly events SeaWorld’s large killer whale, Tilikum, is associated with. After the orca killed veteran trainer, Dawn Brancheau, in front of an audience at SeaWorld on February 24, 2010, the kairos of the argument in *Blackfish* was established. The media attention that ensued after the death of Dawn Brancheau caused the issue to become relevant to those watching the news and gave the argument some grisly evidence to back it. Though the argument has relevance and urgency because no one wants to hear about another killing at SeaWorld, there are still too many people who don’t see the situation as dire and in need of our immediate attention. The general consensus of the world today is that the imprisonment of animals in zoos and places of entertainment is permissible and enjoyable; the death of one person is simply an occurrence that is bound to happen when working with animals. The main demographic that supports the issue are animal rights activists that are concerned with the well being of the whales and not so much with the safety of the humans in contact with them. The claim that Blackfish makes has only a small amount of kairos that stems from the death of Dawn Brancheau and the animal rights activists. Therefore, the movement to release the orcas is moving slowly and little progress has been made.

Similarly, a constraint is a stabilizing factor that inhibits certain effects of the argument from occurring, usually pertaining to the argument’s audience. However, if a constraint is removed from the argument, the effects that were previously inhibited can now take place (Inventing Arguments). The constraints associated with *Blackfish* are mainly related to the audience’s ability to view the film and understand its information. For people that have never seen the film, simply hearing about it from word of mouth is not enough to convince them to become involved. The people that have seen the film but do not agree with or understand its message will not lend their support to the issue either. Another constraint of the film is the need to depict the information in an easy, understandable manner. The majority of the film’s audience is not educated in animal science and thus, the film’s producers were forced to create a documentary that could be understood by the average person. Scientific reasoning and evidence that could have increased the documentary’s ability to persuade educated officials may have been left out for this reason.

            Although Gabriela Cowperthwaite’s varied uses of the rhetorical appeals were effective, she comes up short by creating an extremely biased, one-sided documentary. *Blackfish* may be a film that continuously shocks the world but, despite that, thousands of families continue to visit SeaWorld and the whales everyday.