

TOWARD A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ACTIVIST
DOCUMENTARY

by

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Megan Elizabeth Selheim

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family, who have supported me in all of my decisions, and to Dave, who kept me sane and made this possible.

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ABSTRACT

Documentary film has long been a tool used by progressive political and social movements to raise awareness of an issue or advocate for action to create change. Unfortunately, these films and filmmakers often miss the mark, compromising or oversimplifying their message. I argue that these missteps are due to the fact that these films are reliant on the dominant culture for funding and distribution, and that culture will neither fund nor distribute any product that challenges its ideology too much.

The discipline of political economy looks at how power structures determined and maintained by capitalism direct how media contacts the public. I analyze three environmental documentaries using the basic theories of political economy, and investigate how economics has affected the political goals of activist documentary. I argue that the internet offers both an opportunity to engage with the complexity of an issue through interactive design, as well as a way to potentially circumvent the more restrictive hurdles of a capitalist society.

INTRODUCTION

Partly because movies remain a top-down, capital-intensive art form, they have been more cautious and apt to cater to rather than to subvert the perceived prejudices of the audience. (Dargis and Scott 1)

I have a poster in my apartment for *The Cove*, the documentary film released in 2009 about dolphin slaughter in Japan. The poster is interesting – the top half is an image of a freediver and several dolphins suspended together underwater. The lower half is a list quotations from rave reviews by various critics. The message of the poster seems to be, “everyone thinks this film is great; you should too!”

And many people did. Between its release date in July 2009 and when it finally left theaters in March 2010, the film grossed over \$1 million worldwide (not bad for a documentary) as well as netting the “Best Documentary” Academy Award at the 2010 ceremony. The film attempted to energize an environmental activism movement ultimately aimed at ending all whaling in Japan, and inspired a mini-series spinoff on Animal Planet called *Blood Dolphins (2010)*. The film has taken its core mission, saving dolphins, to heart, and the deftness of the filmmakers has made it a shining example of what can happen when skillful filmmaking meets passionate activism. The mission statement of the social justice video website, takepart.com, reads

Change the world. Start with the world around *you*.

TakePart is a digital media company with a singular mission: To make participating in positive change easy, rewarding, and part of everyday life.

The articles, videos and actions we create build awareness of issues that shape our lives and culture, and provide ways to make a difference.

TakePart is a website, for one, and also a Social Action Network that includes individuals, NGOs, online communities and brands who share a common interest in making the world a better place. We are a division of Participant Media, which has produced culture-shifting films such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Cove*, and *Waiting for Superman*.

To date, Participant has developed programs and active, working relationships with more than 300 non-profits. Collectively, we have the potential to reach more than 75 million people. (“About Us”)

The Cove is listed by name, out of all the film projects and campaigns TakePart has supported in the past and still supports now.

But is *The Cove* all that great? For some it is seen as a pinnacle of activist documentary. It successfully blends the cinema of attractions (Gunning), so widely found in Hollywood, with a documentary predilection for facts and observation and a charismatic cause. The film is engaging, and one of the most entertaining documentaries I have seen in a long time. But the film is intellectually fraught, and given its close association with an important cause, it runs the risk of damaging the very movement it claims to champion. Part of why the film has been so successful commercially is because it adheres so rigorously to the dominant ideology. A group of upper class white men take it upon themselves to invade another country and reveal the horrors that its ignorant society perpetuates.

Very often despite, or perhaps because of, their best intentions, many activist documentaries are complicit in perpetuating the dominant structures that stand in the way of the films’ desired social change. As much as an activist documentary wants to change the world, it is still subject to the pressures of the market and public opinion. Like any other film, a documentary needs distribution in order to be seen, and distribution is tied to how well the film is expected to do at the box office.

For the purpose of this paper, I consider activist documentaries to be those that have garnered some public recognition, and place themselves at the fore of a particular social issue; I will focus specifically on theatrically-released films that are concerned

with environmental issues. These documentaries exist both as cinema, distributed often in arthouse or even mainstream theaters and often made and financed primarily by film production companies, but they also see themselves as flagships in a larger social and political fight to improve the world for the better, and often align themselves with organizations that have no cinematic affiliation but do have a vested interest in the environmental issue component.

I will lay out a brief history of environmental activism in the United States to provide a cultural context for the issues with which environmental documentaries are engaging. I will then explain where Western activist documentary began, and how the role and location of activist documentary has changed over the last century. I will argue that viewing environmental documentaries through the lens of political economy sheds light on why they fall short of their goals, but also offers alternatives that may allow activist documentaries to fulfill their full potential.

DOCUMENTARY AND ACTIVISM

Grierson and the Birth of Documentary Film Activism

Social justice has long been one of the pet topics of documentary film. John Grierson, considered by many to be the father of documentary film, was trained in the social sciences and was interested in the study of immigration before he recognized the power of film. For Grierson, documentary was always a tool; a way to inform and persuade the masses of the greatness of his, or someone else's, cause.

Many public and semi-public bodies found it propitious to explain their role in society through the medium of film, in turn examining some of the issues challenging British society. Films such as *Enough to Eat*, *Housing Problems*, and *Children at School* produced for the British Commercial Gas Association ... were structured to show the possibility of solutions. The paternalistic actions of local and national government were shown to be effective and acceptable, but people were also encouraged to contribute individual initiative to alleviate social problems. (Ward 429)

Grierson did most of his work as an employee of national governments, and as such his films appear more as propaganda than activism. But when given the freedom to move outside of government influence, he immediately turned his attention to social ills. His first film not funded by the British Government, *Housing Problems (1935)*, drew attention to the poverty of the slums in London and how public housing offered a probable solution. Activist films today still follow many of the tenets set out in *Housing Problems*, some good and some not so good.

The film, directed by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton and produced by Grierson, is notable from a film history standpoint as one of the first documentaries to use *vox pop* – ordinary people who have moved to public housing and others who still live in the

slums speak on camera about their living situations. The film introduces some techniques that are still in place for activist documentaries today. It is narrated by the Chairman of the Stepney Housing Committee, which was responsible for clearing the slums and replacing them with public housing in Stepney, a district in East London. The film focuses its argument on emotion rather than fact; while the film does lay out facts in slum life, it does so in such a way that appeals to a person's horror, disgust, and sympathy, rather than her intellect. "The first part of this short but remarkable film introduces us to some slum dwellers who ... tell us of rats, bugs, and lack of water as they sit in their peeling, dripping, cracked homes, collapsing stairwells, and dark courts" (Low 92).

The film also focuses on individual stories of people affected by the issue. People living in the slums tell stories that range from fighting rats in the bedroom to having children die from diseases rampant in the unsanitary slum neighborhoods. The film places the people affected by the slums in a position of the Other; they're treated and discussed as if they are a foreign tribe living in London.¹ It assures us that, when given better housing, "these people" don't continue to live in squalid conditions but actually keep their houses quite clean. And the solution to the problem of slum living is given as better construction methods for public housing. The film draws attention to but then very quickly abandons the topic of where people will live after their slum is pulled down but before public housing is built. Given that this is still a problem in areas such as Nairobi in Kenya, where slums are being replaced with better public housing, it is interesting that the film doesn't even attempt to explore the issue. Instead it focuses its attention on all of

¹ This attitude towards class segregation in British documentary carries through to the modern day. *Creature Comforts (2003)*, an animated television documentary series, features interviews of everyday British citizens brought to life as animated animals. The choice of animal and setting can be interpreted as a critique of the British working class, who are stripped of their humanism.

the amazing architectural and engineering developments that will make the public housing significantly better than the slums. A full two and a half minutes of a film that totals under 15 minutes are dedicated to looking at models of public housing developments, while the narrator explains some of the new construction methods that will be used, such as steel frames and reinforced concrete.

The underlying assumption is that people living in the slums are “slum people.” They have no agency, and live in squalid conditions because that is who they are. The people making efforts to improve living situations in the slum don’t ever concern themselves with actually improving the station of the people affected; there’s no discussion of how other programs, such as employment training, might actually move people permanently out of both the slums and public housing into a better living situation. Unfortunately, this perspective is one that is still common in activist films today. People affected by a social ill are seen as powerless victims, and it takes an active outsider to come in and save them from themselves. In reality, while people in terrible situations may need assistance to improve their conditions, it is the people most affected by any oppressive structure who are in the best position to right the wrong. They know better than anyone what they need to improve their lives. The slum dwellers in *Housing Problems* are asked about their living situation, but never about what they think they need to really improve their lives. Many may have said “larger apartments” but just as many may have said “better wages.”

Documentaries that focus on social problems still attempt to present an external solution. This is partly due to the nature of the interaction between documentaries and

their subjects. Documentaries have always told other people's stories, and usually those stories don't have anything that inherently connects them to film.

Since documentary does not address the fictive space of classic narrative but historiographic space, the premise and assumption prevails that what occurred in front of the camera was not entirely enacted with the camera in mind. It would have existed, the events would have unfolded, the social actors would have lived and made presentations of themselves in everyday life irrespective of the camera's presence. (Nichols 78)

In many cases the filmmaker has a personal interest in the story, or may be making a personal documentary about something in their family or their own experiences. Even in those cases, the story exists outside of the film, and outside of the filmmaker as a filmmaker, meaning that the story being told didn't happen exclusively for the film or with the film in mind. In documentaries such as *Supersize Me*, where the filmmaker did engage in the primary plot device with the final film in mind, the film is still not about him. It's about America and the fast food industry, which existed long before this particular film was even a storyboard. For this reason, there is always tension between the maker of the film and subject of the film, even if those two are one and the same. It is much easier for a filmmaker to assert control over the production of an activist film if they are producing not only the film, but the solution to the problem.

Environmental Activism in the United States

Grierson's films were primarily concerned with people, but the methods he developed can be applied to any film that tries to influence people on any issue. The modern environmental movement in the United States is particularly interested in using media, including feature documentary, to raise awareness and influence decision-making, but this was not always the case.

The environmentalism we recognize today can be traced back to the conservationism that blossomed during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency at the beginning of the 20th century. For the first 40 years of the 20th century, most conservation was initiated from within the federal government². Both Teddy Roosevelt and later, his cousin Franklin saw the responsible use of natural resources as a critical component to the success of the nation (Shabecoff 67-69; Scheffer 113). Teddy created the Forest Service and National Parks Service, among others, to attend to the management of public lands. Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Soil Conservation Service to help agricultural interests make efficient and sustainable use of their land. Many Civilian Conservation Corps projects were used to create controlled access to national parks and forests. In the 1930s, recognizing the role that ecological destruction played in the Dust Bowl, the government funded film projects such as Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938), which encouraged responsible use of natural resources.

When World War II broke out, however, the U.S. government's film efforts were re-directed at promoting support for the war effort, and after the war the government's priorities shifted to building the economy via promoting consumption. The lack of government stewardship in the 1950s intersected with growing social activism that, for environmentalists, was ignited by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. "The publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the ensuing controversy that made it an epochal event in the history of environmentalism can also be seen as helping launch a new decade

² This is not to say that the federal government was always an advocate for the environment. The first 40 years of the 20th century also saw some of the most exploitative administrations, under presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge. My point is that during this period, when action was taken on the environment, it was usually initiated from within the federal government, instead as a reaction to outside pressure from non-governmental individuals or organizations.

of rebellion and protest ...” (Gottlieb 81). The influence of her book showed that successful environmental activism needed to make use of media to reach the general population and incite them to action, and it had to do so in a charismatic way.

Carson did not do much of the research that showed the dangers of DDT or other synthetic substances. She was not even the first to cry the alarm – Bookchin, the naturalist Edwin Way Teale, and a number of others had already sounded public warnings.

What Carson did in *Silent Spring*, however, was to present the scientific evidence in clear, poetic, and moving prose that demonstrated how the destruction of nature and the threat to human health from pollution were completely intertwined. (Shabecoff 109)

The recognition for environmentalists that facts and information were not enough by themselves, but that those facts had to be packaged in a way that would have broad appeal for the public, has carried over into other forms of media production, including documentary film. Unfortunately, the process of filmmaking differs from that of writing, which can translate into a film compromising its message more than a published article or book.

A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DOCUMENTARY

Activist documentary is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, these films, by their very nature, seek to challenge the status quo. They fly in the face of social norms to declare that something is most definitely not right in the State of Denmark, and then propose a sometimes radical alternative. On the other hand, these films fail miserably at their end if they are not distributed and viewed. Thus, in order to secure distribution and make their argument heard, they can only challenge within reason.

Political economic theory offers insight into this dire state of affairs. Political economy explores the relationship between power and commodification in capitalist society, as well as the moral implications of such interactions and pragmatic steps to improve circumstances for the better (Wasko 222-223). Political economy has been used in communications studies since 1960, but rarely is applied specifically to film, especially documentary film. However, I feel that the focus of political economy makes it particularly suited to the study of documentary in Western society, especially activist film.

Political economy becomes crucial in order to document communication in total social context. Interrelationships between media and communication industries and sites of power in society are necessary for the complete analysis of communications and help to dispel some common myths about our economic and political system ... Through study of ownership and control, political economists analyze relations of power and confirm a class system and structural inequalities. (Wasko 224)

With each successive development in film production and distribution, documentary has had to seek new outlets. Nonfiction film used to be as common as fiction film at the box office, but slowly over time found itself relegated mostly to small

art house cinemas and public television. As I am writing this, the federal government is pushing to eliminate all federal support for PBS, which would inevitably lead to even less documentary film distribution in the United States. The United States is a capitalist society, where worth is determined by monetary value. Documentary will never be able to compete economically with Hollywood narrative cinema; in the eyes of most of the United States public, that equates to lesser importance, almost irrelevance. For activist film, the marginalization of their cause is unacceptable. They do not exist for film alone, but to raise awareness of an issue that is already being ignored by the majority. For a film to make itself relevant, it needs to make money, and for an activist documentary, that usually involves pandering.

Kyriarchy in an Oppressive Society

It is generally understood today that oppressive social structures do not exist in a vacuum, or a binary; oppression and social hierarchy is a complex system of interlocking power relationships that rely heavily on each other. In 1992, feminist biblical theorist Elizabeth Fiorenza coined the term *kyriarchy* as a description of this web. “Indeed such an ‘adding on’ feminist analysis disregards the historical interstructuring of race, class, gender, and nation as forms of stratification which develop together out of the same set of circumstances and which therefore need to be changed simultaneously” (Fiorenza 115). The take home message is that oppression is the real issue; whomever is being oppressed is an irrelevant detail. We are either a society that supports hierarchical stratification, or we’re not; as long as we are, someone is going to get the short end of the stick. Support for any oppressive ideology is support for all oppressive ideologies.

But documentary film doesn't have the luxury of an all-or-nothing approach. To make money in capitalist society, one has to be popular. And to be popular, one usually has to conform, at least to a degree. The activist documentary solution generally has been to focus the onus of the argument on one particular issue, and throw some other related, but not as relevant, issues under the bus. We see this in *Housing Problems* when Anstey and Elton decide that to win public support for improved public housing, they can't take on any other class issues.

Many activist filmmakers have been painted into the corner of having to commodify their own cause, which often undermines it. Most of the social problems that still exist today are the result of complex interactions of multiple issues, without a quick or easy answer. They require the collaborative efforts of multiple groups, who may or may not enjoy working together; time; and an in depth understanding of all the factors affecting the issue, along with what steps need to be taken to effectively alleviate those factors. That's really, really hard, and really, really complicated. Documentary film structure doesn't lend itself to explaining complex issues in depth anyway. Add in the commercial pressure, and the stories get even more simplified. While simplification is useful in elucidating an issue, it is antithetical to solutions. Problems of oppression are complex; simplicity is what keeps them in place. If people don't understand the knots, they'll never be able to untie them. An activist film that oversimplifies its message risks directing energy and outcry at the wrong target, making sympathizers complicit in the perpetuation of the problem. *The Cove* points its angry finger at the fishermen who kill the dolphins. Only briefly does it look askance at the international dolphin industry, which is what is actually funding the slaughter in Taiji (by the film's own admission).

Until other countries stop paying for dolphins to perform tricks, there is no reason for the slaughter in Taiji to stop. But taking on an international, multi-billion dollar industry is hard. Taking aim at a small group of poor, Japanese fishermen is much, much easier.

Documentary and Capitalism: *An Inconvenient Truth*

Documentary films often need to cobble together funding from multiple sources, including activist organizations, grants, and production companies. Many investors, including those in the best position to provide most of the funding, are going to choose projects that they feel will make their money back. This additional pressure influences which projects are funded, and may even influence what projects filmmakers are choosing to pursue. The end result often is an activist film that isn't raising additional awareness of any issue, but is rather commercially successful because it is reflecting back to an already galvanized public the need to pay attention to a pet cause. It is enlightening to compare *The Cove* to another environmental film, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

An Inconvenient Truth was released in May 2006, and focuses its message on climate change. The film records a power point lecture about climate change given throughout the nation by former Vice President Al Gore, with short interstices exploring Gore's thoughts on the purpose and efficacy of his quest. Like *The Cove*, *An Inconvenient Truth* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary, but unlike *The Cove*, it is one of the top-grossing documentaries of recent history, with over \$24 million in domestic theater revenue alone.

I believe that a significant part of why *An Inconvenient Truth* did so much better commercially than *The Cove* can be attributed to the public climate in which the film was

released. Al Gore did much to contribute to that climate, although not through film. By his own admission and the public record, Gore has been an outspoken advocate for environmental issues, including climate change (previously “global warming”), since he was elected to the federal House of Representatives in the 1970s. In 1988, the United Nations created the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The Kyoto Protocol, an international effort to slow global climate change, was initially adopted in 1997 and opened for signature by other nations in 1998. Climate change was on the national agenda in 2001, when George W. Bush formally rejected the Kyoto Protocol.

An Inconvenient Truth definitely served to reinvigorate a debate that lagged in America after the United States excused itself from having to think about climate change. It did a great job of making a very complicated issue understandable to a lay person, and offering some small actions individuals could take to reduce personal carbon emissions. But the film *reintroduced* a debate; it didn’t start it. I believe that without the thirty-plus years of scientific research, policy initiatives, and journalistic coverage the film would have failed, both commercially and at its larger mission. *The Cove*, on the other hand, was opening to an audience that knew next to nothing about dolphin hunting in Japan. So while both films are geared at environmentally-minded audiences, *An Inconvenient Truth* outperformed *The Cove* at the box office 25 to 1.

A Case Study: *The Cove*

To illustrate how one might use political economy to analyze an activist documentary, I will work through *The Cove* using the theoretical parameters outline by Vincent Mosco in *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal*.

There are three main entry points of analysis: commodification, spatialization, and structuration (Mosco 139).

Commodification

“Commodification refers to the process of transforming use values into exchange values, of transforming products whose value is determined by their ability to meet individual and social needs into products whose value is set by what they can bring in the marketplace” (Mosco 143-144). In communication studies, and for film, there are several areas of commodification, each having different implications.

The most obvious commodity is the film itself. People pay a set price, either for a ticket or for access after the film has left the theater to see the film. They are putting a price on their entertainment and education. Because films cannot set their own price, but enter the market at the already-determined ticket price, whether or not the film gets enough funding for production is partially decided by whether or not investors think the film will sell enough tickets at the current price. There is not nearly as much flexibility for a film to link the cost of viewing to market demand. Instead, market demand is set, and films must make concessions to meet that demand. This demand also leads to discriminate funding, as discussed above with *An Inconvenient Truth*.

However, the film is only one area of commodification. In the case of activist documentary, its issue also becomes a commodity. Most viewers don't attend documentary films for the special effects or the actors, which can be major draws for Hollywood narrative films. Instead, documentary audiences are attracted to the subject of the documentary. Even if the film is mediocre, viewers will pay if they care about the issue. This connection between issue and film means that for a documentary, the

pleasure of watching a film is not the only commodity; the topic also becomes commodified. The perceived value of the issue not only affects funding, but can also lead to additional media decisions. *The Cove* inspired the three-part miniseries *Blood Dolphins*, which had little in common with the documentary besides the issue of dolphin hunting. In this case, Animal Planet was not investing in the film, but rather its issue.

Animal Planet was hoping to gain on a third level of commodification, the audience. In a general sense, industry commodifies the audience because they are something that a communications outlet, ie a television series, can sell to another business interest through advertising and promotion. The producers of *Blood Dolphins* were hoping to leverage the publicity of *The Cove* to sell advertising aired during *Blood Dolphins*. While the makers of *The Cove* did seem to have a vested interest in their cause, I would guess that the producers for Animal Planet had no such attachment.

We need to consider commodification when looking at activist film, because it affects the discourse. For *The Cove*, commodification was less of a hurdle – the film made it to theaters and inspired a spin-off, so the film, its issue, and its audience were all deemed valuable enough. Commodification is more of a concern theoretically for those topics that never make it to market. The big picture effect of commodification is that, as theorists who analyze content, the content available to us is driven by market value. Films, topics, and ideas that aren't considered "worth it" by commercial interests never make it to the public space where theory and criticism can engage with the material. When we consider that the realm of film theory often connects works to each other, this glaring lack of potential material actually affects what theory discusses and how.

Spatialization

Mosco generally defines spatialization as “the process of overcoming the constraints of space and time in social life” (173). For communication, this idea is more specifically used to understand concentration, which is “the institutional extension of corporate power in the communications industry” (Mosco 175). In the case of *The Cove*, a spatialization analysis would investigate how *The Cove* figures into Participant Media, one of the funding production companies.

The mission statement for Participant Media begins “Participant believes that a good story well told can truly make a difference in how one sees the world. Whether it is a feature film, documentary or other form of media, Participant exists to tell compelling, entertaining stories that also create awareness of the real issues that shape our lives” (“Our Mission”). Participant started out as a film production company, but has since expanded into other forms of media, including publishing. This expansion into other forms of media production, as well as globalizing movements, are examples of concentration.

Recently, Participant has entered into a number of business deals that allow the company to expand and increase its output through guaranteed financing and distribution for a slate of films over the next several years, beginning in September 2008 with its \$250 million film financing fund with imagination Abu Dhabi and in January 2009 with its non-exclusive worldwide distribution agreement with Summit Entertainment. (“Our History”)

As a company expands into other markets or into other localities (or both), it breaks down previously existing spatial barriers to growth. On its website, Participant discusses how part of its outreach campaign for *The Cove* was aimed at showing the film in Japan.

For *The Cove*, Participant joined forces with Earth Island Institute and other organizations to develop a mobile and online international letter

writing campaign urging the Japanese government to end the annual dolphin slaughter in Taiji. The overwhelming response led to the slaughter being suspended for several months and the **film eventually being shown in Japan**. (“Our History,” emphasis mine)

There are a few issues that arise out of the concentration efforts of companies that promote activist films. In terms of activism, the growth of a company brings a culturally-specific brand of activism to a location where it may not be relevant or as effective. Ideally, an organization would work locally to develop community-specific actions to advance a cause; however, a company with global financial interests is more likely to promote a single brand or product in multiple locations. In the case of a film producer, instead of creating several culturally relevant versions of the same story, the company makes one film and then markets it in multiple locations. Not tailoring a message to a community can result in a less effective awareness campaign, or even the possibility of offending and alienating the very people whose goodwill one was hoping to gain. In terms of developing a social movement, both of those results are counterproductive.

Structuration

Another issue that arises from globalization is hegemony, which is a characteristic better understood through structuration. “Structuration ... describes a process by which structures are constituted out of human agency, even as they provide the very ‘medium’ of that constitution” (Mosco 212). Basically, political economy adheres to the understanding that corporate structures, including media industries, both reflect societal norms and perpetuate them. It’s a simple concept, but one that is often overlooked when analyzing the content of media. I believe that structuration is where *The Cove* needs the most attention.

Mosco breaks down structuration into analyses of social class, gender, and race; he acknowledges that there are many more aspects of society, but that for the sake of his argument, he is focusing on some of the larger and more studied areas (238). *The Cove* reflects a homogenous view of society: all of the main participants are white, upper-middle or upper class, and all are male with one exception. While this makeup reflects the values certain members of American society hold (white, rich, male are the “most important”), it also reflects one of the darker sides of American environmentalism. Environmentalism in the United States has not been, for the most part, very open to or inclusive of women (Gottlieb 234) or people of color (Gottlieb 260-262) and often fails to take the interests of working class people into account (Gottlieb 306). *The Cove* is guilty of all of these oversights.

About thirty minutes into the film, Louie Psihoyos, the director as well as a participant, introduces the expert “Ocean’s 11” team he assembled for the production of *The Cove*. Including himself and Ric O’Barry, there are seven named people involved. All are white, and six of the seven are male. None of the participants engage in professional activity that would qualify them as working class.

Gender: Gender is an interesting aspect, not only because there is very little gender diversity highlighted in the production, but also because of how gender is portrayed. Mandy-Rae Cruickshank, the only woman included on the team, is never shown as an individual, but always as half of a married pair, and she’s one of the only women in the entire film. In addition to the team, there are seventeen other people interviewed in depth; none are women. The dearth of women experts is suspect enough – I don’t believe for one second that there are no female scientists or activists involved in

saving dolphins. But I am also concerned with how Mandy is portrayed. Louie Psihoyos introduces each team member with a cool montage and music. The guys get energetic music and montages that focus entirely on the skills and experience they are bring to the project.

When Mandy and her husband Kirk are first introduced, we see a short montage of Mandy free-diving – she is an 8-time world record holder. But then the tone changes to a mystical, magical feel. We watch a second montage of Mandy swimming with whales and dolphins. It is clear that unlike the other team members, Mandy’s contribution is largely her feminine connection to nature. She is the only character who cries, both in interview and in b-roll. Her ambition and physical ability are largely overshadowed by her emotions and connection nature. She and her husband are also two of the only people in the film interviewed together; the other pair are two Japanese town councilmen. She has no unique identity or voice in the film.

Race: In addition to gender, race is also poorly treated. First is the filmmakers’ decision to focus on Japan. Iceland and Norway also currently engage in forms of whaling, but they are never even mentioned in the film. The Japanese are set up as both evil and ignorant; they hunt dolphins because they want to, and also because of government and media cover-ups and misinformation. Near the beginning of the film, Ric O’Barry points the finger at Japanese branches of environmental organizations such as Greenpeace, but at no point does it seem that the filmmakers made any overtures to those organizations. Instead of attempting to work within the culture, the team attacks it from the outside. The Japanese are first introduced to us as ignorant and aggressive, trying to keep the team away from the titular cove. About halfway through the film, we

move to a more sympathetic portrayal, of people in Tokyo completely ignorant of the goings-on in the cove. As we approach the end of the film, we finally encounter two heroic Japanese town councilmen who are standing up to the local government's decision to serve dolphin meat in school lunches. And who are these heroes who risk their reputations and maybe even their lives? We don't know, because they are the only people interviewed in the film who are not named. Their identifying title says only "town councilmen." Much later in the credits we finally find out who they are.

Unfortunately, the Japanese are not the only non-white people to get the short end of the stick. About an hour into the film, we are introduced to a group of nations who are "prostituting" themselves to the Japanese by trading their support at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) for lifting whaling restrictions for money and infrastructure. The filmmakers express moral outrage that these countries, primarily in the East Caribbean and Equatorial Africa, would seek funds to help with development. The producers conveniently close their eyes to the fact that they are from some of the most developed countries in the world, and that other, poorer countries may not have as much room for moral outrage.

While the film explores several reasons that Japan gives for its continued dolphin hunting, one of its most egregious faults is the desire to be self-governing. The filmmakers simply cannot understand why any country wouldn't acknowledge the higher moral and intellectual authority of the West. It's just such a weird concept.

A structuration analysis of communication usually focuses less on content, as I have done here, and more on the larger processes of influence and social reproduction. For *The Cove*, the first step is content analysis so that we can recognize what parts of

society have been emphasized. The film barely includes women at all; the primary female character is portrayed more as the team's esoteric connection to nature than a full and active member of the mission. The portrayal of multiple non-white peoples assumes the worst about them, and the best about white America and the West. And environmentalism is situated as a wealthy man's pursuit. While these issues may not be as blatant in the environmental movement as they are in the film, they do reflect the reality of the current environmental movement in America. Women are marginalized, and connections between race and class are completely ignored. Political economy also draws our attention to the fact that this entire process is driven by the trained-dolphin industry. While that is mentioned in the film, the filmmakers move on to Taiji, and attempt to solve the social ill by treating a symptom, instead of the cause. If the filmmakers really wanted to end the dolphin hunt, they would go after Sea World. But Sea World is too big and powerful a target for this film; it's far easier – and more entertaining – to go after a small Japanese fishing village.

The activist enterprise of *The Cove* and films like it can't work in this environment. An understanding of kyriarchical relationships points to a solution focused on empowering local communities and addressing multiple causes of one issue at the same time. The film has revealed a problem that needs to be addressed, but has done an abominable job at offering any kind of solution or action plan. Based on the facts presented in the film, the solution is some combination of cutting back on over fishing happening in first-world countries like the United States, providing sustainable economic development and support for poorer countries in the Caribbean and Africa, empowering the Japanese to begin a national initiative against dolphin hunting, and convincing Sea

World to stop exhibiting marine mammals caught in the wild. If we think about film as a commodity, we have to admit – that film will never sell. It’s a much better product if the presented answer is to bully the Japanese into doing what we say, via text message.³

Political economy allows us to dissect the kyriarchical relationships that are housed within a film, as well as instrumental in its production. *The Cove* needs to navigate a capitalist society and make money in an environment that will most likely be hostile to its message. The result is a film that engages in just-enough activism. It directs attention to an issue, houses it in an easy to swallow societal structure, and offers no real solutions (because the necessary solutions fly in the face of our current capitalist society).

Film has power. A documentary film has the ability to make experts out of previously unknown people, to direct attention and funding to tiny grassroots organizations, and raise awareness of issues that are intentionally being obscured by the powers that be. But in a capitalist economy, all of this potential power is mitigated by the need to make money, and the cause becomes the product. That changes the focus away from awareness towards making money, and so films that should be at the fore of an activist movement, making the clarion call and organizing the troops, don’t actually materialize until the culture war is underway, and the film then acts more as a pat on the back than anything else.

Understanding this context is critical to moving forward and changing the way film is used in social movements. Documentary film is trapped by the current distribution model, and can’t fulfill its full potential as a tool for social change until it no

³ The credits of *The Cove* and a sign Ric O’Barry held up on-stage when accepting the Oscar award instructed people to “text dolphin to 44144.” According to TakePart.com, that text will sign you up to “get messages right to your phone about how you can help make a difference and end the yearly dolphin hunt in Taiji, Japan” (“Join The Cove campaign”). They don’t specify how.

longer needs to rely on the good graces of society and capitalist investment to succeed. It may be a long way off, but I think there's hope.

THE FUTURE OF ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARY

It would seem an impossible situation; as documentary catches up with progressive notions, capitalism knocks it back down. What is activist film to do? I believe many activist filmmakers earnestly believe in their cause and don't intentionally further oppressive modes just for their own ends. But the reality is that an activist documentary's primary goal is to be seen, in order to raise awareness, and in the current distribution model in Western culture, being seen involves some level of compromise.

Fortunately, we now have the internet.

Digital distribution is activist documentary's salvation. Widespread, unfettered internet access and the ease with which social media allows things to "go viral" means that a documentary no longer has to pander in order to be seen. A savvy filmmaker can promote their film, relatively inexpensively, and get it out to the public without ever relying on traditional distribution modes. It's not perfect; filmmakers looking to bypass traditional structures when promoting their films will find that they are much less likely to make a profit from their work, meaning that these filmmakers are significantly more reliant on grants and donation funding for production. But the option exists. And most importantly, digital distribution provides a crutch to allow documentary to push traditional boundaries to see how the public responds to new ideas and documentary modes. Providing a bridge from historically structured documentaries that look very much like Griersonian films to a new form of documentary that is able to uphold progressive ideals while also succeeding commercially is the benefit of digital distribution. It allows for an openly experimental stage of documentary, without having

to worry as much about the gatekeepers. "... filmmakers have used the web not only to promote their film but also to shape the reception of it, as independent filmmakers begin to find new platforms that may place less emphasis on theatrical premieres" (Tryon 97).

But the internet allows activist filmmakers to go even further. The recent advent of interactive documentary experiences online allow for the very level of depth that a social issue requires but a stand-alone film cannot deliver. These platforms are still in their infancy, and constrained somewhat both by technological capabilities as well as an ingrained linear film mindset. But they have shown promise at creating an interactive experience that melds multiple forms of media, and allowing users to take their time and explore all of the influences that drive a particular problem.

Exploring Journey to the End of Coal

Journey to the End of Coal, an interactive documentary production by HonkyTonk, a French production company, delves into the issues surrounding modern coal mining in China. The experience is treated as a "web documentary," but goes beyond what would normally be found in a film. In addition to the creative melding of film, photography, text and sound, the documentary includes interactive features that allow a viewer to control their own experience. The video follows a train journey from Beijing into Chinese coal country, with stops along the way for the viewer, posited as an investigative journalist, to explore a particular area in more depth.

One of the more effective uses of the interactivity is the design of interviews. In keeping with the journalistic conceit, interviews with characters in the film are arranged as give and take. The viewer clicks on one of several questions they can ask a character,

and each question elicits a different response. Responses also depend on the order in which questions are asked; certain characters won't talk to the viewer until a level of trust has been reached, which gives the viewer a better sense of how average people in China think about the issue of coal mining. The interactive structure is clearly intended to keep the viewer's interest in the website, but the question and answer organization could allow a filmmaker to include more of an interview with a particular subject than might make it into the final cut of a linear film. Answers that would otherwise seem overly tangential could simply be woven into the normal dynamic of a conversation, allowing a viewer to get a more full understanding of a particular character's experience and opinion.

Journey to the End of Coal uses this interactive choice structure to also allow a viewer to explore different aspects of the coal-mining industry. If I am more interested in the industrial piece of the puzzle, I can spend more time in that area of the film, and skip the sections that focus on the plight of peasant coal miners; I can also explore both areas fully. If anything, *Journey* suffers from being too linear, and not more fully exploring its interactive potential. No matter what I might discover in a section of the film, the next step has already been chosen for me.

I believe the future of online experimental documentary, at least for activism, lies in exploiting the interactivity and quick information connections the internet offers. Most issues are complex and multifaceted, which makes for a truncated translation into a time-limited, linear film format. Instead of the pearls-on-a-string structure, I envision an ornate chandelier. An interactive web documentary would ideally make use of the nonlinear format, creating multiple short pieces that each examine in depth a detail connected to the larger issue, but would also use connectivity to create a full picture. A

sequence that interprets a particular research angle could include, in the interaction, links directly to the original study and subsequent reports on it. *Journey to the Center of Coal*, which has mine disasters as a central plot device, could connect viewers to actual news reports (written or televised) of actual mine disasters in China as the main character travels through the story.

Journey has a clear stand on the state of the coal industry in China, and is somewhat limited in scope. But interactive web documentary is still in its infancy, and it is easy to see the potential for a much more comprehensive production that is able to explore most, if not all, of the factors that affect an issue and how they interact with each other. The internet and digital distribution has the potential to create a space where activist documentary films can explore fundamental changes to their structure that will allow them to better represent social problems. They have already created a space where documentaries can move away from a traditional film structure, and make use of interactive organization to take a comprehensive, multi-layered look at a social problem while still maintaining a focus on the primary goal. For activist documentary to truly fulfill its potential, it needs to look to the internet, and fully make use of the medium.

CONCLUSION

We live in a hierarchical society. That is something that cannot be escaped. Activist documentary has taken up the banner of change, but does not fully understand what it is up against. Documentary may seek to change the world for the better, but it is a product of an oppressive society, imbued with the social structures and ideologies that stand in the way of true social progress. It must justify itself to the very society it wishes to change (sometimes radically), and so must compromise. What documentary filmmakers must understand is that oppression is the issue; whomever is being oppressed is a nominal detail. We are either a society that supports hierarchical stratification, or we're not; as long as we are, someone is going to get the short end of the stick. Support for any oppressive ideology is support for all oppressive ideologies. Marilyn French makes this argument in her book *Beyond Power: On Women, Men, and Morals*. She posits patriarchy as the first oppressive structure, from which all others grew. Her argument is that once one group of people recognizes that it can arbitrarily raise itself in value above another group, the basis for that oppression is opportunistic. In some societies, the primary oppressive dichotomy is gender; in others race, income, sexual orientation, family background, the list goes on and on. Whether or not you accept her argument that patriarchy started it all, the important point is understanding that the "reasons" for oppression are not the root; oppression itself is.

Activist documentaries will never reach their ultimate goal until they are able to reimagine their relationship to the society that creates and consumes them. They must separate themselves from the dominant ideology, and find a way to reach the people

without having to compromise their argument or pander to the majority. Developments in internet distribution and platforms offer hope. But funding will remain a problem in a capitalist society. A more thorough political economy analysis of the modern documentary industry seems a necessary next step to evaluate how activist documentary can move forward and start to more effectively advocate for social change.

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