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Blackfish-ing for Buzz: The Rhetoric of the Real in Theme Parks and Documentary

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Abstract

In 2014, a year of record tourism in the state of Florida, SeaWorld saw a drop of one million visitors to its theme park in Orlando. The decline followed Gabriela Cowperthwaite's 2013 documentary film *Blackfish*, which presented the circumstances of orcas, or "killer whales," held in captivity at parks like SeaWorld as cruel to the animals and dangerous to their trainers. In 2016, SeaWorld announced it will stop breeding orcas, and phase out its orca theatrical shows by 2019, a move widely attributed in the press to the impact of Cowperthwaite's film. This article examines the film *Blackfish* as a rhetorical alignment of the symbolic functions of theme parks and documentaries, analyzing the work of the film's discourse to influence audiences and challenge to SeaWorld's use of captive orcas to entertain tourists.

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Baudrillard (1996) describes Disney World as a "palace of the imaginary[1]." Indeed fantasy seems to be the very point of theme parks. They are spaces cordoned off from day-to-day life, where dreams come true, where line drawings assume shape in the material realm of embodied experience and can be hugged and posed with for photographs, or where the reification of "nature" is more than just a trick of

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[1] The view to SeaWorld in this essay will at times come from Disney World, its predecessor in Orlando and the unavoidable center of the Florida theme park universe, as well as any effort to theorize about theme parks more generally.

language but the tangible subject of a life-world encounter with the planet's exotic and varied fecundity gathered together from afar and safely tamed and arranged as a spectacular and immersive display. And that is surely the point; theme parks are proof of our triumph over the laws of nature. Imagination, as we can experience for ourselves, can become a tangible world – a SeaWorld or a Disney World. Theme parks are proof that the word can indeed become flesh, that what we *dream* can become *what is*, just because we will it so, that the Real can be safely shut away. They are a verification of the substantiality of the imaginary – a verification that for the cost of about $100 we can commune with for ourselves (miracles don't come cheap). Still, we know that SeaWorld or Disney World are not *the* world.

Baudrillard (1996) observes further that the theme park "enterprise goes beyond the imaginary," for within the experience, "We are no longer alienated and passive spectators but interactive extras….It is no longer a spectacular logic of alienation but a spectral logic of disincarnation" (Baudrillard, 1996).

For Baudrillard (1988), the point of hyperreal theme park fantasy-made-incarnate is its work to displace the fantasies of everyday life. These parks are a sleight of hand to distract us from the un-real presumptions we make about what is "true" or "natural" and how those presumptions structure the ways we live our lives. The myths of the "real" world outside the parks are left in place to cover over its harsh realities.

Gabriela Cowperthwaite's 2013 SeaWorld documentary *Blackfish* begins by presenting the film's central problem, established with foreboding images of murky waters suddenly interrupted by the black and white patterns of huge killer whales (orcas) swimming by menacingly close, and 911 calls to the Orange County, Florida Sherriff's Department announcing death at the park. We are given a glimpse of the lurking wild. But then we break free of the waters! We see those colossal whales explode from beneath and leap into the air for cheering crowds in an elegant and sublime spectacle. Soon after in Cowperthwaite's documentary we see a TV ad for SeaWorld where orcas are pictured "swimming" through the skies

next to an airplane for the delight of a little blond boy peering out the plane's window presumably on his way to the park, and literally squirming with awe and wonder. The dark, deep-blue mysteries of the seas have come into the daylight. They are now visible in the guise of a sleek and aerodynamic, black and white fantasy set against light blue skies and puffy clouds, their bodies echoing the massive planes that too defy gravity and bring multitudes of tourists to the tarmac of Orlando International Airport for a trip to SeaWorld.

The worldly structures of fantasy

But for all the fantasy, theme parks are *places*, shaped by material circumstances and practices: roads and climate, economic forces, public policy, and living bodies – including the bodies and behaviors of animals who are not always easily conformed to the flights of imaginations sold in ads and structured through theme park attractions.

In the mid-1960s, about a decade before SeaWorld Orlando was to open, Walt Disney decided to locate his Florida park near Orlando. Disney reportedly made his decision while looking from the air at the intersection of roads that could funnel in tourists from the American East Coast and Midwest (Allman, 2013). His lawyers used loopholes in Florida law and special legislation to minimize avenues for state control over his park, setting up an array of public policy structures that would secure an unhindered path toward the fantasy world he would raise from orange groves (Fogelsong, 1999) – even seeking advice from a CIA operative, Paul Helliwell, to legally locate the park partially outside of state regulation (Allman, 2013). Allman (2013) summarizes the effectiveness of their work citing a 2005 comment from Rob Jacobs, Florida's then chief of the Bureau of Fair Rides Inspection after a four-year-old had died on a Disney ride, "We don't have the authority to close the park down or close the ride down" (380).

This same configuration of climate and material and governmental structures was alluring to SeaWorld in the early 1970s when it too decided to locate its new theme park in Orlando – some 50 miles away from the nearest sea (Allman, 2013). That SeaWorld is a *sea* world is itself a

transformation, a rhetorical act – infrastructure and public policy given shape by fantasy and dreams.

Like documentary, theme parks are an awkward, leaky mix of rhetoric bumping up against the stubbornness of the world we seek to conform to our grasp – an interaction between discourse and what that Kenneth Burke calls *recalcitrance*: "the factors that substantiate a statement, the factors that incite a statement, and the factors that correct a statement" (Burke, 1984a, p. 47). Even the best-funded or most assiduous attempts to manifest a fantasy can be interrupted by the recalcitrances of flesh and blood life, especially the rudest recalcitrance of all: death.

In this article I examine the rhetoric of the 2013 documentary *Blackfish.* The film is a rare and appealing text for analysis. In the case of both film and theme parks the ephemera of story and language are marshaled through processes, practices, and materials to create meanings within and about our shared (and recalcitrant) life-world of experience. Both film and theme parks are acts of rhetoric. The patterns of discourse imbedded in

both do rhetorical work. As Ashley (2010) says of tourist venues, they "persist in functioning as rhetorical texts anchored in the contexts and processes of their production and reception" (p. 24). Haraway (2004) argues that "Nature is, in 'fact,' constructed as a technology through social practice" (p. 186), and that "nature" exhibitions work as machines, producing "contingent material-semiotic articulations" (Haraway, 1997, p. 239) making ideologies and shaping culture. The camera too, for Haraway, is an instrument of "possession, production, preservation, consumption, surveillance, appreciation and control…" (Haraway, 2004, p. 175). She notes, "The image and the real define each other, as all of reality in late capitalist culture lusts to become an image for its own security. Reality is insured by the image, and there is no limit to the amount of money that can be made" (pp. 175-176). And to the degree that our symbolic structures interact with reality, they are a "reflection," but simultaneously a "selection" and "deflection" of that reality (Burke, 1966, p. 59).

Perhaps more significantly here, *Blackfish* is especially fascinating to anyone interested in documentary as a tool for social activism. The question of the impact of any particular film is notoriously hard to gauge, leaving reception scholars with a host of vexing problems (Bird, 2003). But *Blackfish* has had an unmistakable impact on tourism at SeaWorld. The 2016 decision of SeaWorld to stop breeding orcas and phase out its orca theatrical shows by 2019 marks the film as a remarkably rare and clear example of a single media text disrupting a multimillion dollar business model (Buss, 2016; Chan, 2016; Ross, 2016).

My analysis of Cowperthwaite's film suggests several ways that its rhetorical appeals invite the sort of powerful audience engagement in line with the film's impact. First, in keeping with the marketing environment of its channels of distribution, I argue that *Blackfish* is composed and marketed to generate buzz. Second, I argue that the film's dramatic structure as a documentary is configured to emphasize its "realness" and solicit the audience's identification and sympathies with the human and nonhuman characters of the film. Specifically, I use the perspective of Burke's dramatism to help follow the way the film locates its *scene* as the "real" world and solicits audience *identification* with its human and nonhuman characters (agents in Burke's terms).

Blackfish Buzz

Blackfish examines the circumstances of orcas, or "killer whales" held in captivity at parks like SeaWorld. In particular, the film tells the story of Tilikum, a whale implicated in the deaths of three people, and in Cowperthwaite's telling, a whale made unpredictable and dangerous by a cruel captivity that confines whales in circumstances that shrivel the complex and highly sophisticated social lives they are meant to have in the open seas, trapping them instead in comparatively small tanks and in culturally mixed groupings that break up families and wreak havoc on their social structures.

My first sense of the cultural impact of *Blackfish* came anecdotally. I had seen the film myself and was very moved by the story it told. I

found it a well-done, interesting, and impactful documentary. But I decided I really needed to take another look at the start of 2014 when I heard separately from my mother and my 14 year old niece – neither of whom I'd EVER known to watch a documentary – that they were no longer willing to go to SeaWorld or swim with dolphins after seeing the film.

And it wasn't just them. Attendance at SeaWorld was down by a million people in 2014 – an otherwise record breaking year for Florida tourism (Satchell, 2015). The widespread buzz about *Blackfish* that I was hearing personally, and seeing in media coverage brought to mind another, similar film I saw a few years earlier.

The critically acclaimed 2009 documentary film *The Cove* had found Oscar success telling a story about the plight of dolphins, orcas, and other cetaceans (winning best documentary feature in 2010). But *Blackfish* has found a different kind of success – viewers who were not going to SeaWorld.

So why the impact for *Blackfish*? While the factors that account for the impact of this particular film at this particular time are no doubt dizzyingly complex, a few considerations rise quickly to the surface.

For one, the film was circulated in several different ways. *Blackfish* ran in theaters, followed by a well-advertised special on CNN (complete with social media integration), and then on Netflix where my niece and mother found it. But beyond its multiple outlets, *Blackfish* is *rhetorically structured* to generate 1) buzz, and 2) an activist response, perfectly situating it for multi-channel word-of mouth-fueled circulation.

The rhetorical strategies deployed in *Blackfish* help reposition the film as not just documentary, but as a meme-worthy publicity object ideally structure for the three-fold run strategy of theatrical release, CNN Report, and Netflix feature.

I will focus here on examples of 1) the film's work *as a documentary* to ground itself as "real," 2) its effort to foster a powerful identification with the whales it portrays, and 3) its work to push viewers to resolve their engagement with the film in the world of their experience, rather than a symbolic resolution contained in the text.

Documenatary and the dramatism of the real

For Kenneth Burke, the work of persuasion is often best understood as a kind of identification. To the degree that audience members see themselves aligned with the ideas, situations, characters or purposes of the text they're engaging, and can thereby participate in its drama, they unite with the perspectives of the text and tend to align that perspective with their own. This has to do with more than just assenting to the logic of evidence or the reasonableness of examples. For Burke (1969, pp. xiii-xv), identification invites audiences to see their own identities and interests bound up with the drama of the text they engage, as the hero of a stage play, novel, or film solicits the basic identification of the audience member to share in the same motives and heroic actions, even if only while engaging the text. For Burke, this is often the real work of persuasion. As audience members align themselves with the drama of the text through their identification, they also align themselves with the motivational regimes the drama is playing out – motivational regimes replete with cultural attitudes and ideological assumptions. In *Blackfish*, the film's text invites viewers to identify with SeaWorld's killer whales, but it does this *as a documentary*, setting the films various other identifications first within the shared scene of the common world we all share.

One of the most powerful tools of documentary then is the rhetorical move to ground its depictions as "real." Good documentaries invite viewers to locate the film's story in the viewer's own world, and do so strategically throughout the film. "Look" the film says, using shots that seem unrehearsed, in settings presumed to exist beyond the film, through people who seem to be acting only as themselves: look, *you* are connected to this, it is part of *your* world.

In this sense, *The Cove* undermines its own rhetorical force by telling its story, as its *New York Times* review describes, in a way that unfolds "like a spy thriller" (Catsoulis, 2009). By fore-fronting a narrative form that is associated with fiction and decentering its status as documentary, *The Cove* invites its audiences to receive the very real

horrors it depicts as a story-world. *Blackfish*, on the other hand forefronts its narrative form as documentary. As the film unfolds, its documentary conventions (ranging from old footage of former trainers, interviewed when they were on the job at SeaWorld, to actual footage of Orcas being captured), squarely locate the film in *our* world. We are invited to identify with the scene of *Blackfish* as connected to our own.

This move to locate the drama of *Blackfish* in the "real" world hits home most powerfully as the film reveals its tragedies. The trainers who die are presented to us as real people who are friends with the actual people we see on the screen. Likewise, the whales who suffer, and the theme park that seems to care more about making money than the wellbeing of its animals and trainers are all the more urgent because of their seeming reality.

The scene of *Blackfish* then is doubled, and done so to powerful effect. From the opening sequence of the documentary, the use of SeaWorld show footage, and the descriptions of the trainers, the film is unmistakably set in a theme park and linked with the corresponding fantasies of a spectacular and monumental nature that is tamed – literally *trained* – by human knowledge and skill. But against the too-good-to-last fantasy realm of a theme park, the realness of huge animals that break from the control of their training, and the realness of death are made all the more real. We go to theme parks to revel in the less-than-realness they offer, so evidence that we are being hoodwinked by them becomes a mechanism for heightening the film's tragedies. The second *scene*, now rhetorically situating the film as profoundly real, colors everything else in the film with an aura of veracity and deep connection the world we ourselves know all too well as we too face the realness of the recalcitrances of nature, tragedy, and death that intrude into our own personal stories.

Identifying with the *Blackfish*

Moving from scene to character, we are also powerfully invited to identify with the orcas, to think of them as like us, and to see their captivity as a kind of human captivity. So "neuroscientist" Lori Marino tells us in the film, "the orca brain just

screams out intelligence, awareness." She describes placing orcas in MRI scanners, and, as we see "science" evoking images of computer screens with brain scans and diagrams of brain parts, she explains that based on studies of orca brains "these are animals that have highly elaborated emotional lives."

Perhaps the strongest point of identification is with the evocation of orca "families," "mothers," and "babies." Orca mothers, the film tells us, love their babies deeply, and are emotionally devastated when they are separated from them, by implication just like *our* mothers love their babies. Carol Ray, a former SeaWorld Trainer is shown emotionally describing such a separation; "…it had never crossed my mind they might be moving the baby from her mom," she says, then goes on to explain that the night a four-year-old orca was taken away from its mother,

> Her mom was left in the pool. She stayed in the corner of the pool, like literally just shaking and screaming, screeching, crying - like I'd never seen her do anything like that. And the other females in the pool, maybe once or twice during the night they'd come out and

check on her and she'd screech and cry and they would just run back. There was nothing you could call that, watching it, besides grief.

The emotional appeal in *Blackfish* centers here around motherhood. We are invited to identify with the imagery of maternal care and correlate the love of an orca mother with our own experiences of maternal love – we are invited to identification. Turning again to *The Cove* for purposes of contrast, *its* emotional appeal is grounded instead in the victimage of the dolphins and whales it portrays. We see them slaughtered in bloody water, and it is certainly horrific, but it is not symbolically happening to *us*, so the moral outrage doesn't run as deep, the emotional response *that needs an outlet*, that needs to be shared, tweeted, and played for your grandmother isn't there in the same way.

Likewise, the villain in *The Cove* is the menacing, but diffuse foreign other – Japanese fishermen who insist on continuing their practice of trapping dolphins and whales in the cove of the title. *The Cove* has – for Americans – a *symbolic* boogieman.

With no target for our ire at hand, our frustrations have no place to settle outside of the text. The resolution of the film, our satisfaction, must be achieved symbolically, or not at all. We are excused from action by the symbolic structure of the text.

Identification and boycott

The villain in *Blackfish*, on the other hand, is much more well known. The culprit, is associated with family – a place where we go for family outings, family fun. We know where SeaWorld is. It is in our world. When *Blackfish* gives us evidence that SeaWorld lies, we are being lied to by someone we know. The stakes are higher. And the avenues for response are much clearer to us. At the conclusion of *Blackfish* we are told what needs to happen; "it's time to stop the shows, it's time to stop forcing the animals to perform." And we are *shown* what to do to make this happen in a concluding a series shots of protesters holding placards outside the park with phrases like "Free Tilly," "It will happen again" (referring to the deaths of trainers), "honk for freedom," and "captivity kills." We are literally coaxed to identify with the protesters, and actively spread the message, to generate buzz ourselves.

Against the rhetorics of documentary reality and identification that structure *Blackfish*, SeaWorld offered a series of responses: press releases and position papers, and in 2015, a TV ad – with all of these almost entirely focused on refuting the veracity of various claims made in Cowperthwaite's film, or assuring park visitors that the animals are well-treated.

The TV ad in particular is worth considering in light of the film it is clearly responding to. Contrast the extremely evocative scene in *Blackfish* describing the agony of a mother orca separated from her "baby," with the well-meaning and concerned-sounding trainers who promise that they love the animals they work with. Here Burke's emphasis on identification as a central mechanism of persuasion shows its force. *Blackfish* creates and sustains a multi-faceted ethos of credibility by anchoring its documentary "reality" in ways that the audience members can readily recognize as corresponding to their own markers for reality. The film further creates and sustains links

between the whales and the audience members' own richly symbolic and personally significant notions of "motherhood" and "family." Once audience members have identified with the orcas through the rhetoric of the film, to dismiss the maternal anguish of the animals is tantamount to the audience members renouncing their own experiences of motherly love or the significance of their own family bonds. There is little headway to be made by the protests of fresh-faced and earnest trainers who are clearly enmeshed with the interests of the now-suspect corporation we know to be making money on the backs of both the whales and the trainers. The trainer-spokespersons in the SeaWorld ad have already been defined for us by *Blackfish.* The film includes a series of former trainers bemoaning their own naiveté while they had worked for SeaWorld.

The ads SeaWorld presents later in 2016, in the wake of their announcement to stop their orca breeding program and phase out their orca theatrical performances, are much more in harmony with the rhetorical appeal of *Blackfish*. The new approach directly shifts from fact-heavy, reason-based arguments to center instead on the well-being of the whales. The park aligns itself now with its former foes, on the side of change, and professes a willingness to bear the expense of continuing to support the killer whales, while eliminating the revenue stream the audience knows are linked to the orcas.

Conclusion

Blackfish reaches out to its viewers with the sort of appeal to identification that Burke locates at the very heart of rhetoric. The film's work as a documentary effectively locates its representations as anchored in a world that viewers can identify as their own. The *scene* of the film is therefore real and hence so is the suffering of the whales and the dangers to trainers. Likewise, viewers are drawn to identify with the orcas in the film, who are depicted as human-like: intelligent, social, and highly developed emotionally. The whales in Blackfish are depicted as experiencing a sense of family and maternal love recognizable to viewers, especially in the anguish of "mother" over her lost "baby," as in line with their own

cultural values about family and motherhood.

It's proved impossible for SeaWorld to make an appropriate and proportional rhetorical response to *Blackfish* at the level of facts, or through ads expressing a sense of earnestness. Cowperthwaite's film strikes a blow at the symbolic core of SeaWorld as a theme park. The veil of fantasy has been ruptured by the Real. While the damage may dissipate, the symbolic damage is profound and calls for nothing short of acquiescence through a thoroughgoing change in the park's approach to its exhibits[2]. And so *Blackfish* is symbolically resolved in the only place it can be: SeaWorld itself.

Links to videos that are described in the article:

Trainer Interview:
https://vimeo.com/160924673/5d6ea3e510

2015 SeaWorld response ad:
https://vimeo.com/160924415/4225e53a44

New, 2016 SeaWorld announcement ad:
https://vimeo.com/160929463/a777d20c60

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[2] Burke observes two symbolic paths by which one might expiate guilt: mortification (accepting blame for oneself and enacting a symbolically appropriate punishment) or victimage (displacing blame and punishment to an outside victim) (Burke, 1984b). For viewers of the documentary, this seems a matter of locating guilt with SeaWorld and boycotting the parks. It is interesting to imagine how SeaWorld might find a way to enact a "mortification" that might seem symbolically satisfying.

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