FILM REVIEWS

The Cove (2009)

Reviewed by Laura Shields

Underwater cameras capture the peaceful sway of sea plants beneath the surface in Taiji, Japan. As the scene progresses, the plants become obscured by creeping wafts of dolphin blood. Rapidly, the entire screen turns crimson, the ocean water thick with the grisly evidence of slaughtered dolphins. *The Cove*, a 2009 Oceanic Preservation Society film, follows a team of activists as they expose a small Japanese fishing town's large role in the capture, trafficking and killing of thousands of wild dolphins. In an effort to document the horrific events, the team launches mission "Full Orchestra," recording dolphin captures and deaths via high-tech underwater, aerial and hidden video and sound devices. A visually stunning and emotionally taxing film results from the footage, oscillating between a heist-style suspense tale and a familiar documentary narrative of institutional dysfunction and greed. Once the activists peek behind the curtain of the Japanese dolphin industry they fall down the proverbial rabbit hole, facing larger issues of anti-captivity, Japanese government corruption, mercury poisoning, International Whaling Commission bribery and modern day imperialism. Despite problematic generalization of the Japanese and an adherence to a human-animal dichotomy, *The Cove* ultimately serves as a reminder of the power and responsibility individuals have in halting nonhuman animal atrocities.

As one of the main themes of *The Cove* is the strength of small scale activism, the film loosely frames the story around animal activist Richard O'Barry's quest to end the dolphin slaughter. After establishing O'Barry as a vigilant activist through a montage of underground dolphin rescues, the film reveals O'Barry's sinister origin as Flipper's capturer and trainer. Following a *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*-esque plot formula, the reformed dolphin trainer awakens to his role in a system of exploitation and torture and dedicates his life to righting his wrongs. Our readers can no doubt relate to O'Barry's immediate transformation into an activist after witnessing a horrific animal event. According to O'Barry, "one day it all ended" when Kathy, the original Flipper, committed suicide. She swam into his arms, took a breath and sank to

the bottom of the tank. His remorse for his involvement in the dolphin industry is painfully palpable. O'Barry says, "I spent ten years building that industry up and I have spent the last thirty five years trying to tear it down."

O'Barry enlists Oceanic Preservation Society co-founder Louie Psihoyos, also the film's director, to help him expose the slaughter. Psihoyos witnesses Japanese fishermen hammering on metal poles underwater to create a "wall of sound" that frightens the sonically sensitive dolphins into swimming ashore. Once corralled, the dolphins are sealed in with nets overnight until dolphin trainers come the next morning to hand pick "trainable" dolphins. The film explains that Taiji is the largest supplier of dolphins to marine parks and swim with dolphin programs around the world. Captured dolphins sell for up to $150,000. The Taiji Whale Museum arranges the dolphin sales, dividing profit between the town and fishermen. After the capture, the fishermen drive the remaining dolphins to a secret cove and kill them for meat. In an effort to discover how the mass slaughter occurs, O'Barry and Psihoyos assemble a hodge-podge special-ops crew of two free divers, a rock concert organizer and an ex-military engineering genius. Recording the Taiji slaughter involved two covert missions: the first set up underwater cameras in the cove, and the second hid cameras in the surrounding landscape. They developed faux rocks to disguise the cameras and constructed an unmanned drone to record aerial scenes. The film weaves together the dramatic mission with a series of interviews featuring other activists, Japanese fishery officials, scientists, dolphin historians, International Whaling Commission delegates and Japanese citizens. The filmmakers deliberately capture haunting images. Watching the aerial view of the ocean turning bright red with blood is one of the more memory-searing scenes of the film. Recorded sounds of the dolphins are the only accompaniment to the slaughter. Fishermen spear and knife the dolphins as they twist and struggle in the bloody sea. They drag living dolphins out of the water with hooks in their flanks, flinging their bodies into the boats.

The Cove enters the public discourse in the wake of the recent drowning of a SeaWorld whale trainer by Tilikum, a captive killer whale. Public interest in captivity controversies suggests that *The Cove's* message of abolishing exploitive animal practices may find a receptive audience. Perhaps due to the film's goal of reaching a mainstream viewership, it leans heavily on a human-animal dichotomy as rationale for

the eradication of cetacean captivity and slaughter. In the field of Critical Animal Studies (CAS), we work to break down the arbitrary line between humans and the nonhuman world. Through interviews with scientists and people involved with dolphins, *The Cove* exerts a substantial amount of screen time highlighting how well dolphins perform within human systems of behavior and intelligence measurement..Once O'Barry recognized that each dolphin can distinguish themselves from other dolphins, he concluded that "when you become conscious of this non-human intelligence, you realize after awhile that they don't belong in captivity." David Rastovich, a free surfer, claims his passion for dolphins originated when he witnessed a dolphin protecting another surfer from a tiger shark attack.

Arguing that dolphins have altruistic actions, self-awareness, intelligence and agency obviously supports their liberation, but should not be the criteria. Philosopher Tom Regan has articulated that since animals have awareness, the burden lies on the exploiters to defend their treatment of sentient beings (Regan, 2004). From this perspective, there is no need for the filmmakers to appeal to an anthropocentric worldview in which references to dolphins' "human-like" behavior underwrite their right to liberation. Examining dolphin captivity and slaughter in a non-anthropocentric context would better serve an overall animal liberation agenda.

The film's main promotional image immediately establishes the human-animal hierarchy. A human free diver floats underwater in the center of the image, her feet bound in a single flipper. Christian iconography abounds as the diver's outstretched arms form a cross silhouette beneath a sun beam. Below the diver, five dolphins face her in a position of worship. As a privileged species, the diver is able to put on the fin and enter the dolphin's environment as a savior, moving freely between species boundaries. As humans originally enslaved the dolphins, the Christ-like figure of the diver sends a self-congratulatory and hypocritical message about interspecies relationships. The compositional focus on the human rescuer reifies an anthropocentric understanding of animal activism. Although the activists' courage, ingenuity and fearlessness in defiance of the law should be celebrated and emulated, we need to move away from viewing liberation action on behalf of nonhuman animals as something exceptional and therefore out of reach for most people.

For scholars schooled in postcolonialist thought, the film's slightly xenophobic depiction of the Japanese may be troubling. The film's portrayal of an aggressive fisherman whom the activists dubbed "Private Space" (due to the fisherman's constant screaming of those words) may invite criticism as an Orientalist rendering of the Japanese (Said, 1978). At the film's culmination, we are presented with post-production updates on those involved in the dolphin slaughter. Next to the fisherman it reads, "Private Space has been removed from his position at the cove." By refusing to recognize the fisherman by his actual name, the film inadvertently supports a rendering-invisible tactic it seeks to oppose in the case of dolphins. In CAS, we are trained to seek out linked systems of oppression. The film needed to recognize more fully that the fishermen are completely folded into a government-pushed ideology that actively presents fabrications as authoritative truths. For example, when the activists presented the fishermen with a proposal to pay the same amount if they kept their boats docked, the fishermen responded that they were engaging in "pest control." Upon further investigation, the film exposes claims by the Japanese government that dolphins are in direct competition with humans for ocean fish. Referred to as "biological nonsense" by a delegate at the International Whaling Commission, the Japanese government has no evidence supporting such an outlandish excuse for the dolphin trade. Yet from a postcolonialist perspective, we must participate with what's at stake with other countries and engage with national issues on a global stage. In this context, the film does excellent work demonstrating how cultural histories and national identity projects should not protect against criticism, protest and direct sabotage.

The case of the Japanese fishermen aside, the film highlights how animal exploitation is never a stand-alone issue, but always entangled with other systems of oppression. The dolphin capture and slaughter is symptomatic of an entire speciesist and capitalist system dependent on institutional corruption and misinformation. For example, the International Whaling Commission excludes dolphins and porpoises from the list of protected whales . When asked about this absence, Michael Illiff of the Institute of Antarctic and Southern Ocean Studies at the University of Tasmania claims "the whaling nations that set up the levels of protection afforded to cetaceans have a vested interest in leaving the smaller whales out, especially if they're eating them". The mass extermination of dolphins in the Taiji cove reveals the deadly consequences of

arbitrary cataloguing by an organization that supposedly exists for their protection. Moreover, the film exposes the practice of labeling dolphin meat as larger whale meat in Japanese stores. Many Japanese consumers avoid eating dolphin meat because it contains high levels of mercury. However, when it's packaged as a different type of whale people unknowingly ingest toxic levels of mercury. One test found mercury levels of 2000 parts per million (ppm) in dolphin meat when the recommended total maximum consumption in Japan is 0.4 ppm. Since the dolphin meat industry is completely intertwined with the political and economic systems, Japanese officials are effectively poisoning their own citizens.

The most successful aspect of the film is its encouragement of action taken on behalf of nonhuman animals. As Sea Shepherd President Captain Paul Watson, affirms, "all social change comes from the passion of individuals." What the CAS movement can take away from this film is that exposure is the first step toward the abolition of animal oppression. The film's extensive focus on pre-mission reconnaissance work emphasizes the importance of awareness and preparation for successful resistance. The film's delicate straddling between criticizing and supporting xenophobia also serves as warning to activists to be aware of the attitudes they may develop as they work to end injustice. Overall, *The Cove* reinforces an animal liberation agenda that reminds us we need to act now. Take action now: TakePart.com/TheCove or texting DOLPHIN TO 44144.

References

Regan, T (2004), *The Case for Animal Rights*, University of California Press. Berkeley.

Said, E (1979), *Orientalism*, Random House, Inc. New York.