

FILM REVIEWS

***Behind the Mask* (2006) Uncaged Films and ARME**

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For over thirty years the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) has been freeing nonhuman animals around the world and destroying the property that causes them harm. Using economic sabotage in the form of property destruction they have caused animal industries a loss in the hundreds of millions of dollars of “damage.” Shannon Keith’s 2006 documentary *Behind the Mask*, produced by Uncaged Films and ARME, is the first contemporary and entertaining movie geared towards the general public to understand this infamous and controversial group. Winner of numerous awards including Best Documentary Feature at the *Venice Film Festival*, this seventy two minute film weaves together interviews of those who take underground animal actions and prominent supporters of the ALF with undercover footage of animals in laboratories, as well as animals being liberated and in loving sanctuaries. Keith, a civil and animal rights attorney, also synchronizes quotes and clips from other social justice movements such as The Civil Rights Movement, Woman Suffragettes, Nelson Mandela and John F. Kennedy. Accompanied with excellent musical choices, this makes for a powerful impact.

With species after species being wiped off the Earth, and animals facing tremendous suffering and death in animal industries, something needed to occur with equal gravity. The ALF grew from its roots in the Hunt Saboteurs Association (HAS) which was first active in England in the 1960’s (and is still active today). The Band of Mercy soon emerged as an offshoot of HAS. While the HAS disrupted hunts by confusing hounds with horns and false scents, the Band of Mercy used property destruction such as sabotaging hunting vehicles to end the hunt before it began. One person involved with both of these groups was ALF founder Ronnie Lee. After being freed from imprisonment for a laboratory raid, he and others realized that they should establish universal guidelines and change the Band of Mercy’s name to reflect a more ground-breaking

liberatory movement. Hence, the notorious Animal Liberation Front was established for the purpose of taking extreme action in extreme times for animals. It was not long until the ALF became international. In 1977 ALF cells entered the U.S. radar by releasing two dolphins from a research facility in Hawaii.

While the film does not go into extensive detail on the origins of the ALF, some history is discussed. Keith traveled around the world to interview long time activists including Ronnie Lee. Describing how they came up with the guidelines, Lee says that they wanted tactics that everyone would be happy with so many would join in, and to be certain that no one got hurt, including the animals.¹ John Curtin describes how the ALF used to have an office but it wasn't long until the police shut it down.² Ever since then the ALF has consisted of small groups of clandestine, autonomous, and decentralized underground activists.

Keith, who made this film because "change has only come when laws have been broken," profiles those who have been imprisoned for their illegal actions to help animals.³ These animal liberationists and economic saboteurs, including Keith Mann, Melanie Arnold, and Rod Coronado, explain why they have risked peril to help nonhuman animals. As Mann puts it, "If I didn't do anything to help these animals out, that's what would keep me awake at night."⁴ As a radical faction the ALF is not alone. Referring to struggles such as civil rights, women's suffrage and Nelson Mandela's guerilla campaign, Keith states that:

Throughout history there have always been those who petitioned the government and wrote letters to politicians. There have even been those who have written bills and had discussions with leaders of the nations. These tactics alone have never worked. The only time we have seen a social justice movement prevail is because there was pressure from more radical factions.⁵

Having asked nicely for those in power to stop animal abuse, the ALF saw that these actions alone were not working. But because the ALF's direct action has succeeded in putting pressure

¹ Lee, Ronnie, Interview.

² Curtin, John, Interview.

³ Keith, Shannon, Commentary.

⁴ Mann, Keith, Interview.

on animal enterprises, there has been increased government repression and the labeling of these activists as “terrorists.”

Although the ALF has been identified by the FBI as the number one domestic threat in the U.S., they have not harmed a single human since becoming established. The extent of their extreme actions is causing property destruction such as arsons to facilities that torture animals, and freeing animals such as puppies, kittens, mice, and rabbits from being tested on by companies such as Proctor and Gamble. The ALF do not see a species barrier; they recognize that all sentient beings, those who feel pleasure, pain, and have inherent value, have a right to freedom. As philosophy professor Steven Best comments:

Whatever your species is, whether you have a tail or not, those criteria are just as irrelevant as what your race or gender are...now it's true that they can't design spaceships, it's true they don't compose sonatas. We don't run like the wind, we don't have the grace of the gazelle, we don't hear with our feet like elephants do.⁶

Behind the Mask challenges the public perception that those who take direct action to help animals are terrorists. Keith found during the making of this film that even he had been investigated by the FBI as a “terrorist organization member” since 2001.⁷ The only conclusion to make from this terrorist status is that if an organization, group, or individual threatens the profits of a corporation or company they are also causing a threat to the values and foundation of capitalism, the gas that fuels many governments around the world including the US. Moving from assumption to fact, this was proven with the passing of the undemocratic Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) of 2006 which provides severe restriction to the protesting of animal enterprises because it could jeopardize corporate profits.

One such industry is vivisection which is practiced primarily to serve corporate interests.⁸ When the ALF was founded they pinpointed vivisection as an area that was not really being addressed

⁶ Dr. Best, Steven, Interview. *Behind the Mask*. Dir. Shannon Keith. DVD. Uncaged Films and ARME 2006.

⁷ Keith, Shannon, Commentary. *Behind the Mask*. Dir. Shannon Keith. DVD. Uncaged Films and ARME 2006.

⁸ patrice jones, “Corporate Crimes Against Animals” *Eastern Shore Sanctuary & Education Center* 19, Sept. 2009
<<http://www.actionforanimalsnetwork.org/corporatecrimes.htm>>

extensively and where they could make a difference. The film features medical specialists such as Jerry Vlasak and Dr. Rich McLellan, along with Ingrid Newkirk who has interviewed many scientists, doctors and researchers, who discuss the illusions of vivisection and how it is “just a big business.”⁹ An undercover investigator for PETA shares her experience of working in the laboratory, and notes that all the staff knew people taking drugs that they had been testing on the primates for years. This brings up the obvious question: why were they still being tested years later?¹⁰ Animal testing, explains Vlasak, is not necessary and can actually slow medical progress.

In the 21st century we have much more modern and efficacious techniques for testing drugs and doing medical research...this day and age we are looking at things on molecular level and sub atomic levels and to think we can do that on a mouse or rat and apply that to humans is ridiculous, it doesn't work.¹¹

Further, Dr. McLellan says that he and his associates used to joke about “what were we doing with these animals,” and that it was widely known those doing animal research may have been making a living but were not making a meaningful contribution.¹²

It is tremendously important to have such a comprehensive documentary on the ALF because they, as profound and extreme as the Civil Rights Movement, Underground Railroad, Suffragettes, and Quakers, have not seen much positive attention within the social justice movement and that which they have received has been massive repression by law enforcement around the world. Although not as sensational, and produced with less funding than documentaries such as Oscar nominated *The Weather Underground* which social justice activists have shown repeatedly at schools, community centers, activist meetings and conferences, *Behind the Mask* should be valued and utilized the same way. Unfortunately it has not been for two reasons: first, because the film stresses the value and respect for nonhuman animals and not simply humans, and second, it is not a historical film but rather it is speaking about extremists

⁹ Newkirk, Ingrid, Interview. *Behind the Mask*. Dir. Shannon Keith. DVD. Uncaged Films and ARME 2006.

¹⁰ Rokke, Michelle, Interview. *Behind the Mask*. Dir. Shannon Keith. DVD. Uncaged Films and ARME 2006.

¹¹ Vlasak, Jerry, Interview. *Behind the Mask*. Dir. Shannon Keith. DVD. Uncaged Films and ARME 2006.

¹² McClellan, Rich, Interview. *Behind the Mask*. Dir. Shannon Keith. DVD. Uncaged Films and ARME 2006.

today. The ALF are extremists in the tradition of Martin L. King Jr., who said it best in his Letter from Birmingham Jail (April 1963):

Was not Jesus an extremist for love -- "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice -- "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ -- "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist -- "Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist -- "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist -- "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist -- "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice--or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?

People often say that if they were back in the sixties they would be marching with Martin Luther King Jr. and supporting Malcolm X, or they would join the Weather Underground, as today members of the Weather Underground and Black Panther Party are respected professors at top universities. While the Weather Underground's theoretical analysis was based on critique of imperialism, and the Black Panther Party and Civil Rights Movement on race, the ALF's theoretical analysis is grounded in the anarchist critique of property that, whether a person or a tree, no living being should and can be property. This film challenges the viewer to recognize that the animal liberation movement and ALF are imperative liberatory groups for today's society, and to take action to support them.

The commencement of covert ALF direct action in the 1970's stepped activism for animals up a notch. While there are a number of clips and documentaries on the ALF available online, no film until *Behind the Mask* has included the comprehensive historical and philosophical understanding of the group geared towards a mainstream audience. Not only is this an important documentary to show at activist conferences and meetings, and college courses in the field of sociology, criminology, philosophy, education, critical animal studies, peace and conflict studies, and environmental studies, it should be viewed by anyone who eats meat, uses animal tested products, is considering a career in animal testing, wears fur, or just wants to understand what

the ALF is about. It is well worth remembering that: “When you drive by UCLA or Cedars-Sinai, those pretty walls and the lawns, behind that the horrors take place.”¹³ The same applies behind the walls of slaughterhouses, fur farms, factory farms and other industries that profit off the use of nonhuman animals. Until the government takes action to remove these animals, there will be those willing to risk their freedom by taking matters into their own hands. This film gives a glimpse into the hearts and minds of these people. Further, it describes animal liberation within the context of other movements for justice and points out that you don’t have to take ALF actions to make a difference, you can simply start by boycotting cruelty. *Behind the Mask* is sure to engage and educate those who love animals and have even the most rigid ALF critic rethinking their assumptions and justifications for proclaiming protectors of life and freedom are violent terrorists.

13 DeRose, Chris, Interview. *Behind the Mask*. Dir. Shannon Keith. DVD. Uncaged Films and ARME 2006.

Portions of this review are reprinted from Anthony J. Nocella, II’s review of *Behind the Mask* on Political Media Review (www.politicalmediareview.org).