Sentimentality and the Politically Engaged Documentary

By Grace Wilsey

Documentary cannot be melodrama. By definition, documentary's function is to inform and to document the "real." Regardless of whether or not documentary films succeed in this practice, the essence of the form remains the same: non-fiction. In contrast, the exaggerated and sensationalized medium of melodrama seems in all ways antithetical to documentary form. Two recent films, Louie Psihoyos' *The Cove*[1] and Davis Guggenheim's *Waiting for Superman*[2] appear to subvert this notion. Both films are documentaries by genre, but act as melodramas through a highly stylized dramatic rise to a moment of catharsis. These documentaries nearly force their audiences to cry. However, unlike typical melodramas, in these films the audience cries about "real life" situations. These films extend beyond the world of the narrative into actual political situations. They create an emotional response in the audience, with the explicit aim of channeling those emotions into concrete effects. In *The Cove,* the audience cries over the vicious slaughter of Dolphins in Taiji, Japan and is then asked to take part in a political movement to save them. *Waiting for Superman* attempts to function in the same way, except in this film, it is the American public school system that needs saving. In many ways, these films extend from traditions of pathos in documentary filmmaking present in such classic documentaries as *Eyes on the Prize*[3] and *Hearts and Minds*[4]. Yet, they deviate from these traditional models by the precision and calculation of their emotional effects. Instead, they take on an older model of political conversion, one found most prevalently in the sentimentalist novel. These films adopt the steps of the sentimentalist political conversion model, made famous by novels such as Harriet

[1] 2009
[2] 2010
[3] Henry Hampton, 1987
[4] Peter Davis, 1974

Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly, expanding and enhancing the practice through cinematic technique, potentially to the detriment of the documentary purpose.

Uncle Tom's Cabin serves as the model for success of the political sentimentalist agenda. In explaining the abolitionist intent of the 1852 serial novel, Stowe was often quoted as stating that her purpose was to cause the reader to "shed a tear for Uncle Tom." In other words, Stowe believed that if she could create a strong enough emotional investment for her readers in the tragic story of her hero, a slave named Uncle Tom, so that they could be brought to tears, she could achieve her political goal of converting white moderates and even slavery supporters into abolitionists. Her process for creating this emotional investment followed in the tradition of Charles Dickens and other great sentimentalists and it involved three steps. First, the author must model the conversion process for the audience through the text. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, the first and most notable instance of narrative conversion occurs towards the beginning of the novel when Eliza, an escaped slave, seeks refuge in the home of Senator Bird. Senator Bird, a strong proponent of the passage of the anti-abolitionist Fugitive Slave Act,[5] at first turns her away, but is then converted into an abolitionist after experiencing an emotional catharsis based on mutual identification, and aids Eliza in her escape. Stowe then uses Senator Bird's conversion as the model for the conversion experience the audience must undergo in regards to Uncle Tom.

The next step is to lead the audience into a similar moment of catharsis. Stowe accomplishes this by creating sympathy for Uncle Tom and then subjecting him to a tragic, Christ-like fate. Stowe humanizes Uncle Tom throughout the extensive novel, demonstrating his loyalty and kindness, and characterizing him as a hero. In the end, after a long process of conversion, Stowe subjects Uncle Tom to a terribly violent and unjust death at the order of the

[5] 1850 law declaring that all runaway slaves be returned to their southern masters, regardless of whether or not they have entered the northern free territories.

satanic Mr. Legree. It is at this moment the catharsis occurs. At the instance of the beloved Uncle Tom's death, the reader inevitably cries.

The reader's tears have a political purpose. In creating a world completely separated by good and evil, Stowe allows no other option but for the reader to side with Uncle Tom. In doing so, the reader must take on the thought processes of an abolitionist, longing to save the tragic Uncle Tom. Thus, Stowe's political agenda comes into place. This agenda is based on a single theory: right *feeling* leads to right *action*. For Stowe, this meant that if she could make her readers feel sympathy for Uncle Tom–to cry for Uncle Tom–they could perceivably turn those sympathetic, right *feelings* into right *actions* and become abolitionists. Ultimately, Uncle Tom's Cabin was hailed as the first inciting incident leading to the North's fight for the abolition of slavery in the Civil War. If this is true, Stowe's work of political conversion succeeded.

Whether consciously or not, both *The Cove* and *Waiting for Superman* take on this three-step sentimentalist conversion process modeled by Stowe; amplifying the emotional effects through differing cinematic techniques. In *Waiting for Superman*, like in Uncle Tom's Cabin, a conversion occurs early on with a figure other than the hero serving as the model. In this case, Guggenheim himself models the conversion rather than the film's hero, education reformer Geoffrey Canada. The documentarian explains that he was a staunch supporter of American public education until he had his own children. He says, "My feelings about public education didn't matter as much as my fear of sending them to a failing school."[6] He then guiltily includes obscured images of himself driving his children to private school in the morning and explains, "But I am lucky. I have a choice."[7] At this moment, he expands out the narrative beyond his

[6] *Waiting for Superman*. Dir. Davis Guggenheim. Perf. Geoffrey Canada. Paramount Vantage, Participant Media, and Walden Media, 2010. DVD.
[7] Ibid

own family to America as a whole and begins his vendetta against America's "failing" public education program. The documentarian uses himself as an example to model the process of disillusionment all American citizens must go through while watching this film in order to then be able to push for reform. Yet, in the first step of the conversion process, Guggenheim maintains a fairly standard documentary form. He incorporates voice-of-god narration[8] that explains the content of the images, in which he keeps all but his arm in the shadows and obscured from view, and incorporates only light ambient music. Thus, his modeled process of conversion becomes forgettable; a side-note in a richer story, which lacks emotional impact.

In opposition, *The Cove* draws power in the initial conversion model though breaking with tradition and incorporating experimental technique. *The Cove's* hero and champion of dolphin's rights, Rick O'Barry, becomes sympathetic and multi-faceted when he explains, "I never planned on being an activist… I feel somewhat responsible because it was the Flipper show that created this multi-billion-dollar industry [of capturing dolphins for entertainment]."[9] O'Barry continues on to explain that he was the dolphin trainer on the popular television show and one of the first people to capture a dolphin. However, this statement only hints at a conversion experience that will be seen later in the film. Instead, O'Barry's voice-over testimony is placed over a montage of found-footage including clips from "Flipper." Suddenly, the playing of the popular television theme song becomes dark and foreboding in its new context. Then, as the music continues eerily in the background, as if heard through a tunnel, new and familiar images appear of Sea World-like dolphin shows, with screaming crowds. O'Barry does not need to explain; the combination of images and sounds explains the injustice of dolphin

[8] As the view of Guggenheim is kept in obscurity, he maintains the god-like presence.
[9] *The Cove*. Dir. Louie Psihoyos. Perf. Richard O'Barry and Louie Psihoyos. Roadside Attractions, Lions Gate and Participant Media, 2009. DVD.

captivity more poignantly than words ever could. Only after the film has created this sense of injustice, O'Barry continues his testimony and explains that he was converted into an activist when his beloved flipper dolphin, Cathy, committed suicide while in captivity due to depression. *The Cove* experiments with the sound and image properties of cinema to depict the conversion experience as an alternate to the standard practices Guggenheim puts to use. Also, the hero demonstrates the conversion instead of a mysterious and authoritative director of *Waiting for Superman* or the relatively insignificant Senator Bird from Uncle Tom's Cabin. In *The Cove,* the converted activist has a face and a significant stake in the story. Ultimately, the innovations of the first-step conversion experience in *The Cove* make it a much more powerful moment in the narrative than in *Waiting for Superman,* or perhaps, even in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

After the somewhat expositional conversion experiences, both directors then devote the rest of the films to a tension filled build-up to the climactic moment of catharsis. In *Waiting for Superman* this build up is done primarily through a combination of stylized reenactments, interviews, and detailed informational graphics explaining the travesty of the complicated public school system. The first images after Guggenheim explains his conversion are of a bingo ball cage rolling in slow motion, a raffle depicted with exaggerated diffused light and a computer screen randomly selecting from a group of names. These are explained to be the modes in which American public charter schools randomly select whom will be admitted into the schools. Thus, it becomes clear where the film's argument is headed. Guggenheim will depict charter schools as the saving grace of the American public school system. The emphasis on the selection methods hammers home fact that these schools are limited and foreshadows the fact that almost none of the children Guggenheim focuses on will be chosen. These images are repeated throughout the film, preparing the audience for the climactic drawing.

The film appeals to the audience's sympathies, as the stories of the children applying are revealed to be more and more tragic. In one case, a little girl is forced to watch her private school classmates graduate without her because her mother has had her hours cut at work and was unable to pay the tuition. In the next image, the film incorporates a reenactment of the mother applying for her daughter to be placed in a public charter school, Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Success Academy. A wide shot of the mother from down a long hallway depicts her as funneled in and surrounded by darkness, only the application to the charter school she fills out is illuminated by a desk lamp reflecting light; a beam of hope on her grim face. Guggenheim places a text overlay on the image: "Harlem Success Academy… 35 Spaces, 767 Applicants,"[10] further dramatizing the hopelessness of the situation. His narration is the only sound during this sequence as he explains what the image has already made apparent. Through this sequence and many similar sequences, along with the repetition of an over-dramatized image of a bingo ball cage spinning in slow motion, the emotional aspect of the climactic ending comes to be expected. The children will be refused admittance to the charter schools, which will then doom them to a failed education. When this happens, the film's audience will inevitably cry.

The setup is painfully obvious and Guggenheim delivers exactly what the audience anticipates. They know they will cry and they do. With so many images of sobbing parents and children, it is impossible not to mimic their behavior. Guggenheim achieves his catharsis. He creates sympathy for the unjustly treated and impoverished children whom are often forgotten; but does his catharsis measure up to Stowe's work? Like Stowe, Guggenheim takes on a just cause, giving a marginalized group of people a voice; in this case that group is impoverished children. He utilizes many of the standard practices of documentary film to accomplish this

[10] Guggenheim.

including the interview and voice-of-god narration, and also some less standard practices such as reenactments. Yet, ultimately the catharsis becomes over determined and excessive, lacking the subtlety of Stowe's work, despite the fact that Uncle Tom's Cabin is fictional and *Waiting for Superman* is not. The pathos overpowers the film and it begins to feel more like a melodrama than an informative documentary.

On the other hand, *The Cove* takes the unique capacities of cinema and effectively builds up to a moment of catharsis. As in *Waiting for Superman*, the climactic moment is anticipated, or at least, so it seems. The film begins at "the cove," a small inlet in the bay of the town of Taiji, Japan. However, instead of explaining these images of the cove in a voice-of-god style narration as Guggenheim would, Psihoyos juxtaposes the serene images of the Japanese coast with images of Japanese industry, including one wide image of workers chopping large fish into pieces with axes. These fish could be dolphins, but it is unclear because the factory images are taken, or at least made to look like they have been taken, by a thermal camera, which creates rough images based on the presence of body heat in the subject. Psihoyos's use of this experimental camera has two major effects. First of all, it blurs the image of the chopping, hinting at violence, but not showing it out right. Secondly, it foreshadows the inclusion of thermal camera work later in the film, when O'Barry goes on covert missions at the cove. Eventually, the importance of this initial sequence is explained. After O'Barry depicts the horrors of dolphin captivity in his conversion experience, he reveals that as an offshoot of the sudden surge in popularity of show dolphins, tens of thousands of dolphins are being killed every year for their meat. These are the dolphins that are captured, but not bought by the aquariums. These mass killings occur primarily in the cove shown in the opening images at Taiji.

After this revelation, the documentary takes on many of the qualities of a Hollywood action thriller as the activists work to infiltrate the cove and reveal the unjust practices that occur there to the world. The film includes sequences where O'Barry and his *Ocean's Eleven*-like crew undergo covert nighttime missions planting sound equipment and high definition cameras disguised as rocks in the cove. They also often wear disguises, use military-grade equipment, and avoid being pursued by the local Japanese police force. All of these elements contribute to a rising tension in the film. In an action film, such as a James Bond film, this tension would be broken by a final showdown with the villain. *The Cove* channels the tension towards a moment of catharsis. It does this through a complex interweaving of narrative themes.

In addition to the driving narrative storyline, the action-filled quest to expose the dolphin slaughters at the cove, Psihoyos interweaves several minor storylines. He takes special care to focus in on the gridlock over the dolphin issue at the International Whaling Commission, a United Nations recognized group that O'Barry has been exiled from, and to inform the viewer about the unique and wonderful qualities of dolphins. Both of these storylines are indispensable to the film's purpose because they explain the stakes of O'Barry's activism. Then Psihoyos adds yet another dimension to the film when O'Barry explains the high quantity of mercury in dolphin meat, a meat that will soon be incorporated into the compulsory school lunches of many Japanese children, causing them to develop mercury poisoning. This storyline is unique because it allows the unknowing Japanese population to become sympathetic. They are victims as well to these slaughters in Taiji, which more and more begin to seem like senseless acts of violence. Thus, each interweaving storyline develops a different aspect, creating a sense that the documentary is educating the viewer on all sides of the issue. It is also important to note, that this functions very differently from the interweaving storylines in *Waiting for Superman*, many

of which are very similar and often repetitive, giving the impression that there is no other dimension to the problem.

In *The Cove*, the multiple storylines add stakes to O'Barry's actions and to the main storyline. They pull the audience out of O'Barry's thrilling covert missions, constantly reminding the audience that this is a documentary, and that O'Barry's actions have real world consequences. In this sense, *The Cove* purposefully addresses a rational viewer. It allows the audience to feel informed and to come to their own conclusion that O'Barry's actions are righteous. Though, as rationality is often the antithesis of emotion, how does this contribute to the moment of catharsis? It seems Psihoyos is prepared for this question, for as he builds a rational argument in defense of dolphins, he also foreshadows the violence against them. At one point in the film, Psihoyos shoots in a cinema vérité style as O'Barry and his crew listen to the sound recordings they have made from planting microphones in the cove. The camera zooms in on O'Barry's face as he listens to the horrifying sound of thousands of dolphins being slaughtered and he begins to cry. The cinema vérité style of the shooting gives the sense that this scene is unmediated, an actual tragedy unfolding before the camera. The great hero, O'Barry, is shown at his lowest point. The audience, who has come to sympathize with him and through him with the now slaughtered dolphins, experiences the first wave of pathos in the film. As sound always comes before image in film, it is almost instinctual to realize that soon the film will put an image to the chilling dolphin cries. Thus, the cathartic moment is expected, but remains mysterious and unthinkable. Psihoyos is careful never to fully show any form of violence until the final cathartic moment, leaving a tension of the unknown–a very different effect from the tragedy of *Waiting for Superman*, in which the dejected students must return to their own unfortunate status quos.

The scene in which the footage captured by the hidden cameras in the cove is revealed brings the viewer into a new dimension, where the unthinkable becomes reality. Psihoyos enters the moment of catharsis in a very precise and climactic manner. First, beginning with secret footage of the Taiji fisherman preparing for the slaughter, then the camera switches to an underwater vantage point. The now familiar sound of dolphins in distress is heard as the water quickly turns from aqua to deep red, bringing the tension to its breaking point. Then, finally, Psihoyos brings the camera into the heart of the violence, with shot after shot of the brutal slaughter. As these images appear, tears are the inevitable consequence, and so, the audience follows O'Barry's example and cries for the dolphins.

The Cove derives its strength from the sequence that comes next. Up until this moment, much like in *Waiting for Superman,* the film has set up a rising tension and led to a cathartic climax, but that is not where the film ends. It is easy to presume that Psihoyos intends for the footage to be exposed to the world through the release of his documentary. However, a third, unexpected, wave of pathos occurs when O'Barry straps a television screen displaying the footage of the dolphin massacre to his chest and intrudes on a conference at the International Whaling Committee, forcing them to see the damage they are allowing to occur. This pathos is strongly amplified by heroic music in the sound track. O'Barry has taken the content of the documentary and used it for activism. It soon becomes clear that as the audience has mirrored O'Barry's tears, they should now mirror his activism. They too should save the dolphins at Taiji. This last sequence of activism is absent from *Waiting for Superman.* Instead Guggenheim offers its reverse, resolution, by creating a reenactment of one of the children being saved from poverty and admitted into an elite public boarding school. However, it is a concept that is present in the sentimentalist literary tradition from which these films appear to grow; for at the end of Uncle

Tom's Cabin, Stowe also incorporates a residual moment of catharsis and a final moment of activism. The catharsis occurs when the story unexpectedly returns back to the hero's cabin home shortly after his death and the reader is appealed by pathos to cry for Uncle Tom's widow as well. Then, in the final chapter entitled "The Liberator,"[11] George Shelby, Uncle Tom's former master who cries at his deathbed, decides to let all of the slaves on his plantation go free.

The Cove and *Waiting for Superman* approach the sentimentalist three-part structure in differing ways. For one, Psihoyos places more effort in developing a central hero, Rick O'Barry, than Guggenheim, who presents the film with the charismatic Geoffrey Canada, but then focuses on education reform outside of Canada's sphere of influence. Also, various highly stylized reenactments in combination with Guggenheim's singular and authoritative point of view gives the film a highly mediated and seemingly manipulated effect. On the other hand, Psihoyos appears constantly on camera throughout the film, and chooses to restrict his images to archival found footage, and both interview and cinema vérité documentary footage. This gives the sense that the viewers are allowed to come to their own conclusions rather than being given a mediated viewpoint.

Where the films diverge most significantly is in the final step of the sentimentalist political conversion. *The Cove* depicts O'Barry showing the footage of the dolphin massacre to the International Whaling Committee. In this instance, O'Barry is turning his right *feelings* into right *actions*. According to Jane Gaine's theory of political mimesis,[12] this should cause the viewer to mimic O'Barry's actions, and presumably, then show the documentary to other people. In addition, during the credits sequence, in which the triumphant score continues to play,

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[11] Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1852).

[12] Jane Gaines theory on politic mimesis is presented in Collecting Visible Evidence, and deals with the potential of documentary film to inspire radical political acts.

Psihoyos writes this message: "The Taiji dolphin slaughter is scheduled to resume every September. UNLESS WE STOP IT… Unless you stop it."[13] Following these words, the audience is given a phone number to text and a webpage to visit where they can donate money and sign a petition to President Barack Obama to save the dolphins. At this moment, the music changes to David Bowie's famous anthem "Heroes." Thus, *The Cove* gives multiple direct ways in which viewers can turn their right feelings into actions and join its cause. It also, insinuates that by doing so, they too can be "heroes" like Rick O'Barry. *Waiting for Superman*, which was released one year after *The Cove,* offers a similar tactic, inviting the viewer to send a text message to a certain phone number in support of the film's reformative project. However, Guggenheim's call to action does not garner the same emotional impact as it is hidden in a rambling restatement of the problem and is set to a melancholic ballad that creates a sense of hopelessness. Also, in the case of *Waiting for Superman,* it is unclear what other direct action opportunities there are for the audience to take. The film presents the problem of public education as a lost cause, and offers no example of political action for the viewer to imitate. Yet, even in Uncle Tom's Cabin, George Shelby becomes an abolitionist, despite the fact that Stowe wrote the novel at a time when the abolition of slavery seemed a lost cause. She still gave her audience a political action to imitate.

Ultimately, the sentimentalist model can find success in the modern documentary if the filmmaker is able to strike the right balance of pathos and political action. The feeling must be equally as powerful as the action. *The Cove* can be offered as proof of a successful sentimentalist style documentary. Psihoyos utilizes melodramatic pathos in order to support a rational argument and garner the strongest possible support for his cause. Consequently, the film was very well received; even winning the Academy Award for Best Documentary. More

[13] Psihoyos.

importantly, it had a real world impact on the dolphin slaughter in Taiji, causing the killing of dolphins to be temporarily banned in 2009 and garnering nearly two million signatures in its petition. In the case of *The Cove* right feelings became right actions. On the other hand, *Waiting for Superman* can be seen as an example of what happens when the pathos overpowers the political impulse. For though *Waiting for Superman* attempted to follow *The Cove's* politically engaged model, it diverged too far into emotional manipulation and received heavy criticism for its reenactments. In fact, one article in the Village Voice called the film an "exploitive melodrama."[14] *Waiting for Superman* became so engrossed in pathos that it lost its documentary identity and became a melodrama. This is problematic because, as stated before, documentary cannot be melodrama. However, as *The Cove* demonstrates, documentary can successfully utilize melodramatic techniques in order to further social justice.

[14] Melissa Anderson. "Ignoring the Inconvenient Truths in Waiting for Superman," *TheVillageVoice.com.* The Village Voice, 15 September 2010. 17 April 2011 <http://www.villagevoice.com/2010-09-22/film/ignoring-the-inconvenient-truths-in-waiting-for-superman/>.