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# Rhetoric in film: Three explorations of influence in documentaries and digital stories

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Rhetoric in Film: Three Explorations of Influence in Documentaries and Digital Stories

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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for the degree of

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## Abstract

This thesis is made up of three distinct articles, two written with the intention of publication while the third consists of a digital story and subsequent reflection on the process of creation. The first article serves to answer the question “Do documentary films inspire activism?” by analyzing data gained after surveying 266 members of the James Madison University community. The results suggest that viewers are moved to emotion when witnessing struggle but that they are moved to action when said action directly impacts their own life. The second article is a rhetorical analysis of the 2013 documentary film *Blackfish*. Both the director, Gabriela Cowperthwaite, and the film as a whole are considered an author and the construction of empathy is explored as the primary rhetorical device. The societal impact of the film is explored as well how the empathetic approach to storytelling contributed to the resulting changes in attitudes and actions towards SeaWorld. The third piece consists of a link to a digital story focused on the experience of the class of 2018 at the University of Virginia. The reflection that follows provides details of the filming process and outlines the rhetorical choices employed and the limitations of the medium.

## Introduction

Looking back, it seems only natural that the elements of my educational background would foster an intense interest in documentary filmmaking. As an undergraduate, I studied cinema and planned to become a director so that I could create art that was both beautiful and entertaining. Over time I found that I had no interest in idolizing the French New Wave or sacrificing my artistic integrity to play the Hollywood game. I was, instead, increasingly drawn to the stories of social deviance, countercultures and feminisms that were a part of my sociology classes. The disillusionment with cinema fortunately coincided with the rise of popular documentary film, and I began to see that there was a way to tell interesting stories, advocate for important causes, and change the conversation in popular culture through visual media. As part of my journey to become a better filmmaker and to begin creating pieces in the documentary genre, I chose to return to school with a focus on writing and rhetoric so as to bolster my ability to craft an argument and to tell a compelling story.

This goal remained at the forefront of my mind as I worked my way through my studies in the Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication department. It was a foregone conclusion that at the culmination of my studies I'd create a thesis that would synthesize all that I researched and explored in an effort to better understand documentary filmmaking. Thus, the articles and digital story that comprise my thesis are part of an effort to challenge myself to use diverse media to answer challenging questions while contributing to the field and while taking advantage of expansive views on what it means to be a rhetorician. That is, my articles address gaps in the literature on the rhetorical elements of documentary films and my digital story taps into a movement toward digital

scholarship in writing studies. Each of the three allow me to demonstrate mastery of a number of skills and forms of communication.

My first article “Do Documentary Films Inspire Activism? An Examination of Data Collected at James Madison University” analyzes information that I collected in May 2018 in Dr. Cathryn Molloy’s “Research Methods” class. For those of us interested in the power of activist filmmaking, it is hard to quantify what motivates people to become involved in an issue beyond passively becoming more aware of it. The current literature shows that while scholars are interested in the rhetorical methods used by documentarians in their push for social change, there is little follow-up regarding how a call for activism may be interpreted by documentary viewers, nor do we know very much about how many documentary viewers are actually moved to meaningful action. In other words, it’s easy enough to discover what a film’s director has in mind, but the same cannot be said for the film’s audience. My research takes up this gap in the field’s knowledge by asking participants if, how and why they are motivated to action after watching a documentary film.

My data emerged from a mixed methods survey of the James Madison University community. After sending a bulk email request to anyone with a JMU email address, including undergraduate, graduate, and PhD students as well as faculty, and staff, I amassed roughly 250 participants. Using a mixed methods survey, of course, allowed me to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative questions determined demographic information such as age, education, area of study, and political affiliation. The qualitative questions gave more open-ended opportunities for the survey takers to describe why they

chose to watch a particular documentary, how it made them feel, and whether they felt compelled to take action afterwards.

As I explore in the article in this thesis, the data I collected concludes that the majority of viewers are affected emotionally by witnessing struggle. However, when it comes to issues that inspire viewers to take action, my survey suggests that a viewer's primary concern is with the issues relevant to their own lives, rather than issues they see as belonging to another person, group, species, or the earth at large. This conclusion is illustrated by the many responses in which the community has indicated that they have made changes to their own habits or way of thinking about an issue in ways that are directly related to improving their own lives. Few indicated that documentary films inspired activism let alone any non-personal changes. The survey results also indicate that empathy alone does not seem to be a powerful enough catalyst for action. I acknowledge that the conclusions I reach are specific to the studied population but I also see the value in recreating the study with larger and/or more diverse groups to confirm or deny what I have discovered. This article is written with a more traditionally academic tone, but it is my hope to have it published in a place where both scholars and working filmmakers can have access to the information.

In my second article, I chose to focus on one documentary film that had a clear impact on society and motivated viewers to change their behavior. Gabriela Cowperthwaite's documentary *Blackfish* premiered in 2013 and quickly grabbed the nation's attention. The film follows the story of Tilikum, an orca whale that caused the death of three people while it was in captivity at SeaWorld. The film presents the argument that the whale's aggression stemmed from psychological distress and that SeaWorld

continued using Tilikum in performances while hiding the dangerous reality from trainers and the public.

While the story is compelling, it was the resulting public reaction that inspired me to study this film further. After *Blackfish* was released, entertainers refused to perform at SeaWorld parks, corporate sponsors such as Southwest Airlines severed their relationship, and by November of 2014, SeaWorld stock was down 50% from where it had been the previous year. In 2015, SeaWorld executives announced that the parks would end their shows involving orca whales in San Diego. In 2016, the company announced that it would end their orca breeding program. It is clear that *Blackfish* created a catalyst for change in public opinion and motivated viewers to protest the company. My article “Shut SeaWorld Down: A Rhetorical Analysis of ‘Blackfish’” explores the idea that this impact was created through the rhetorical choices Cowperthwaite employed to build empathy for orca whales and trainers. Interestingly, the empathy created in the film inspired direct, outward action—the least common reported result in the examination of data of my survey in the previous article.

My examination of *Blackfish* was inspired by the precedent set by an article published in *Rhetoric Review* wherein Laura Johnson examines how fear and discomfort were utilized in Al Gore’s 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. However, I specifically wrote my article with a more informal tone as I would like to get it published somewhere other than a scholarly journal so as to share my conclusions with filmmakers in the environments they inhabit. The article begins with a summary of *Blackfish*’s rhetorical situation, essentially covering the “who, what, where, and why” of the film in order to give context. I examine what is known about Gabriela Cowperthwaite as a

filmmaker to better understand what her mission was in creating this film, the demographics of her targeted audience and her intended argument/aim. I also look at the film's logical consistency and deconstruct the claims being made in support of the thesis, determining whether those claims are intelligible. I do so by weighing empirical data, personal stories, primary and secondary sources, and any other forms of evidence that arose. The core of the article examines specific instances of emotional significance to pinpoint the desired audience reaction and how Cowperthwaite structures her film to have this effect.

The final piece of my thesis is an exploration of the digital story. As this genre is still growing, there are several definitions of what a digital story truly is. Joe Lambert, the founder of the Center for Digital Storytelling, emphasizes authorship and prefers to have more photos than moving images. Jean Burgess, Director of the Digital Media Research Centre at the Queensland University of Technology, argues that the process should be workshop-based and that the final product should be autobiographical. While I certainly studied Lambert and Burgess and their work in the field influences my final product to some extent, I chose to work primarily with the definition set forth by Carolyn Handler Miller. In her book *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*, Miller defines digital storytelling as "the use of digital media platforms and interactivity for narrative purposes, either for fictional or for non-fiction stories." This open ended definition gave me the freedom to create my piece without overbearing constraints that would limit my ability to tell a story I consider to be significant.

My digital story serves as a profile of a sample of students in the class of 2018 at the University of Virginia. This group had front row seats to tragedy, death, and social

unrest year after year while they were undergraduates at UVA, and I wanted to explore how these events affected them emotionally and impacted their college experience. After all, two weeks into their college career, the UVA class of 2018 was forced to grapple with the disappearance and subsequent murder of a fellow student. A few months later, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an article about a violent rape that allegedly occurred at a fraternity house on the university's grounds; the article reported that the administration attempted to cover up the events. In August of 2017, a "Unite the Right" rally was held at the epicenter of the university where neo-Nazis and members of the so-called "alt-right" gathered around the school's statue of Thomas Jefferson and spewed hate speech. This event, of course, came with more violence and death. Each of these moments warranted national news coverage and created negative associations with the University of Virginia and Charlottesville. Though several other significant events occurred during the class of 2018's time at UVA, I chose to use these three issues or controversies as a frame for my digital story and selected four of the twelve students I interviewed as a representative sample for the purposes of offering the committee a glimpse of the hours of footage I acquired interviewing selected students from the class of 2018.

Joe Lambert notes in his book *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* that "the honoring of each individual's process of authorship, and resulting control over the context of the story being shown, is critical." It is my hope that the committee keeps this in mind when viewing my digital story. The piece is not intended for a larger audience. Its purpose is to show proficiency in aspects of the genre, but it has clear limitations since I'd need far more time to use all of my footage in a meaningful way. Still, the sample I provide might serve as an example of how others can continue to expand the

definition of a digital story. The story is self contained and intended to stand alone for the purpose of my thesis, but it is only a small fragment of the hours of footage I collected and a hint of what I intend to do moving forward. I speak to this further in my reflection and divulge my process as well as the challenges I faced during production. I also explain my rhetorical choices in the creation of the digital story and acknowledge the limitations of the material I collected.

At present, digital storytelling as a genre is somewhat limited as storytellers/composers almost ubiquitously create short form compositions, many with personal reflective agendas. I see digital storytelling as a genre that is capable of rapid expansion. Shedding traditional ideas such as the preference for photo over video and the insistence that creation should be done in a workshop environment will allow rhetoricians to find new ways to inform, persuade and communicate with others using visual media. It is my hope that my digital story serves as an example of what is possible in the future of the genre.

### **Do Documentary Films Inspire Activism?**

As an introvert, I've always dreaded team-building activities, icebreakers, and "get to know you" games. Unfortunately, these situations arise quite frequently as one grows up and attends new schools, goes away to camp, or begins a new job. In an effort to lessen my pervasive social anxiety, I quickly developed strategies so that I may fade into the background and/or get things over with as quickly as possible. One game I mastered is called "Two Truths and A Lie." The idea is that you give three statements about yourself and the other members of the group must guess which one is untrue. The trick is to think of a lie that isn't too outrageous and have some interesting truths up your sleeve. My go-to truths were the fact that I have had 13 teeth surgically removed and that I was born in the garlic capital of the world.

Gilroy, California is a small city that sits about 16 miles south of San Jose. Each year, they host one of the nation's largest food festivals to celebrate all things garlic. A garlic cook-off is held, children lick garlic ice cream, and one young woman is crowned Miss Gilroy Garlic Festival Queen. I never had a chance to earn this title as my family moved clear across the country before I could even begin forming memories, but I always had this interesting bit of trivia to dole out as necessary. And that's all that garlic has been to me—a delicious food additive and a standard ice-breaking tool. I never imagined it would be something beyond that.

Soon after 2018 began, Netflix released a documentary series entitled *Rotten*. Each episode focuses on a food staple in the American diet and exposes its seedy, secret underbelly. In the first two episodes, I learned that China launders honey into the United States better than Walter White laundered his meth money. I learned that contemporary

America is so bent on sterilizing everything in a young child's life that their immune systems go haywire and treat any interaction with simple foods, such as peanuts or corn, like the plague. It was with horror that I watched the third episode and learned that garlic is controlled by a Tony Soprano-like company named Christopher Ranch who is based in Gilroy and will do anything to squelch competitors—including small farmers—in order to keep their grip on the industry.

As the episode ended, I felt devastated, outraged, even. I ran to the kitchen to throw what bulbs I had into the garbage. I pledged to only buy garlic at local farmer's markets from then on. However, as my rational mind slowly caught up with my emotions, I found myself once again in a familiar situation—swept up in the powerful rhetoric of another documentary film. As an emerging filmmaker myself, I understand what shot composition, editing, and sound design can do to make a film great and how these elements can move an audience to emotion. As a rhetorician and activist, however, I find that there is little study on the connection between documentary film and tangible action. When it comes to these works, there seems to be no obvious key as to what motivates people to become involved in an issue beyond passively learning about it.

Activist movements across time have often been lead by a figurehead that has a direct autobiographical tie to the community or issue that they are advocating for. Martin Luther King Jr., Gloria Steinem and Cesar Chavez used their experiences within their minority group to incite action and inspire others to join their causes. In cases where it was not possible to elevate a member of the group to a leader status, many activist groups have selected a public “face” that was recognizable by their intended audience. An example of this would be animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (or

PETA) who recruit celebrities to serve as an honorary director or to lead a campaign. Historically, effective activism involved organizing marches, rallies, sit-ins and engaging in face to face communication. These methods were employed in conjunction with the use of traditional media such as print, radio and television and have resulted in the success of many causes.

Recently, however, the landscape shifted with the emergence of the internet. Internet World Stats reports that over 4.2 billion people are online as of June 2018 (“World Internet Users”). While this means that more people than ever before have the ability to communicate with each other, it also means that any group or person attempting to be heard must learn to do so in a cacophony of voices. Activist groups are just a small percentage of the many factions fighting for attention in online spaces. Successful groups that have formed and interact with each other and their audience on websites such as Reddit and Facebook include Anonymous, Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. However, unlike activist movements in the past, these groups have no central figure with which to identify and rally around. It is within this new context that documentary filmmakers who are looking to use their platform as a catalyst for social change must decipher how to motivate audiences to participate.

Activist documentaries have two potential audiences—those who already have knowledge of the issue being addressed and those that are unaware. Both come with a unique set of rhetorical challenges for filmmakers. Audiences familiar with the topic being addressed will begin watching the documentary with a set of preconceived notions that the filmmaker must either confirm or dispel. Confirming a viewer’s thoughts and opinions can increase said viewer’s passion and incite action. Challenging these thoughts and opinions

can cause viewers to feel alienated, confused, and/or inspire them not to join a cause but to discontinue watching the documentary. Audiences with no previous knowledge of the issue being addressed in a documentary film must be convinced that the issue is worth their consideration and time. Activist filmmakers must be aware that both types of viewers will watch their documentary and make rhetorical choices that can inform and entertain a diverse audience.

In reviewing a film, it's easy enough to discover what the director had in mind, but the same cannot be said for the subsequent actions of the audience. Current scholarly literature shows that while some academics are interested in the rhetorical methods used by documentarians in their push for social change, there is little follow-up regarding how a call for activism may be interpreted by documentary viewers, nor do we know very much about how many documentary viewers are actually moved to act. Future filmmakers would benefit from an exploration of audience reactions to activist pieces and an analysis of the rhetorical methods employed in films that inspired action.

In an effort to better understand what drives people to change their behavior after watching a documentary film, I conducted survey research in May of 2017 and chose the entire James Madison University community as my target population. This population was selected based on their proximity and access. The survey consisted of qualitative and quantitative questions and was distributed to students from freshmen to Ph.D. candidates as well as to staff and faculty. Potential participants received an email were able to voluntarily take the survey by clicking a link. No incentive was given to encourage responses and respondents were able to say as much or as little as they wished when asked open-ended questions.

To best situate my research and form questions, it was important for me to review the current literature within my field of study: Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication (WRTC). As I soon found out, documentary filmmaking is approached in a scholarly manner from several different angles. Some analyze specific films in terms of their rhetoric or their social impact. Others compare visual and written communication. The majority of academics in WRTC, either in tandem with these ideas or separately, approach filmmaking as an opportunity to create new learning experiences for their students. This trend makes sense given the discipline's ties to Composition Studies, which is a field of study focused on issues and topics to do with effective college writing instruction.

One example of this trend is the essay "The Case for Filmmaking as English Composition," in which Richard Williamson notes that "The first step in the reform of composition classes must be the admission that not all students can nor want to learn to be articulate in writing, and so long as they can express themselves adequately--if not eloquently--in some other symbol system, they should be encouraged to do so" (134). Williamson acknowledges that a typical composition class is "ideally the environment in which a student is allowed to examine his own experience, order his thoughts on his experience, and communicate those thoughts in the best possible way" (133) and that alongside traditional writing courses, students should be able to explore filmmaking. In doing this, "the student will still get exercise in what is generally agreed upon as the end of composition classes: clear thought and effective expression." Beyond this, he points out that filmmaking may have an advantage over written communication because "it does not

seem esoteric to the student who has been watching television and movies all his life” (134).

When Williamson wrote his case in 1971, he was part of a growing interest in multimodality, an area of communication that scholars in WRTC continue to explore today. Multimodality involves the use of various modes of communication including text, language, sound, space and visuals to create one artifact. In his book *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, Jason Palmeri points out that many scholars within the field “often question whether or not multimodal composing should fall under their purview” and argue that the discipline is rooted in, centered around, and should therefore be solely focused on alphabetic text (7). Palmeri subsequently argues that the purpose of his book is to contest this idea and outline the “oft-forgotten ways that multimodal theories of process figured prominently in the disciplinary formation” of the field (8). He devotes a chapter to cameras and writing to better explore the “crucial interconnections between composing with words and composing with images” and asserts that studying film and photography as composition, including understanding the similarities and differences in composition made up of images versus words, may help students develop transferable skills to their alphabetic writing and aid in addressing political and social concerns (119).

William Costanzo sees the benefits of film analysis in his classroom, noting that he has “discovered that a surprising number of students can recognize the compositional elements of clarity, unity, completeness, continuity, and mechanics more readily in visual terms than they can, initially, in their own writing” (80). This ability to understand visual composition may be due to students growing up in a screen-filled world. Costanzo sees his

students as already having much of the knowledge they need to write successfully and that “students who are more conversant with the current forms of visual communication find that they can read movies, commercials, and television shows with the critical competence that they formerly regarded as the private property of English teachers” (85). The ability to interpret visual communication greatly improves the students confidence and excitement surrounding composition.

Costanzo and others see the similarities in the process and product of written and filmed projects. As Costanzo puts it, “What filmmakers imply through close-ups and camera positioning, writers can suggest through their attention to descriptive details and the connotations of words” (83). Roy Huss and Norman Silverstein take this idea further in their piece "Film Study: Shot Orientation for the Literary Minded," stating that “the further one delves into the heart of cinematic structure and movement the nearer one comes to discovering something that is very much like poetry” (567). They point out that both film and the written story have the ability to manipulate time, distance, and space and eloquently propose that “every movie sequence is a deck of picture cards, as every sentence is a collection of words, and their arrangement has some significance” (568). While this comparison sounds simple enough, S.M. Shelton finds that translating writing to filmmaking “is especially tough for writers because most are not attuned to encoding messages visually” (658).

It is also important to note that many more people today have access and the ability to create a visual story and this communication is, thus, no longer limited to professional filmmakers. As Robé, Wolfson and Funke illustrate, “These new tools have allowed community groups to depict stories otherwise submerged from view, to draw connections

across different fronts of struggle, and to quickly connect with and mobilize communities that were once hard to reach” (57). Based on this observation, the authors go on to argue that video and film “must be understood as a form of activist practice in and of itself, not only as a way to relay representations of activism happening elsewhere” (59).

Activists are not the only group of people that can benefit from the documentary genre, however. Shelton’s piece “Script Design for Information Film and Video” deals more directly with how technical writers can be involved in information and documentary film. He defines the documentary genre as being “produced to enlighten mass audiences about current topics that have social relevance. Usually, documentaries have well-defined communication goals, such as to raise consciousness, change an attitude, or urge the audience to action” (656). In this way, video can be used as a form of activism. For the wary technical writer, Shelton assures that “information film and video do not have to entertain to communicate. What they must do is engender empathy in the target audience. And we engender empathy by setting the mise-en-scene of the film/video in a tone, location, and scenario that our audience understands, relates to, and empathizes with” (661).

While all films use pathos, it is not always a gentle approach to encourage viewer action. Some films use fear such as the 2001 George Ratliff documentary *Hell House* which follows a church group that uses the Halloween season as a time to set up an attraction with the goal of scaring its visitors into accepting Jesus. Ratliff remains very detached from the piece, letting the subject speak for itself. Brian Jackson says that this approach “has been both praised and criticized, but as a rhetorical strategy, it demonstrates the earnestness of these believers while simultaneously giving the audience a feeling of discomfort in their

often simplistic and intolerant representations of eternal judgment” (53). One of the most well known instances of documentary film using fear or discomfort to motivate its audience is the 2006 Al Gore film, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Laura Johnson analyzes the rhetorical strategy of *Truth* and labels the tactic as “tempered apocalypticism.” She argues that “the vividness of disaster imagery” may be powerful, but that it “risks overshooting the goal of inspiring action precisely *because* it so frequently attends to irreparability more thoroughly than to repair” (32) *Truth* walks a fine line between fear and inspiration, as Johnson points out. She sees Gore as presenting himself as “an authority on global warming to declare crisis and render it real (or more real) for the audience” (37) in order to inspire activism. She also appreciates that Gore presents *an* inconvenient truth, rather than *the* truth as it is noncompetitive and can appeal to a wide range of people regardless of ideological viewpoints.

Another film that attempts to enact social change through rhetoric is Abby Epstein’s 2008 documentary *The Business of Being Born*. In her analysis of its rhetorical impact, Kim Owens summarizes the film as arguing that “midwife-attended homebirth is a viable and safe alternative to Americans’ usual physician-attended hospital birth, critiquing current dominant childbirth practices, practitioners, and locations as overmedicalized” (294). In her examination of the film, Owens finds that the number of home births increased in the film’s setting of New York City after the documentary was released. She notes that this may be due to it receiving positive reviews in the press, finding that audiences “will make judgments about films and their topics based on their previous experiences along with brief encounters with film reviews” and that “such reviews may help shape public opinion in ways that extend far beyond that of the documentaries themselves. Reviews and

other public reactions help determine whether dominant discourses are ultimately changed” (295). In diving further into the documentary genre, Owens finds that the first consideration of an audience is the film’s entertainment value. Whether they learn something or change their point of view is “of secondary importance” (298).

While Owens showed that some documentaries inspire activism in an auxiliary capacity, others are created with the express aim to enact social change. Kate Nash and John Corner examined a strategy within this genre known as the strategic impact documentary which aims to achieve kinds of quite tightly specified social change. The measured capacity of a documentary to achieve this is described as its impact (230). What makes these documentaries different than others is that “rather than existing as a single, discrete media object, strategic impact documentaries are hybrid communications products that cross media platforms and combine audio-visual representation with various mediated and face-to-face communications activities” (230). They further note that “the pathway to audience engagement” is “the ability to connect audiences to social issues emotionally” (235).

Though it is outside the purview of WRTC, social psychology certainly plays a role in activism. Scholars in this field have examined the many ways in which an individual may be motivated to become an activist and there is a general consensus that personality characteristics and life experiences play a role. However, many are still exploring the myriad of psychological factors that influence activism. Dr. Jonathan Horowitz, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, published an article in 2017 which begins with the question: “What is an activist identity?” The piece attempts to answer this question “through the lens of role-based and category-based identities” in

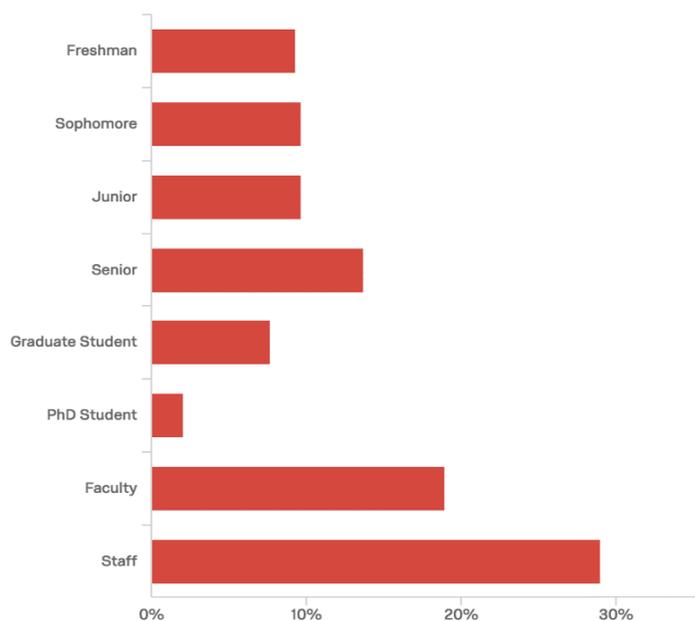
interviews with 27 activists. Horowitz concludes through his study that the internalization of role responsibilities and the expectations of friends and family are influential. He also concluded that one may craft a social identity within an “injustice frame” either by incorporating the frame into their current social identity or by using the frame to create a new in-group (Horowitz). He emphasizes the importance of community, a factor which aided the participants in his study with their internalization of the expectations of an activist role.

Though scholars in WRTC approach documentaries from different angles and examine varied elements of the rhetoric found within them, most focus on the communication methods and efficacy of said methods. Some use this knowledge to improve their composition classes while others look to analyze how the public responds to an issue. The results of this research show that there is clear evidence that documentary film can lead to social change, both in the classroom and beyond. From this starting point, what I wanted to better understand was what exactly prompted this change.

The survey I created was a mixed methods study consisting of both qualitative and quantitative questions. The quantitative questions helped to determine demographic information such as the age, education, area of study, and political affiliation of the survey takers. This data was acquired to aid in framing responses to the qualitative data that I gathered through asking open-ended questions. These questions allowed the participants to describe why they chose to watch a particular documentary, how it made them feel, and whether they felt directly responsible to take action as a result. The survey was sent first to faculty and staff at James Madison University and then to students ranging from undergraduates to PhD candidates.

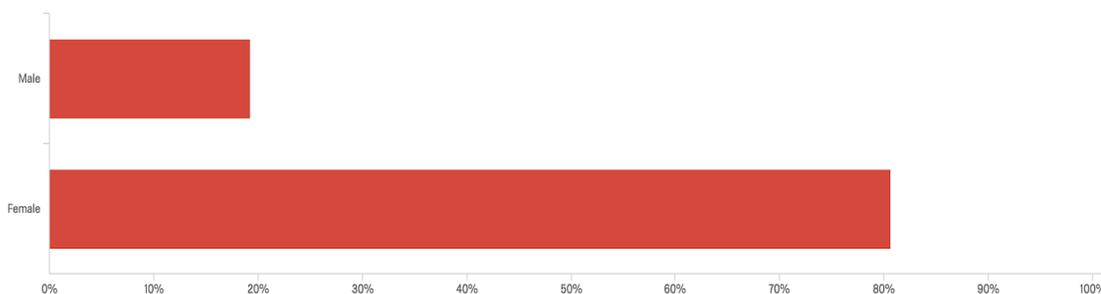
Survey takers were first asked to provide the demographic data that would allow me contextualize the subsequent questions. They were, then, asked if they watch documentary films and, if so, how often. If the answer was yes, I then wanted to know what subgenre was most popular. I based my potential answers on the current subcategories found on the streaming service Netflix because they are succinct and familiar to many people. These subgenres were: biographical, crime, historical, international, military, music & concert, political, science & nature, social & cultural, sports, and travel & adventure. Respondents were able to select as few or as many categories that described their experience. I, then, presented 20 popular documentary films from across various genres. This list included films such as *The Thin Blue Line*, *March of the Penguins*, and *Food, Inc.* Respondents were asked to rate each film with the options “loved it,” “liked it,” “didn’t like it,” “hated it,” and “never seen it.” This scale was modeled after traditional Likert scales which are used in the social sciences to measure attitude and it provided the ability quantify preferences while giving respondents the option to state that they have not seen a particular film. The survey finished with three qualitative questions to allow respondents to write freely and to offer more specific information about their experiences with documentary film. The questions were: “What was the most recent documentary you watched and why?” “What documentary has moved you most emotionally and why?” and “Has a film ever inspired you to take action? Why or why not?”

Upon closing the survey, I had 266 responses. The respondents were divided almost evenly between those studying at JMU and those employed there - 52% to 48% respectively (see fig. 1). Of the students that responded, seniors accounted for the greatest number at 26% while PhD candidates had the fewest number at 4%.



*Fig. 1 Responses to “What is your academic level?”*

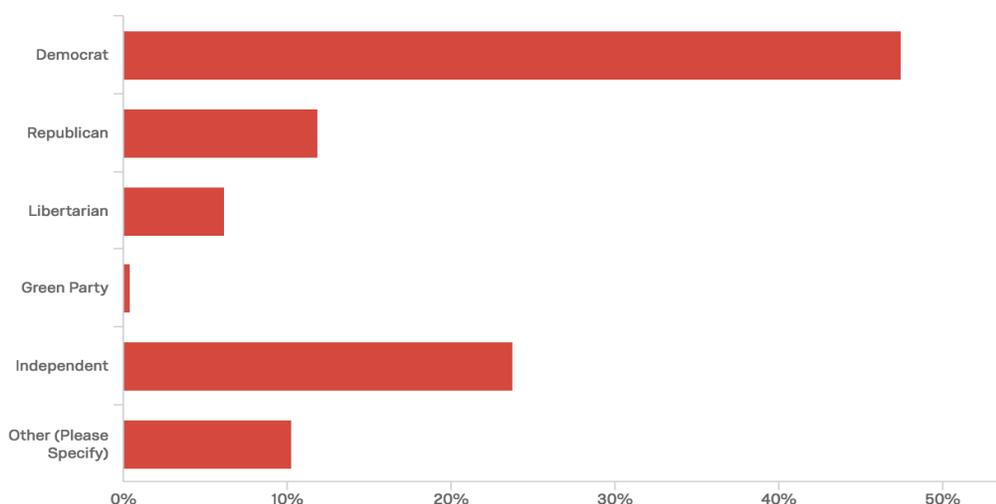
Respondents were overwhelmingly female (see fig. 2). The U.S. News and World Report concluded that in 2016, 59% of undergraduate students at James Madison University identified as female. It may be that this majority accounted for the difference in responses. However, there may be many other factors that influenced the decision to partake in the survey that is beyond the scope of this research.



*Fig. 2 Responses to “What is your gender?”*

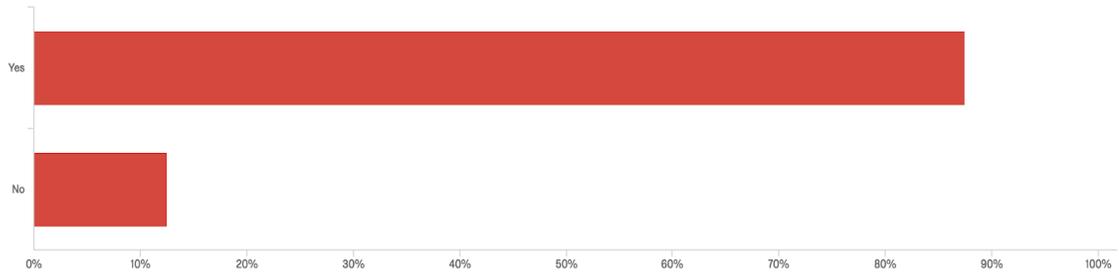
The majority of respondents—nearly half—self identified as Democrats (see fig. 3). The 10% that selected “Other (Please Specify)” reported that they were either not

affiliated with any political party, were unsure, or identified with another group that was not represented such as the Progressive Labor Party. Political affiliation may be a factor in the choice of documentary film one chooses to watch, such as the preference for social & cultural films over military films. This identity may also color the reaction of the viewer, possibly causing a stronger emotion in response to issues such as immigration, abortion, or prison reform.

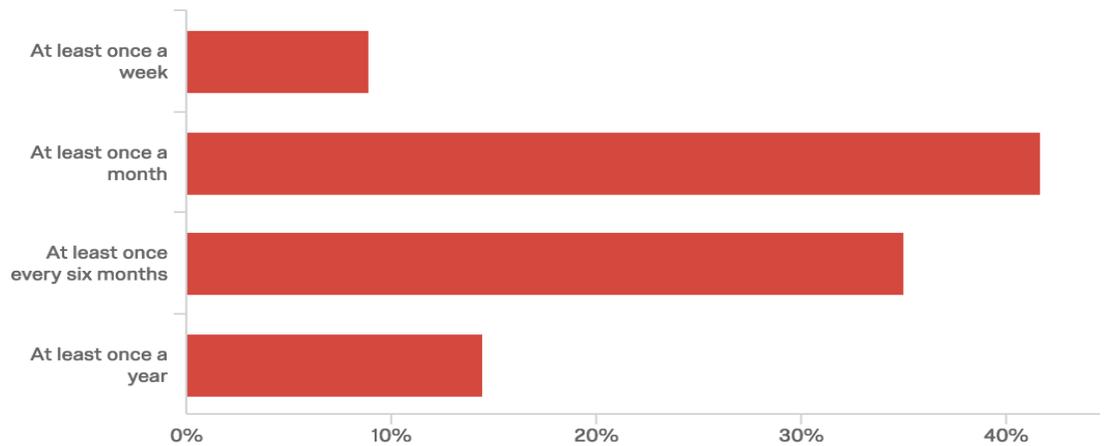


*Fig. 3 Responses to “What is your political affiliation?”*

Most people willing to take the survey said they watched documentary films (see fig. 4). Nearly 42% said they watch them at least once a month, while 35% said they watch them at least once every six months (see fig. 5). These high percentages are likely due to the fact that the survey was completely voluntary, and no incentives were given. Thus, if one were to click into the survey to take it—one of many one might receive on our campus—they were, perhaps, interested in the topic in some way.

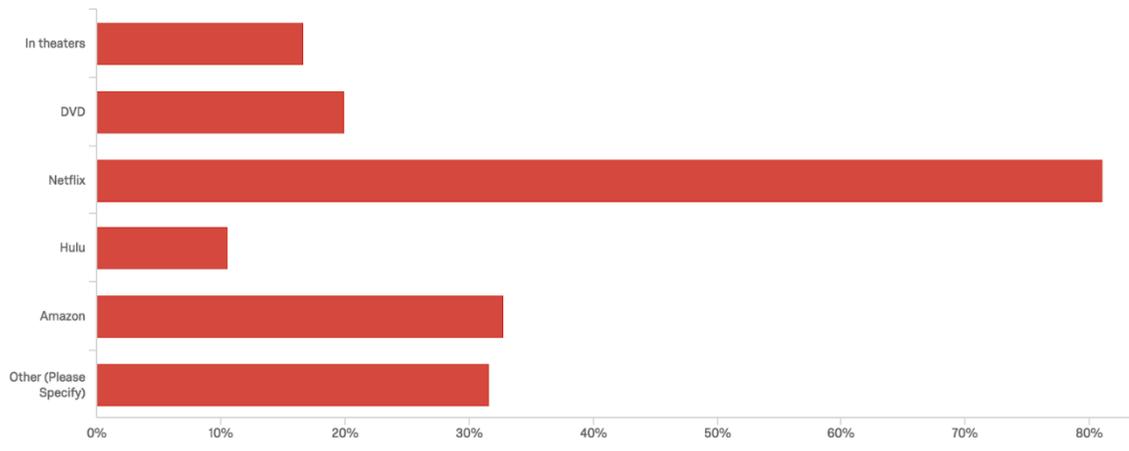


*Fig. 4 Responses to “Do you watch documentary films?”*



*Fig. 5 Responses to “How often do you watch documentary films?”*

Netflix was overwhelmingly the most used platform used to watch documentary films, but write-in responses to the option “Other (Please Specify)” showed that cable television and YouTube were also popular mediums (see fig. 6). Respondents were able to select multiple platforms.



*Fig. 6 Responses to “How do you watch documentary films?”*

The data gathered from the question “What genre(s) of documentary film interest you?” allowed me to order the popularity of the genres from most to least popular as follows: social & cultural, historical, biographical, science & nature, crime, travel & adventure, political, international, music & concert, sports, and military (see fig. 7). Respondents were able to select multiple genres.



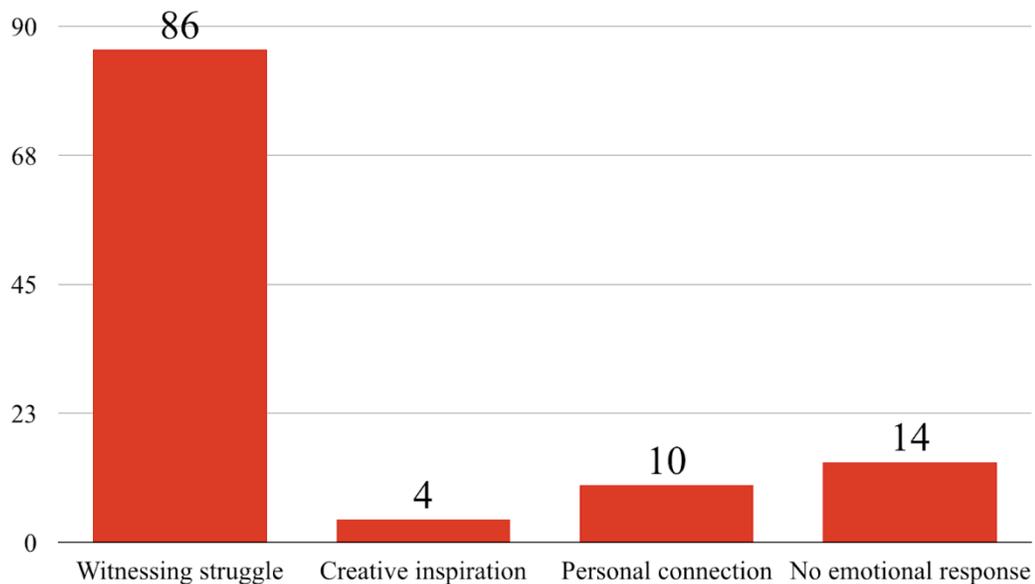
*Fig. 7 Responses to “Which genre(s) of documentary film interest you?”*

After reviewing the qualitative questions, I used open coding to interpret the data. This process afforded me the ability to identify themes and topics within each individual answer to better identify trends and categorize the data. Coding for the question “What documentary moved you most emotionally and why?” identified three reasons for emotional response: witnessing struggle, creative inspiration, personal connection and no emotional response (see table 1).

<b>Codified category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Witnessing struggle	Subject of documentary faces difficult odds and/or unfair treatment.	“Eggsplotation (on human egg donation) because it is a very heavy look at an unregulated and greedy industry that preys on vulnerable young women, their altruistic instincts, and their need of money while in college.”
Creative inspiration	Subject of documentary influences viewer to express themselves artistically.	“Netflix's Abstract series' Graphic Design episode, which focused on the work of Paula Scher. I am already pursuing a career in graphic design, and it struck a chord with me and left me extremely inspired and wanting to accomplish what she has.”
Personal connection	Subject of documentary has proximity to the life of the viewer.	“i forget the name but the one about the woman who faked being a 9/11 victim, it probably affected me because my dad worked in the world trade center and i know friends who lost parents and family members. Seeing someone exploit that for personal gain was disgusting but engrossing”
No emotional response	Documentary film does not provoke emotion.	“I honestly can't remember being moved by a documentary - the ones I tend to watch are informative.”

*Table 1 Coding scheme for the question “What documentary has moved you most emotionally and why?”*

Witnessing struggle was the most commonly occurring category by a large margin (see fig. 8).



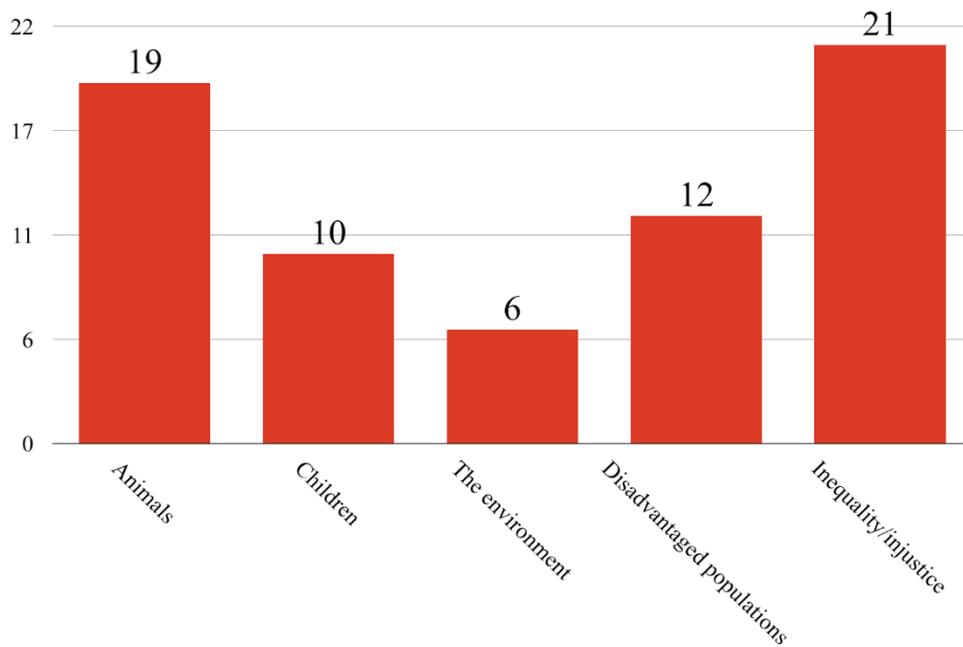
*Fig. 8 Instances of category occurrence in response to the question “What documentary has moved you most emotionally and why?”*

The witnessing struggle category was broken down to determine the type of struggle. Not all respondents were specific enough in their answers to categorize them further but the majority were divided into the following subcategories: animals, children, the environment, disadvantaged populations and instances of inequality or injustice (see table 2).

<b>Codified subcategory</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Animals	Subject of documentary is a struggling animal	“I remember being sad when the unhatched penguins died due to freezing in March of the Penguins”
Children	Subject of documentary is a struggling child or group of children	“A Place at the Table, because it brought up issues I didn't realize were so devastating, and brought in people who were suffering from food uncertainty, including children.”
The environment	Subject of documentary is the status of the Earth	“Before the Flood, because our world is run by greed. The destruction of the planet is depressing.”
Disadvantaged populations	Subject of documentary is a population of people lacking resources	“Poverty, Inc. was a documentary that really illuminated the development of poverty and many key contributors to poor living conditions in developing countries. It really struck my heart because these are human beings who only know struggle and disheartenment and betrayal.”
Inequality/Injustice	Subject of documentary is treated with a lack of fairness	“‘Trapped,’ because it was absolutely heartbreaking to see the inequality that people face, and the harshness of the reality for women.”

*Table 2 Coding scheme for the subcategories within the category of witnessing struggle in response to the question “What documentary has moved you most emotionally and why?”*

Animals and instances of inequality or injustice were the most common themes found in the witnessing struggle category (see fig. 9).



*Fig. 9 Instances of subcategory occurrence within the category of witnessing struggle in response to the question “What documentary has moved you most emotionally and why?”*

A similar process of open coding was used on answers to the question “Has a film ever inspired you to take action? Why or why not?” Three types of action that respondents had after watching a documentary film were identified: personal change, outward change, or no action (see table 3).

Category	Definition	Example
Personal change	Viewer takes action that impacts their own life.	“Yes, I have stopped eating all processed ground beef and only eat if it's grass fed and organic which is very rare. I started reading food labels, more paying attention to how much I was eating of processed foods and I always try to avoid processed foods if I can.”
Outward change	Viewer takes action that impacts others and/or supports a cause that does not affect their own life.	“Political documentaries inspire me to take action to express my beliefs by attending local meetings, calling congressional and senatorial officials or writing letters/emails. Donating funds to causes I feel are important.”
No action	Viewer does not take action.	“Not really, I tend to watch films that are about subjects that don't really need help or they are too far away for me to actively do anything”

Table 3 Coding scheme for the question “Has a film ever inspired you to take action? Why or why not?”

Responses involving personal change occurred most frequently and there were more instances of inaction than outward change (see fig. 10).

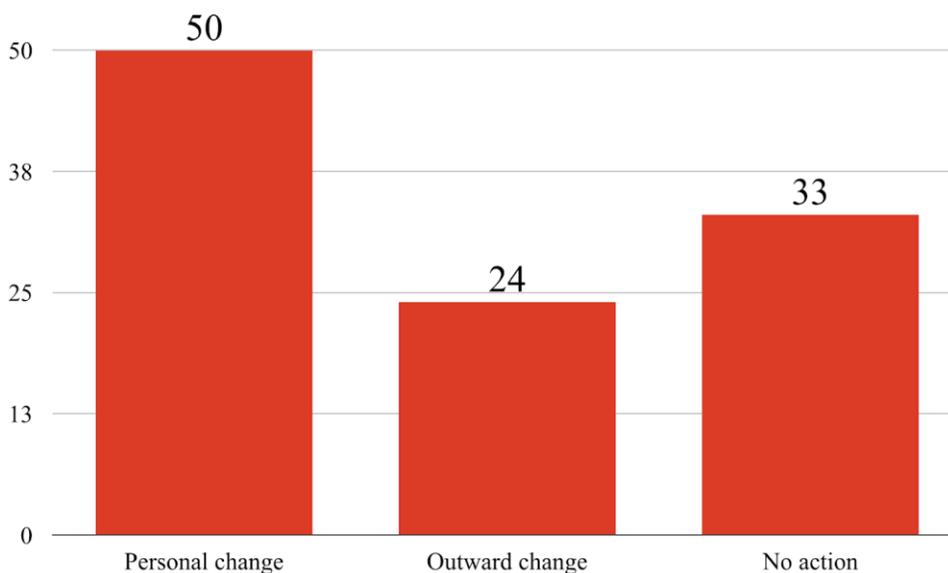


Fig. 10 Instances of code occurrence in response to the question “Has a film ever inspired you to take action? Why or why not?”

The data from my survey showed that the most common catalyst for emotion after watching a documentary was seeing the struggle of another being or entity. This struggle could be that of a child, an animal, the environment or a person who is disadvantaged, socially unequal or fighting injustice. One respondent described being brought to tears when watching *Blackfish* and “seeing animals being treated as material items for human entertainment.” Several others cited the exploration of Syrian refugees and their rescuers in the film *The White Helmets* as an impetus for emotion. One said specifically: “It moved me emotionally because there are people saying that the refugees may be terrorists but they are running from indescribable terror.” They described the rescue workers as heroes who “continue to put their lives on the line to save lives” despite “losing some of their own and members of their families.” Others showed that the witnessing of struggle does not only lead to feelings of sadness or empathy. One respondent said that *Makers: Women Who Make America* made them “mad!!” because they saw that “across all industries the story is the same - women are ignored.”

Only four respondents described being moved to emotion due to creative inspiration but it was a common enough occurrence to create a category for and may be an interesting area to follow up on in further research. Respondents cited that it was the dedication and creativity they saw that was so inspiring. One respondent wrote, “*Chef’s Table* was about so much more than cooking. As an artist, I am interested and inspired by these cooks-turned-chefs, because they allow their creativity to go past what is usually expected, and most feel a very strong connection to the earth, as a provider or the freshest ingredients for their dishes.”

The third type of emotional inspiration identified in the survey responses was a personal connection between the viewer and the documentary being watched. One respondent—who self-identified as being “passionate about health and wellness”—wrote that she was moved by *Fed Up* and *Forks Over Knives* because “they made you realize that what you thought were your truths may actually be deceptions (like big food industries deceiving us on food labels, etc.).” Another said that they lived in the Washington D.C. area during the sniper attacks in 2002 and recounted how watching an episode of the CNN documentary series *Crimes of the Century* that profiled the events “brought up old emotions of terror that I and my family witnessed when it was occurring.”

The types of actions that survey respondents reported taking after watching a documentary film can fit into three categories as well: personal change, outward change, or no action at all. Respondents that said they have not taken any action after watching a documentary vary in their reasoning. Many simply answered “no” when asked if a documentary had inspired them to take action. Others commented that they were motivated at the film’s conclusion but that the feeling was fleeting. One respondent described this by saying, “I feel good in the moment like “yeah let's save the planet!” but then I never actually do anything.” Similarly, a few respondents reported that even if they are inspired, there are other factors that prevent them from acting. Some described feeling powerless—“I do not know what I can do, personally, to advocate change for the world”—while others said they were “not given enough contacts/resources” or that they do not possess the adequate amount of “money/power/influence.” Interestingly, a number of survey takers credited their lack of inspiration to their distrust of the genre. They used words like “biased,” “artificial and staged,” and “outright constructed” to describe documentary films and said

that “filmmakers only show you what they want you to see” because “directors/writers who get into [sic] this business do so to manipulate.”

The most commonly reported actions taken after watching a documentary film fell into the category of personal change. These are actions that did not directly affect others and/or only benefited the person performing that action. Many respondents referenced personal change that was internal or within in their own mind. They reported that they now “think twice” and have “new ways to see situations.” Many more made a change in their physical actions, specifically in what they choose to eat. Some said they altered their diet and discontinued eating certain foods or ingredients like red meat, dairy, high fructose corn syrup, and McDonald’s french fries. A few credited their vegetarianism to films such as *Food Inc.* and *Cowspiracy*. Others said they are now more conscious of their food’s origin and that they “always try to avoid processed foods” and/or “only buy fresh meat from the co-op.” More generally, answers such as “I also want to become more knowledgeable on the topic” show that some viewers are motivated to continue learning about the subject of certain documentaries after the film has ended.

The category with the fewest number of responses was that of outward change, meaning actions that would affect someone or something other than the viewer. Six respondents reported that a documentary film inspired them to make a direct monetary donation to a cause. Others decided to withdraw their support or contribution to an issue by no longer buying certain items. One person said they “no longer purchase from large clothing chains [so] as to not contribute to the horrible slave-like conditions of the workers.” Another said, “I no longer use drinking straws or buy bottled water/drinks, and try to cut back on the amount of plastic products that I purchase.” Three people were

inspired to boycott SeaWorld specifically while others were more general and said they now avoid zoos, aquariums and circuses. Others were motivated to encourage others to act by “attending local meetings, calling congressional and senatorial officials” and by “writing letters/emails.”

The data from this survey illustrates the ways in which viewers are moved to emotion when watching documentary film and why this may cause them to take action or not. These results speak to the rhetorical power that many films may or may not have and their ability to persuade people to do something beyond passively watching. Based on the results of this inquiry from this specific community, it might be argued that the majority of documentary viewers are affected emotionally by witnessing struggle. However, when it comes to issues that inspire viewers to take action, this survey has shown that audiences’ primary concern is with their own life rather than another person, group, species, or the earth at large. This reality is illustrated by the many responses in which the community has indicated that they have made changes to their own habits or ways of thinking about an issue as opposed to the comparably few examples of outward change.

The most significant conclusion that can be inferred from this data that empathy alone is not a powerful enough catalyst for action. This notion may be able to aid filmmakers in more effectively crafting their arguments so as to not just emotionally affect their audience, but inspire real change after the film ends. By examining the rhetorical choices found in other works that move audiences to emotion and those that provoke action, activist filmmakers may better inform, inspire, and recruit others to join their cause.

### **Shut SeaWorld Down: A Rhetorical Analysis of “Blackfish”**

On February 24th, 2010 at the theme park SeaWorld Orlando, trainer Dawn Brancheau was killed during a public performance with an orca whale named Tilikum. The routine was one that Brancheau had successfully participated in many times before. She was hired by SeaWorld in 1994 and began working with orcas two years later, spending countless hours in the water with the whales and encouraging them to perform behaviors—such as waving their pectoral fin or using their snouts to propel trainers into the air—through the use of positive reinforcement. On the day of her death, Brancheau completed a performance with Tilikum and led him to a ledge at the edge of the pool to engage in “relationship time.” This practice is meant to give the animal time to disengage from the performance and reconfirm their relationship with the trainer. As Brancheau lay on her stomach in the shallow water next to Tilikum and stroked his head, the orca grabbed her and dragged her 30 feet below the water. After her body was recovered and an autopsy was performed, Brancheau’s official cause of death was declared to be a combination of drowning and blunt force trauma. This violent event was shocking as it seemed so out of place in a theme park meant to entertain and educate the public about marine life.

SeaWorld was established in San Diego, California in 1964, and as its success grew, the company expanded by opening sister parks in Aurora, Ohio, San Antonio, Texas and Orlando, Florida. For many years, marine animal performances at the parks included those from sea lions, dolphins and orca whales. Many of SeaWorld’s original orcas were captured from the wild or purchased from zoos and aquariums until the establishment of the company’s orca breeding program in 1985, which has resulted in 24 live births. One of the most well-known and popular attractions at any SeaWorld park is a performance by

“Shamu.” Shamu was the name of the first orca whale brought to SeaWorld San Diego in 1965, and it became a moniker that all performing orca whales would don in each park’s “Shamu Stadium.” When these performances were commonplace, audiences were invited to sit in “splash zones” where they were in close enough proximity to the animals that they could get drenched when the whales slapped their fins on the surface of the pool. All performances were upbeat, often full of jokes and accompanied by majestic music. Trainers used whistles and rewards of food to elicit behaviors from the orcas that demonstrated the animals’ extraordinary capabilities.

In 2013, SeaWorld reported an unprecedented profit of \$1,460.3 million (“SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc. Reports Record”). Just two years later, however, SeaWorld’s profits would drop by 84% (Neate). Corporate sponsors such as Southwest Airlines severed their ties with the company, and numerous performers cancelled appearances at the parks. In March of 2014 a bill was introduced in California titled “The Orca Welfare and Safety Act” that proposed to make it unlawful to hold a captive orca “whether wild-caught or captive-bred, for any purpose, including, but not limited to, display, performance, or entertainment purposes.” The bill passed in 2016. SeaWorld stock prices and park attendance numbers continued to drop for years, and in March of 2016, the company announced that it would discontinue its orca breeding program and began to phase out all live performances using the whales.

The catalyst for this sudden change in the profits and perception of SeaWorld was arguably the release of the 2013 documentary film *Blackfish*, directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite. Though the company continually denied that they were dealing with what the media dubbed “the *Blackfish* effect,” they eventually conceded. In September of 2018,

the Securities and Exchange Commission announced that SeaWorld agreed to pay \$5 million “to settle fraud charges for misleading investors about the impact the documentary film *Blackfish* had on the company’s reputation and business” (“SeaWorld and Former CEO”). The film in question posits that due to the treatment and living conditions of orca whales at SeaWorld, the animals are so psychologically damaged that they act out violently. It also argues that SeaWorld was aware of this behavior in their orcas and either blatantly covered up any negative events or attempted to frame the narratives in a way that would continue to maintain a positive public perception of the whales, and, therefore, the parks.

*Blackfish* is just one of many films that has had a wide-reaching social impact and is part of a new wave of filmmaking Jon Fitzgerald calls “Cause Cinema.” In his book *Filmmaking for Change*, Fitzgerald notes that “Audiences are calling out for more films about the world we’re living in. And someone’s listening. We have more theatrical releases for cause movies, more diverse digital platforms presenting documentaries and classes being offered in colleges across the country” (3). While documentary films as a genre have always had rhetorical aims, the shift toward explicitly activist agendas in documentary filmmaking is arguably more recent. Prior to World War II, travelogues and biographies dominated the documentary genre. These films gave audiences the ability to see other countries and explore other lives. They often included reenactments or explicit scene manipulation, though this was not known by audiences at that time. Through the Second World War and the cold war, propaganda films became more commonplace. The most well-known example of this is *Triumph of the Will*, a film commissioned by Adolf Hitler to further the Nazi agenda. As technology changed and film equipment became more

portable, the subgenre of cinéma vérité increased in popularity. Documentaries in this style show real life as it happens and the influence of the filmmaker on the subject being explored can vary. Some may choose to be a “fly on the wall” and attempt to be as impartial as possible. Others may insert themselves into the story and/or ask the subject questions in order to document emotional reactions. Modern documentary filmmakers are still heavily influenced by cinéma vérité but incorporate a more narrative style. Increasingly, these films also serve as a form of activism. Documentaries such as *Making a Murderer*, *13th*, and *Food Inc.* invite audiences to explore topics that range from the American criminal justice system to the food on one’s table. These films conclude with calls to action; they asks viewers to consider being a part of a new way of thinking or acting in the future.

Because the activist documentary subgenre is relatively new, there is a need to study how and why certain films are able to inspire audiences to act while others are not. In this essay, I examine the rhetorical choices Cowperthwaite made in *Blackfish* that may be responsible for causing social change beyond the passive absorption of a documentary film for entertainment. Specifically, I will examine how *Blackfish* builds empathy for Dawn Brancheau and her fellow trainers as well as for Tilikum and other captive orca whales. That is, I will show how the film establishes Brancheau’s character and outlines Tilikum’s history of psychological distress in conjunction with SeaWorld’s denial of danger and apathy for safety. For the purposes of this essay, both the film itself and the film’s creator, Gabriela Cowperthwaite, will be considered “speakers.”

One factor that might have led to *Blackfish* successfully inspiring real change is the credibility of the filmmaker—both in her reputation that predates the film itself and in the choices she makes in the execution of the film. That is, analyzing ethos for *Blackfish* begins

with taking a look at the character of the director. While Cowperthwaite does not insert herself directly into the film, her history is relevant to the development of her documentary. Prior to *Blackfish*, Cowperthwaite produced television documentary episodes for companies such as National Geographic, Animal Planet, Discovery and History. She made her directorial debut with a film titled *City Lax: An Urban Lacrosse Story* which debuted on ESPN in 2010 and shortly thereafter she wrote a treatment for *Blackfish* to raise money and begin production. Cowperthwaite decided to investigate the living condition of orca whales at SeaWorld after hearing of Dawn Brancheau's death and finding herself with questions: "I remember asking someone why an orca—a highly intelligent animal—would attack its trainer or essentially 'bite the hand that feeds it,'" Cowperthwaite wrote in a special statement for CNN. "We sometimes hear of dogs mauling other people, but in these cases we don't seem to hear about them attacking their masters. So why would America's lovable Shamu turn against us? How could our entire collective childhood memories of this delightful water park be so morbidly wrong?" ("Filmmaker: Why I made: 'Blackfish'") She often insists in interviews that she did not begin making *Blackfish* because she was an activist, but because she is a mother who brought her children to SeaWorld and assumed it was a safe and happy place.

The credibility of *Blackfish* is further developed in the choice to structure the film as an expository piece. Well-known documentaries, such as those from Ken Burns, follow this style and resemble an essay in that they are generally outlined in the same manner with a clear introduction that includes a thesis, a logically defined core structure and a conclusion that restates the initial claim and summarizes the piece. Expository documentaries may include interviews and visual elements, including graphics or photos,

but the ultimate aim is to build an argument via a narrative arc that engages the audience. Cowperthwaite chose to present *Blackfish* in this form, but she left out one hallmark of the genre: narration. Often referred to as the “voice of God,” narration explicitly gives information to viewers, often telling them how to think or feel. The narrative in *Blackfish* is told primarily through information obtained in interviews with primary sources. The interviewees—mostly former SeaWorld trainers—recall their experiences working at the parks; recount what Dawn Brancheau was like as a coworker, friend and animal trainer; and illuminate the history and treatment of Tilikum the whale. Cowperthwaite also makes the strategic decision to include interviews she conducted with people that have differing viewpoints on certain events, which creates an impartial ethos. Though she was not able to obtain any interviews with representatives of the company at the center of her investigation—A title card at the end of the film states that “SeaWorld repeatedly declined to be interviewed”—her attempt to give them the opportunity to speak also shows a good faith effort to hear all sides of the issue.

*Blackfish* begins with a 911 call from a SeaWorld employee reporting that someone has been attacked by a whale. Suddenly, we see an orca and trainer underwater. The whale pushes the trainer up into the air as an audience applauds and triumphant music swells. This is the first occurrence of an important tactic Cowperthwaite uses throughout the film—juxtaposition. Not only does she juxtapose highly emotional moments such as an act of violence next to a SeaWorld commercial filled with childlike wonder, but she also consistently juxtaposes opinions of former employees and experts with statements that come directly from the company.

SeaWorld is shown to continually and directly proclaim Tilikum's innocence in the death of Dawn Brancheau. In courtroom testimony shared in the film, a "SeaWorld Expert Witness" named Jeff Andrews states in the case of OSHA vs. SeaWorld that "Tilikum is not an aggressive killer whale... The only thing that led to this event was a mistake made by Ms. Brancheau." This mistake is purported to be that Brancheau had her hair in a ponytail. However, in their interviews, former trainers argue that many trainers wore their hair in the same style, and the audience is shown photographs to validate this. This is but one of many occurrences wherein an interviewee or piece of news footage presents a point and Cowperthwaite presents a counterpoint.

To introduce the former SeaWorld trainers that make up the majority of interviewees seen in *Blackfish*, Cowperthwaite has them reminisce about what drew them to work at the company. One woman notes that her parents took her to the park when she was young and that, "From that point forward, I was hooked." Another describes watching a night show at Shamu Stadium as "very emotional, you know, popular music and I was just—I was very driven to want to do that."<sup>[11:51:52]</sup> The excitement is palpable as viewers watch the trainers speak about their dreams coming true and the strength of the relationships they had with the animals in the park. As we hear these stories, we are shown archival footage of trainers practicing and performing, joking with one another, and seemingly enjoying their jobs. Witnessing the joy and passion of the trainers builds an emotional connection with the audience that almost feels like friendship.

Concern for these new friends grows as audiences learn the trainers and the company had differing standards regarding safety. After one trainer managed to remain calm during an attack and was able to escape, SeaWorld lauded their own safety training.

Dave Duffus, a whale researcher and witness in a court case that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration brought against SeaWorld said, “They claim this is a victory of how they do business. And maybe so, but it can also be interpreted as a hair’s breadth away from another fatality.” A former trainer also claimed that at the time of her interview, there had been over 70 orca and trainer accidents and that “maybe 30 of them happened prior to me being actually hired at SeaWorld. And I knew about none of them.” When a young man entered the SeaWorld facility after hours and was found deceased in Tilikum’s pool the next morning, many interviewees were shown to be skeptical of the official SeaWorld story. They describe the company as characterizing the man as “mentally disturbed” and a “drifter” that drown in the pool after becoming hypothermic. They question why he was not seen on camera despite them being equipt underwater and “pointing every which way,” and they note that the SeaWorld public relation “spin” leaves out graphic details about the man’s injuries found in the official medical report that describes Tilikum stripping the man bare and biting his body.

Beyond building a general empathy for SeaWorld trainers, Cowperthwaite focuses on creating compassion for Dawn Brancheau early in the film and does so initially by establishing her character. Former coworkers describe her as “beautiful. She's blonde. She's athletic. She is friendly. You know, everybody loves Dawn. She captured what it means to be a SeaWorld trainer.” We watch her grin and laugh with the animals as another trainer speaks to her safety-related fastidiousness, “I mean, she was always double-checking and making sure that everyone was doing the right thing. So I remember she would record every show that she did and she would watch it and critique herself. And she was constantly

trying to be better.” These descriptions and visuals help the audience connect with Dawn and further emphasize the tragedy of her death in contrast to her professionalism.

It is clear that the interviewees that appear in *Blackfish* hold SeaWorld responsible for Brancheau’s death, citing the company’s negligence in regards to safety and their treatment of orca whales. Through the inclusion of these opinions, it is apparent that Cowperthwaite agrees. She contrasts the statement of Thad Lacinak, a former SeaWorld executive—“Dawn, if she were standing here with you right now, would tell you that it was her—that was her mistake in allowing that to happen. He grabbed her ponytail and pulled her into the water.”—with the opinions of former trainers—“They blamed her. How dare you? How disrespectful for you to blame her when she’s not even alive to defend herself?”

Just as she emphasizes Dawn’s competence and professionalism, Cowperthwaite also spends a large amount of time in her documentary establishing the intelligence and emotional capacity of orca whales. One way this goal is accomplished is through interviews with experts. Howard Garrett, an orca researcher, speaks to the strong familial bonds in orca whale pods, telling viewers that offspring never leave their mothers, even into adulthood. He also mentions that while there is reluctance in the scientific community to define how orca whales communicate, “there’s every indication that they use languages.” Testimony from neuroscientist Lori Marino is accompanied by an animation to illustrate how orcas have been studied with Magnetic Resonance Imaging scanners. Through this research, scientists have discovered that orca brains have a large part that is not shared with humans. This piece extends next to their limbic system, an area of the brain that Marino describes as being responsible for processing emotions. She reports that, “The safest

inference would be these are animals that have highly elaborated emotional lives. It's becoming clear that dolphins and whales have a sense of self, a sense of social bonding that they've taken to another level—much stronger, much more complex than in other mammals, including humans.” This data provides the audience with a broader context of orca whale life in the wild and shows that it is a poor fit for how SeaWorld treats its animals.

Not only does *Blackfish* claim that SeaWorld denies the emotional intelligence of orca whales, but it also purports that the company is in denial regarding the animals' physiology. Several clips of archival footage are displayed in rapid succession wherein SeaWorld employees claim that the lifespan of an orca whale is “25 to 35 years.” Howard Garrett then refutes this claim, arguing, “of course that's false. We knew by 1980 after a half a dozen years of the research that they live equivalent to human life spans.” He reports that female orcas can live to be a hundred years or more while males typically live between 50 and 60 years. Another point of contention that Cowperthwaite focuses on is the phenomenon of dorsal collapse. A SeaWorld employee is shown to say that this floppy fin occurs in 25% of whales. Garrett asserts that in the wild, less than 1% of whales have this affliction, whereas “all of the captive males 100% have collapsed dorsal fins.” Photo and video evidence accompany this claim to highlight the difference between the rigid dorsal fins of wild orcas and those of SeaWorld's whales.

Before SeaWorld was able to successfully breed their own orcas, the whales had to be caught in the wild in a process that Cowperthwaite frames as highly traumatic for both the animals and their captors. To illustrate this idea, she interviewed a man named Jon Crowe—his profession is described only as “diver” in the film—who recounts what it was like capturing young orcas in the 1970s—chasing them down in boats, isolating calves

from their mothers and weighing down dead whales with rocks and anchors. Tears fill Crowe's eyes as he remembers hearing the communication between the whales, "It's the worst thing I can think of, you know? I can't think of anything worse than that. I've been part of the revolution and two change of presidents in Central and South America. And seen some things that are hard to believe, but this is the worst thing that I've ever done—is hunt that whale. [L T L] [SEP:SEP]" Silence punctuates this heavy moment, and the audience watches as a young orca is lifted into the air on a stretcher. Title cards then state that in 1983, a 2-year-old male orca was captured in the North Atlantic and named Tilikum.

After establishing a general sadness in viewers by forcing them to witness a fellow mammal being torn away from its mother, Cowperthwaite hones in on Tilikum specifically and outlines his life prior to his involvement with Brancheau's death. *Blackfish* shows that before arriving at SeaWorld, Tilikum lived at Sealand in Victoria, Canada where he and the other orcas were, according to a former employee, held in a tank "20 feet across and probably 30 feet deep" with no lights or stimulation "for two thirds of their life." Other Sealand employees describe Tilikum as being attacked by the other whales and suffering large "rakes" or teeth marks down the sides of his body. Steve Huxter, the former director of Sealand, also admits to using food deprivation as a training tactic.

When Tilikum arrived at SeaWorld, he is again described by trainers as being a victim to female whales as "it's a very matriarchal society. Male whales are kept at the perimeter. In captivity, the animals are squeezed into very close proximity. [L T L] [SEP:SEP]Tilikum—the poor guy is so large. He couldn't get away because he just is not as mobile relative to the smaller and more agile females. And where was he going to run? There's no place to run." Despite these conditions, Tilikum is described as being a great animal to work with,

always willing to learn and seemingly enjoying fulfilling requests for trainers. One of his handlers notes, “I never got the impression of him while I was there that, you know, ‘Oh, my God. He's the scary whale.’ You know, not at all.” These testimonies build immediate empathy for Tilikum, and the affection that the people who worked with him display is apparent.

While the trainers appear to show true endearment for Tilikum, they also acknowledge that he had incidents of aggression—though many admit that they did not know the true breadth of his violent actions. Many trainers attest to the fact that SeaWorld never divulged information about Tilikum being involved in an attack on a woman at his former home, one trainer noting, “It was pretty outrageous that SeaWorld would claim there was no expecting Tilikum would come out of the water because they had witnessed him coming out of the water and it’s written in his profile.” Viewers are, then, shown a document assumed to be Tilikum’s profile describing his age, length, weight and other characteristics. The document flips, and viewers see a summary. One particular segment is highlighted that reads, “sometimes lunging at trainer.” The scene holds on this image for a moment before fading to black to let the information sink into the audience’s mind.

Cowperthwaite anticipates that audiences may have questions about why SeaWorld continued to knowingly house a violent animal. She gives her answer through the opinion of a former trainer—“His semen is worth quite a lot of money.” A graphic shows that Tilikum is genetically linked to over 50% of orca whales owned by SeaWorld. Cowperthwaite also anticipates that audiences may wonder what happened to Tilikum after Brancheau’s death. A trainer states that he is now “spending a great deal of time by himself and basically floating lifeless in a pool.” This claim seems to be confirmed by footage of a

whale in a tank and an unknown woman saying, “Three hours now. And he hasn’t moved.” A title card tells the audience that “Tilikum remains at SeaWorld Orlando, performing daily” though even the idea that he is performing is contested by former trainers—“You know what he does in his show? He does a few bows. And then he goes back into his little jail cell. That’s his life.” After building an argument that orca whales are highly intelligent and emotional creatures, the contrast of seeing said creature in what looks to be a depressive state drives home the opinion that they live in an unhealthy environment at SeaWorld.

To best frame her narrative, Cowperthwaite uses both explicit testimony and more subtle artistic choices to influence the audience. For example, interviews with former trainers are mainly held in open outdoor areas while experts and scientists answer questions in locations that represents their area of knowledge, such as in a laboratory or a research center. SeaWorld representatives are only ever seen giving a statement in news footage or in a courtroom, presumably because they did not want to participate in the documentary. However, the inclusion of SeaWorld’s public statements also helps to show what side of the argument they sit on and helps to establish their pattern of dishonesty. Though placement of interviewees is not an aggressive rhetorical tactic, it does subconsciously inform audiences of who may be relatable and sympathetic to the treatment of orcas versus who Cowperthwaite considers the villain.

In stark contrast to this cunning form of persuasion, *Blackfish* forces audiences to face uncomfortable visuals for a period of time that may last longer than viewers would prefer. When the trainers are discussing the many injuries that Tilikum suffered when in pools with other orcas, we see photographs of deep gashes along his body, many of them bleeding enough that they begin to stain the water red. As each case of a trainer being

injured by a whale is explored, Cowperthwaite runs the audio of her interviewees describing the events behind footage of said moment. We watch as whales pull trainers dozens of feet below the surface, as two whales collide and crush a trainer between themselves, and as rescue workers tend to wounds, cover the deceased, and load bodies into ambulances. The incident that is explored in most depth is, of course, the interaction between Tilikum and Brancheau that led to her death. In near real-time, the audience is shown what actions led up to the moment in which Brancheau was pulled into the pool. As it has already been established that Tilikum caused Brancheau's death, an anxiety builds until we expect to witness the violence. Cowperthwaite, however, deviates from the precedent she has set for showing these events and instead denies any catharsis, forcing the audience to carry the carefully crafted tension into the final ten minutes of her film.

The culmination of the *Blackfish* is a call to action, dispelling any doubt that it fits into what Jon Fitzgerald calls the genre of "Cause Cinema." Many of the former trainers heard from throughout the film are seen in news footage, reporting on the perceived abuse. One woman explicitly states, "It's time to stop the shows. It's time to stop forcing the animals to perform in basically a circus environment." After showing that there is now a foundation in Dawn Brancheau's name and with the release of the main interview subjects watching orca whales swim in the wild, the documentary quickly ends, forcing audience members to reflect on all that they have seen and heard while the call to action is still fresh in their minds.

In the months and years since the film's release, SeaWorld vehemently denied that their low attendance and revenue was a result of *Blackfish*, instead citing high ticket prices, poor weather, and holidays. SeaWorld announced in 2015 that all orca performances would

be discontinued and in 2016 they ended their breeding program of over fifty years. In their public announcements, SeaWorld avoided any mention of *Blackfish* in connection to these decisions and instead credited them to a commitment to conservation and to new data from their scientists and researchers regarding orca whale health. Despite the company's insistence that *Blackfish* had no effect on their profits or practices, animal rights activists praised Cowperthwaite and her film as being instrumental to raising public awareness and forcing SeaWorld to make changes. Still, the link could be argued to be a correlative coincidence. That is, until September 18th, 2018 when the Securities and Exchanges Commission announced that SeaWorld and two former executives agreed to pay over \$5 million to settle fraud charges. The SEC complaint alleged that SeaWorld and its former CEO James Atchison "made untrue and misleading statements or omissions in SEC filings, earnings releases and calls, and other statements to the press regarding *Blackfish's* impact on the company's reputation and business" and in doing so, mislead their investors. SeaWorld's agreement to pay this settlement is a long-awaited admission and solid proof that *Blackfish* was the impetus for change.

I would argue that *Blackfish* created a significant impact on American society and altered public perception enough to pressure a company worth several billion dollars to make changes in its practices because of the rhetorical choices made by the filmmaker. Cowperthwaite built her credibility by showing a good faith effort to address all sides of the issue and by building the narrative through primary sources and expert witnesses rather than using "voice of God" narration. She used juxtaposition to highlight differences in opinion between SeaWorld and its critics as well as to emphasize the dichotomy between the company's positive public persona and the hidden, violent and abusive reality.

*Blackfish* portrayed Dawn Brancheau as a woman who was passionate about her job and who, despite her dedication to safety, became an unfortunate victim. Tilikum, though he was the attacker, was examined sympathetically as well. After outlining a history of psychological distress, his actions were shown to be a result of circumstance rather than malice. This exploration of character was combined with science that emphasized the intelligence and emotional capabilities of orca whales, underscoring the tragedy of their treatment in captivity. The call to action in the final moments of *Blackfish* asks audiences to consider what they have witnessed and to advocate for change. Evidence shows that this call was met and that *Blackfish* achieved its goal of changing the destiny of SeaWorld's orca whales. As the "Cause Cinema" subgenre of documentary continues to grow in popularity, analysis of the rhetorical choices in successful films such as this may serve as an example to other filmmakers interested in using their medium to effect change.

**Link to “Fourth Year” Digital Story**

<https://youtu.be/DNyJJ-EBtT4>

### Reflection on “Fourth Year” Digital Story

I’ve been talking with Tori for about an hour. We’re sitting in her bedroom. Photos of her time at the University of Virginia line the walls. She speaks with ease and honesty, a surprising attitude when contrasted with the topics we’ve been discussing—murder, sexual assault, racism, politics. I ask her what it’s like to be constantly pressured to have an opinion about each event that has occurred during her college career.

“It just like gets to this point where you’re just no longer... You’re so acclimated to like wretchedness that it doesn’t hit you anymore. Maybe there’s something to be said there for the lack of empathy between people and maybe even in the class of 2018 as a whole. But on the flip side of that it’s like, wasn’t this supposed to bring us together? You know, doesn’t tragedy bring people together? Aren’t we supposed to be going out in some way that is connected and feels whole instead of, ‘God, just get me out of here. Let me leave.’”

Tori may not feel that they are united, but the UVA class of 2018 is certainly linked by what they have endured during their time at the university. Hannah Graham was abducted and murdered after a night out in a part of Charlottesville constantly teeming with college students. *Rolling Stone* magazine released an article claiming that UVA is a hotbed of sexual assault, a place where young girls are gang-raped and the administration is cold and unhelpful to victims. Martese Johnson, the leadership development chair of the UVA Black Student Alliance, was violently thrown to the ground and bloodied outside of a popular pub. Otto Warmbier was arrested and detained by the North Korean government, ultimately dying from mysterious injuries after being released. Neo-nazis marched with torches on university grounds, roaring the rebel yell around a statue of Thomas Jefferson.

Not only were all of these events covered heavily by the media and discussed by everyone I knew, my younger brother was a part of the class of 2018 and would report to my family what it was like to be in the midst of all this trauma and chaos. Through his discussion with other students and based on his knowledge of the environment on the university's grounds, he reported to us that the *Rolling Stone* article was suspicious long before the news ever did. He worked with Warmbier's girlfriend. His childhood friend was hit by the car that killed Heather Heyer at the "Unite the Right" rally.

A few days before his fourth year is about to begin, my family is sitting at the dinner table, reflecting on all that has happened. My mom remarks,

"Someone should do a documentary on everything that's happened." She turns to me. "*You* should do a documentary about what's happened."

Suddenly, a lightbulb. I knew there was something there. How could a young person just beginning to explore their independence and on the precipice of stepping into the adult world process any one of these events, let alone all of them? I knew I could use my experience in film to capture these stories. I had at least one interviewee in my brother, but I was unsure if I could convince anyone else to talk with me. I also knew there was no way I could make this the film I wanted it to be on my own. I needed a team.

I reached out to Joe Loyacano, a friend and instructor in the School of Media Arts and Design at JMU. I pitched my idea and asked if he thought any students would be interested in helping. Joe saw this project as a learning opportunity for SMAD students and helped by posting flyers and talking to students in his classes. With this help, I was able to meet Sean Paige, Jordan McGlotten, Kacey Dolan, and Ellis Finney—all of whom ended up being enthusiastic about the idea and joined the project. Joe also connected me with

John Hodges, the Technology Manager in SMAD. John told me that it is highly unusual to let students use SMAD equipment for projects outside of classes, especially a student such as myself who is not in the department. However, he trusted Joe's recommendation and saw the value in this experience for Sean and Jordan, both of whom were, at that time, in one of his classes. He also happened to have a set of cameras that no instructor was interested in using that semester. If we promised to respect the equipment and adhere to his rules, he would let us check out what we needed.

In order to find interviewees, I created a Facebook page and paid for a targeted promotion to the demographic I was interested in. I also directly emailed roughly 1,500 members of the UVA class of 2018 through a MailChimp campaign. These students were chosen at random in order to obtain a representative sample and I attempted to email as many as possible in the timeframe I created. Both the Facebook page and the emails linked to a Google Form that had preliminary questions. Any student interested in being interviewed was required to complete this form. Respondents answered questions such as: What made you decide to attend UVA? What do you love about UVA? What has been your most challenging time at UVA? How have you grown since attending UVA? They were also asked to select dates and times that they would be available for an interview.

I received 41 responses and was able to narrow down the pool of interviewees based on their answers. Respondents who answered questions with one word or with very short sentences were eliminated because I wanted as much insight into each interviewee's character prior to their formal interview as possible and I did not want to risk getting similar answers on camera. Some interviewees were selected based on their reported proximity to a significant event during their time at UVA. For example, one respondent claimed that she

knew Hannah Graham and Martese Johnson. Another said he was on grounds during the night of the “Unite the Right” rally. I also wanted to have interviewees with diverse opinions of the school. I selected a few people who seemed to adore UVA, the university’s head cheerleader being one. I also chose respondents who seemed angry or disillusioned with the university, such as one young woman who said she received “zero support” from her RA and professors when she was struggling her first year. Finally, some interviewees were selected simply because they said something I wanted to know more about. One respondent mentioned feeling uncomfortable with the school’s administrative past. Another described the university environment as being polarized and as a place “where opinion is fact and (healthy) debate is no longer tolerated.” In one young woman’s answer to the question “What has been your most challenging time at UVA?” she divulged, “my dad and brother passed away and I came out to my mother who essentially disowned me.” I attempted to comb the answers of potential interviewees so that I would have as many interesting stories and diverse opinions as possible. The 25 chosen respondents were asked to formally sign up for an interview. Some people changed their minds, others were unable to participate due to their schedule, and I ended up with 12 recorded interviews.

Filming took place from March to May on weekends to accommodate the schedules of my student interviewees and team members. We would spend the hour drive to Charlottesville brainstorming questions and shot ideas. On the drive back, we would process what we heard, discuss how it compared to other interviewees, and talk about what b-roll we could use to emphasize their comments. I came prepared with a list of questions for each participant. The general outline was always the same, but I would pepper in questions based on the responses they gave in the initial Google Form. For example, in

Sarah Nelson's Google Form, she said that "compared to before, this place is a wasteland of wasted potential and indoctrination," so in her interview I quoted this back to her and asked her to explain what she meant in saying that. In Jacob Genda's Google Form, he said that he "came from a very rural area and had pretty much known only conservatives/conservatism" prior to attending UVA, so I asked him how that shaped his perception of UVA and how he interacted with students and professors with differing viewpoints.

By the final interview, I found myself hardly looking at my questions. I knew what points I wanted to hit, and I always wanted to follow the conversational rhythm of the person I was talking with. If they wanted to talk about something before I reached it in my list of questions or if they had a lot to say about something I hadn't considered, I always followed their lead. In this way, even though these interviews were not part of formal research, I was able to practice some of the skills I learned in my graduate "Research Methods" class.

The final result of these interviews is a digital story in which four members of the University of Virginia class of 2018 reflect on three major events that occurred during their time in college including how it impacted their lives and how they saw it impact the lives of others and the university as a whole. I chose to only use four of my twelve interviewees for the purposes of time but also because the selected four gave answers that could form a cohesive story within a small time frame. I used two women and two men to hear opinions and experiences from both genders. As much as I aimed to have diversity, only one interviewee, Kara, is a person of color. Despite my efforts, she was one of only two

interviewees that was not white. This may be due to the demographic makeup of the university.

My digital story opens with footage of the class of 2018's graduation in order to "begin at the end," so to speak, and frame the piece as a reflection. I included some of university president Teresa Sullivan's commencement speech because it unifies the group and highlights the strength they displayed during their college careers. The body of the digital story is structured around what I and my interviewees consider to be the three largest events to have occurred: Hannah Graham's disappearance and murder, Rolling Stones's *A Rape on Campus* article and the "Unite the Right" rally. They are represented on title cards which was done to distinctly separate each segment. Audio of news footage describing the event plays under each title card, followed by a bit of the news broadcast to give context and inform or remind viewers of their significance.

Most filmmakers are taught that a shot should last no longer than three to five seconds. This tip may help new editors learn to consider audience attention span but this commonly held "rule" is completely arbitrary. Some of the most famous films have longer shots. *The Godfather* opens with a single shot that is about three minutes long. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* has a run time of 80 minutes and only includes only a few noticeable cuts. Most of the film plays out in real time. Alternatively, some films utilize fast cutting and sequence many shots together that are less than three seconds to imply a fast pace and/or a chaotic environment. Knowing that I had the freedom to choose my shot lengths based on the pace I wanted to set, I made the choice to let many of the shots of interviews in my digital story play out for longer than is typically expected. I did this to make sure that the viewer is entirely focused on the content of the interviewees speech. Of course, I

did include some variations in camera angle to keep the eye interested and I peppered in a few news headlines and a tweet from Donald Trump to underscore specific examples that interviewees gave.

Silence and black space play heavily in this digital story. Using both allowed me to separate each event with a moment of reflection. I also chose to use very few transitions. Fade outs were used to signal the end of a segment but new segments began with the “punch” of a direct cut. This was done to mirror the jarring feeling that students experienced with the occurrence of each new event.

I made the choice to include moments of levity within the context of such heavy events to parallel the complexity of human emotion. Jacob provided a powerful example of this. He spoke of how horrific it was to witness the “Unite the Right” rally and admitted he was scared. But he also saw humor in that time when reflecting on his choice to leave a few members of the alt-right stranded. I end the digital story with Jacob emphasizing that there are still good parts of UVA and that there is hope for the university. To drive this home, the final few seconds are made up of the song that he referenced, “Amazing Grace,” and examples of positivity and unity from the homes of interviewees and around the university’s grounds.

There are, of course, limitations to my digital story. For timing reasons, I was only able to give a service-level look at how each event affected each interviewee. Of course their experiences were more nuanced and complex than can be portrayed in 15 minutes. I also wanted to be sure that the piece had a narrative arc, but I was limited by the answers that my chosen interviewees gave. This was a problem when it came to the issue of the Rolling Stone article and the topic of sexual assault on campus. I certainly do not want to

imply that I or my interviewees do not believe that sexual assault is a serious problem. However, because my focus was more on the national attention that this story brought the school, I did not give space for the exploration of how the article may have damaged the conversation around the issue when it was discovered to be untrue.

As I was reminded throughout my education in WRTC, every element in an artifact is a rhetorical choice and I struggled with how to best make these choices when structuring my digital story. In my first draft of the piece, I had the two male students speak first about the Rolling Stone article because I believed their words set up the story in the best way for the audience. It was pointed out to me that an audience may perceive that I am favoring the male perspective on this issue by placing them before the two female interviewees. I chose then to rearrange the interviews, letting the women speak first and placing the men last. However, it may now appear that I am giving them the “final say” on a very sensitive topic. Despite only having the intention to tell a story in the most compelling narrative arc, I must acknowledge that every element in the digital story has rhetorical power and that audiences may be influenced by my choice of structure and/or interpret meaning that I did not intend. This is certainly something that I will consider as I move forward in my work and will continue to make a conscious effort to avoid similar misunderstandings in the future.

To edit the footage I gathered in to a digital story, I condensed roughly 40 hours of material into a 15 minutes. Doing this leaves out so much of what I wanted to show. However, I now have a great starting point for where I will take this project in the future. I plan to expand this piece into a feature length documentary so that I can include more interviewees and explore each event more fully. I would also like to touch on topics that emerged in my interviews such as the UVA stereotypes of “work hard, play hard” and

“culture of competition,” the influence of Thomas Jefferson, the disruption of naivete, the pressure to feel something emotionally and the lack of adequate mental health resources at the university.

I am still working with SMAD student Sean Paige to create a trailer so that I may use it to apply for grants to fund the post-production phase of the film. I would like to raise enough money to hire a professional editor to assemble what I have gathered and/or to finance marketing so that the film may reach a wide audience. I am also looking into finding a 501(c)(3) fiscal sponsor so that if I am granted any money it may be channeled through a nonprofit route.

Throughout filming, I kept remarking to my team members, “I can’t believe this is going so well!” I still can’t. I am incredibly grateful to the participants for their willingness to be open with their stories and to the WRTC department for providing me the opportunity to pursue this as a part of my thesis. My aim from the conception of the idea was to document the experiences of the UVA class of 2018 and to be the channel through which they tell their stories. What they have to say is powerful, and I am proud to help make their voices a little louder.

## Conclusion

When I was offered admission into James Madison University to study Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication, I accepted my place in the program with the intention of strengthening and honing my research skills so that I could become a better documentary filmmaker. I found, however, that the field had much more to offer. I learned how to carefully craft an argument and tailor it to a specific audience. I became a better editor. I created a research study and learned how to best code and interpret that data. I dabbled in various content management systems, discovering their power for both clients and consumers. I witnessed that the field is growing that saw the possibilities of further exploration. All that I absorbed became pieces of my final thesis, and the skills that I gained will certainly be to my benefit as I graduate and find employment.

As I note in my introduction, my article “Do Documentary Films Inspire Activism?” compiles the data that I gathered in my graduate “Research Methods” class in which I surveyed the students, faculty and staff at James Madison University in order to understand why and how documentary films inspire audiences to change their attitudes or behaviors. Though the data is certainly colored by the shape of the JMU population, my analysis concludes that the strongest factor that evoked empathy was witnessing a struggle, but respondents were most likely to change their attitudes and behaviors if the topic of the documentary affected their lives directly. Many respondents divulged that watching stories of poverty, war, abuse and disease certainly caused emotional reactions. However, most stated that the empathy they felt was not enough to warrant later action such as actively advocating for a cause or providing monetary support. Within the studied population, the majority of change that was motivated by documentary film was personal. This could come

in the form actions such as altering one's diet, exercising more or adopting a new point of view.

As previously noted, the information gained from this study is influenced by the makeup of the James Madison University population and it would be unwise to extrapolate the data without further study. However, the survey I created has the potential to be expanded to larger and more diverse populations and recreating the study may help to either solidify the conclusions I have reached in my work or help to understand variations in motivation and the generation of empathy in differing demographics.

If this study is expanded, documentary filmmakers who aspire to inspire activism may gain valuable insight on how best to do so. We may better understand what motivates baby boomers versus millennials, African-Americans versus caucasians or people in Seattle, Washington and Dallas, Texas. With further data, the hypothesis that the proximity of an issue to one's personal life is most often the motivation for action may be more solidified and if this is so, filmmakers may be able to explore how to make larger, abstract issues seem more personal. As a filmmaker myself, my future projects will be informed by the data I have acquired and I plan to share what I have with others and advocate for further study.

As my data shows, externally motivating documentary films are outliers. That said, there is value in studying the rhetorical elements of these outliers. To better understand how this could be possible, I wanted to study a piece that successfully had clear ramifications in American society. I chose to examine Gabriela Cowperthwaite's *Blackfish* due to its popularity and the connection the film has to SeaWorld's monetary loss and change in policies regarding orca whales. In my article "Shut SeaWorld Down: A

Rhetorical Analysis of *Blackfish*”, I focused on how the filmmaker crafted her story and specifically how she created empathy. Through interviews with former SeaWorld trainers and expert witnesses, Cowperthwaite contrasts the intelligence of orca whales with the apparent cruelty they endured. She offers her audience no respite from witnessing blatant hypocrisy and violence but concludes with a call to action, providing viewers a way out of the uncomfortable emotional position she has placed them in. My article thoroughly deconstructs the narrative arc of the film in order to better understand the structure of Cowperthwaite’s argument. I also examined visual elements -- what was included or purposefully left out and how these visuals were combined with personal testimony and other audio to cultivate an emotional reaction. By better understanding how films such as *Blackfish* craft empathy, future filmmakers may be able to replicate a similar social reaction for their cause.

One of the most exciting and valuable pieces of my time in the WRTC department was the expansion of the idea of what it means to be a rhetorician. In Sarah O’Connor’s “Public Work of Rhetoric” class and Dr. Seán McCarthy’s “Interfaces and Design” class I saw how these respected and published scholars used audio, video, graphics and visual composition to communicate, persuade and inform in a field that is traditionally dominated by the written word. When I began brainstorming the potential of creating a documentary film about the University of Virginia class of 2018, I was excited by the challenge of creating a digital story and the proximity of that genre to documentary film. I hoped that incorporating a primarily visual and auditory element as part of my thesis would allow me space to explore this newer (to me) and nebulous territory while demonstrating to other students what is possible within the field.

Thanks in large part to my zeal and that of my undergraduate assistants, I ended up with an unwieldy amount of footage which posed a problem when it came time to craft my digital story. Knowing that I could eventually use what I have to make a feature length documentary film that covers all of the themes and events that the UVA students spoke about helped me feel comfortable in creating a shorter piece that is solely intended for my thesis committee. As I discuss in my reflection on the piece, the digital story I created has a narrative arc which highlights a few of the major events that occurred during the college careers of the class of 2018 while giving a glimpse into how a few students were emotionally affected.

I am currently working hard to find an editor who can assist me in creating a feature length documentary with the footage I gathered and I am still working with one of the undergraduate students who assisted me in filming to put together a trailer and other promotional material. I will continue to research and apply for grants as well as look for a 501(c)(3) fiscal sponsor. I am open, however, to giving an interested student the opportunity to undertake this editing project. Every element of the film so far has been student- produced, and it would be a powerful thing to continue on that path, giving others the chance to learn on the job. When the final film is complete, I will enter it in festivals and in doing so hopefully make connections that will allow me to pursue my passion for documentary filmmaking.

As I approach graduation and begin exploring the job market, I am focusing on applying to nonprofit companies that have need for a content creator or media manager. I want to take what I have learned and use it in a way that might help other people or advocate for a cause that I find important. Regardless of where I end up, I am confident that the skills

I gained while pursuing a degree in Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication will make me a unique and indispensable team member. I am now better able to demonstrate to clients, audiences and employers that I have a vast array of knowledge that is beneficial to crafting stories and creating content. My thesis project is a perfect culmination of my time in this program; it is a testament to the work I've put in and the skills I take with me as I graduate.

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