**Examining the Foundations of Documentary Film Through The Cove**

Directed by Louie Psihoyos, *The Cove* (2009) is an Oscar-winning documentary that follows Psihoyos and a crew of devoted dolphin activists as they fight to stymie and bring attention to dolphin hunting in the small coastal village of Taiji, Japan. Psihoyos’ [film](http://www.studentpulse.com/keyword/film) is unusual for documentaries in that it combines his activist stance with “dramatic arcs and suspense one would expect in a James Bond or Hollywood action movie” (Rohter). Film critic Larry Rohter writes that *The Cove* “seems destined to generate an emotional and contentious debate” and the film does just that (Rohter). Indeed the film invokes a multitude of reactions, ranging from those who praise the movie’s captivating and atrocious tale to those who believe the film to be a form of propaganda: low in meaningful content, but high in bias and misinformation.

Extreme one-sidedness is prevalent in *The Cove*: Psihoyos and his other subjects make convincing arguments regarding the inhumanity and the human dangers of the dolphin hunt, but the opposition is never given a chance to respond. Considering *The Cove* mirrors a Hollywood action film and overtly reflects the director’s opinion, should it be considered a true documentary? Where does such a one-sided and subjective film place in the grand history of documentary film? It would be tempting to dismiss *The Cove* as an overwhelmingly biased piece of propaganda, but “this is no angry enviro-rant but a living, breathing movie whose horrifying disclosures feel fully earned” (Catsoulis).

After an examination of the history of documentary film and documentarians such as John Grierson, Robert Flaherty, Frederick Wiseman, Michael Moore, and others, it becomes apparent that subjectivity seeps into all non-fiction films. Ultimately, every documentarian makes decisions that range from subtle to overt that influence the presentation and reception of their material and Louie Psihoyos is no exception. While *The Cove* is biased and propagates some misinformation, it firmly adheres to the traditional documentary standards set forth in the early 20th century. The history of documentary film and non-fiction film emerges from a tradition of subjectivity and not a foundation of pure, unadulterated truth; as *The Cove* reveals, the notion of documentary as a representation of pure truth is a simple fallacy.

The origins of documentary film can be traced back to December 28, 1895, when the influential French film pioneers, the Lumière brothers, held their first screening of ten short, nearly minute-length films. These films, which included footage of workers leaving the Lumière factory (*La Sortie des l'Usine Lumière à Lyon*) and a train arriving at a station (*L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat*), were the first to be presented to a paying audience. While watching one of the films, an astonished witness supposedly exclaimed, ‘It is life itself!” (Ellis 9). Even with the criticism hurled at *The Cove*, the film firmly sticks to this motto. That is not to say that the film presents the only correct understanding of the dolphin hunt, but rather, the film is fairly straightforward in documenting the trials and tribulations that face a team of dedicated activists as they attempt to curb dolphin hunting with protests, public appeal, espionage, and more. As *The Cove* is filtered through the eyes of Psihoyos and his subjects, the film shows audiences the reality of the world according to those few individuals. By showing the real-life struggle of the subjects as well as their firm beliefs, *The Cove* is “life itself.”

The genre of documentary film as we conceptualize it today emerged some years after the Lumière brothers. One of the most prominent early documentarians, producers, and critics—and the first to coin the term “documentary” in 1926—was John Grierson. In his 1932 essay, “First Principles of Documentary,” he writes that documentary films embody “the living scene and the living story,” something *The Cove* certainly does by showing audiences the struggles of Psihoyos, O’Barry, and the crew as they attempt to bring attention to the killing cove (21). While it may seem as if Grierson believes non-fiction films to portray “life itself,” he actually champions documentary film as “the creative treatment of actuality” (Ellis 5).

While Grierson’s musings on non-fiction film are certainly relevant in the study of documentary tradition, it must be compared to other theories order to better understand what makes documentary film. In 1989, Northwestern film professor, Jack C. Ellis, synthesized theories of what exactly defines “documentary idea” in his definitive book *The Documentary Idea: A Critical History of English-*[*Language*](http://www.studentpulse.com/keyword/language) *Documentary Film and Video*. Ellis’ definition of “documentary” goes further than Grierson’s in recognizing the filmmaker’s influence, writing that, “documentary is purposive: it is intended to achieve something in addition to entertaining audiences and making money” (7). Ellis would agree with Grierson’s definition, but he adds that documentarians must also have some sort of motive that goes beyond entertainment and profit. Ellis’ theory that documentaries are made for a higher purpose applies to *The Cove* as the film’s producer is billionaire Netscape founder—and co-founder of the Oceanic Preservation Society with Psihoyos—, Jim Clark. According to Larry Rohter, Clark funded the production of *The Cove*, “more out of conviction than a desire to add to his bank account” (Rohter). This “conviction” to expose people to and bring an end to the murder of dolphins in Taiji supports early activist filmmaker Willard Van Dyke’s theory that, “documentary is film intended to bring about change in the audience – change in their understanding, their attitudes, and possibly their actions” (Ellis 6).

The call-to-arms ending of *The Cove* makes it fairly evident that the film was made to change the audiences’ attitudes and drive them to action against the dolphin hunting industry. *The Cove* comes to a somber end as the screen turns black and text reads, “The Taiji dolphin slaughter is scheduled to resume every September” (Psihoyos). Psihoyos allows this line to sink in for a few seconds before he gives us a glimmer of hope, writing, “Unless we stop it” (Psihoyos). Now that there is hope, David Bowie’s uplifting song “Heroes” kicks in and we are implored by Psihoyos to take a stand – “Unless you stop it” (Psihoyos). We, the audience, are then instructed to “Text Dolphin to 44144” and visit a website where we can make contributions. The whole ending segment is a blatant call to arms and Psihoyos does nothing to hide this fact; clearly, *The Cove* was made, “more out of conviction” to halt the slaughter than for artistic purposes. More support for this belief comes from the 2010 Academy Awards, where *The Cove* won the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature. During the acceptance speech, key subject –and founder of the Dolphin Project and director of Save Japan Dolphins – Ric O’Barry carried a sign that advertised the same text-to-contribute number. Because of his actions, Psihoyos and crew were cut sort of their acceptance speech and the camera zoomed away from the sign. Even so, text subscriptions almost doubled after the broadcast, which is surely what Psihoyos and his fellow filmmakers would have hoped for (Tsirulnik). Even though *The Cove* garnered Academy Award recognition, Psihoyos is more interested in spreading the message of the film than making something artistically beautiful; “What I set out to do was not so much make a movie as to create a movement…this movie is a tool to shut this thing down and end the barbarism we saw back there in that cove” (Rohter).

*Figure 1. Two moments from the end of The Cove that best display its call-to-arms tone as Psihoyos implores his audience to take action. Psihoyos*, *2009.*

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Now that we have thoroughly explored the definition of “documentary,” we must turn towards the study of select films. A good starting point is the first feature-length documentary, Robert Flaherty’s 1922 documentary of Inuit life in Canada: *Nanook of The North.* In the film’s introduction, Flaherty writes that if he were to focus on a single Inuit, “and make him typify the Eskimos…the results would be well worth while” (Flaherty). The “fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo” he chooses is the great Nanook (Flaherty). Flaherty studied the Inuit of the Hudson Bay region for many years before setting forth to make a film and, in a way, Flaherty’s film has a base in salvage anthropology—the belief in documenting rituals, languages, and other practices before a native society collapses (Ellis 8, Arkin). In order to “preserve” the [culture](http://www.studentpulse.com/keyword/culture) of the Inuit, Flaherty changed some facts: for example, Nanook’s real name was actually Allakariallak and he had more than one wife, contrary to his monogamous lifestyle portrayed in the film. Furthermore, the Inuit—they did not call themselves “Eskimos”—lived in houses, not igloos, possessed radios, and no longer participated in the antiquated hunting style depicted in the film (Godmillow 7). John Grierson believes that “such an interpretation of subject matter reflects, of course, Flaherty’s particular philosophy of things” (Grierson 22). It may seem outrageous to some today that such a highly acclaimed documentary would contain such outright subjectivity and misinformation but it is actually quite commonplace. Flaherty actively influenced the audience by changing facts and by doing so Flaherty created a film that adheres uniquely to his point of view – “particular philosophy” – of the Inuit. This exploration of *Nanook* shows us that even in the first feature-length documentary there is blatant subjectivity and bias.

One of the most serious moments of subjectivity in *The Cove* is the heroic depiction of two Japanese councilmen: Hisato Ryono and Junichino Yamashita. In the film the two are celebrated for brining awareness to the dangers associated with eating dolphin meat. While Yamashita, Taiji’s local assemblyman, has long fought for increased awareness of the risks, Ryono – “who was touted as a hero on the mercury issue in the documentary” – has revealed he was told his interview would be used for a documentary on “international contamination of the oceans’” and not for *The Cove* (Masters). Complaints by supposed misinformed interviewees are not just limited to Ryono as a few Japanese who appear in the documentary, such as Tetsuya Endo – an associate professor at a Japanese University –, claim to have been lied to about *The Cove*’s subject matter (Alabaster). Since the film’s release, Ryono has requested that the film be re-edited to remove his parts and Endo is considering taking legal action (Masters, Alabaster). These examples show how *The Cove*, like Flaherty’s *Nanook*, is rife with subjectivity; Ryono, Endo, and other subjects are opposed to the overall message in *The Cove*, yet Psihoyos uses their interviews to support the very cause they resist. Whereas Flaherty changed information to better connect Nanook’s story with an audience, Psihoyos changed things to help bring an end to the slaughter; these changes reflect the filmmakers’ “particular philosophy of things.”

*Figure 2. Hisato Ryono and Junichiro Yamashita are praised as heroes in The Cove. Ryono would later request to be removed from the film. Psihoyos, 2009.*

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About forty years after *Nanook of the North*, a movement arose in documentary film that promised to exhibit straight, unadulterated, reality. This movement, otherwise know as direct [cinema](http://www.studentpulse.com/keyword/cinema), saw documentarians asking, “What if the filmmakers were simply to observe what happens in front of the camera without overt intervention?” (Nichols, *Intro* 109). These directors attempted to portray “life itself” and uphold the concept of “reality” by attempting to be some sort of “fly on the wall” (Nichols, *Intro* 110 -112).

While admirable in intent, direct [cinema](http://www.studentpulse.com/keyword/cinema) is ultimately an idealized fallacy. One pioneer of the movement, Frederick Wiseman, has spent a lifetime devoted to producing and directing direct cinema films and, even then, the prominent [film](http://www.studentpulse.com/keyword/film) historian Bill Nichols asserts that Wiseman’s attitude towards his subjects [read, his “particular philosophy of things”] can be derived from his directorial choices (Nichols, “Fred Wiseman” 17). Wiseman’s subjectivity and opinions –and the subjectivity and opinions of all documentarians –comes out through his choice of subjects, camera composition, and editorial decisions (Nichols, “Fred Wiseman” 17). If the father of direct cinema, the so-called “last purist of direct cinema,” cannot produce purely objective documentarians, it should not be expected of Louie Psihoyos (Wiseman 278). However, Wiseman should not be chided for his failures; his films present admirable attempts at exhibiting “life itself,” but the simple matter is that no documentary is devoid of its director’s subjectivity.

What about the Lumière brothers you ask? Surely their minute-long films could not have been subjective? After all, the films present “life itself.” While the oft-quoted audience member may have believed the films to be bathed in reality, he was not quite correct. Since that first screening in 1895, five other takes of workers leaving the Lumière factory for *La Sortie des l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* have been unearthed (Godmillow 8). Even a simple minute long shot of workers leaving a factory was staged; it is clear that even from its inception, documentary film has been rife with subjectivity. As we have seen with *Nanook* and the direct cinema movement, while filmed moments might be appear to be straight “reality,” they are surely influenced by subjectivity. While the Lumière brothers’ films may have appeared to be “life itself” they were staged and while Hisato Ryono may have appeared to be in support of Psihoyos’ cause, he actually wants no part of *The Cove*.

Nowhere in documentary history is there evidence of a filmmaker truly avoiding subjectivity as every little directorial decision has traces of subjectivity or bias (even if the director is unaware of his or her influences). As Grierson puts it, “You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it” (Grierson 23). The ways in which filmmakers frame, edit, and construct their films reflect the director’s own opinions, biases, and prejudices. Documentarian Scott Hicks affirms, “It’s all manipulation, let’s not be too saintly about this. I think…documentary filmmaking is a very subjective process, and anybody who tries to present themselves [sic] as telling the truth in some way is perpetrating fraud because it’s just impossible” (Ferrari). Now that we have established that documentary tradition is bathed in subjectivity and bias, we need to focus our attention to more overtly opinionated films.

Recently there has been an increase in filmmakers who readily acknowledge their influence on their own films. While we have explored documentary and documentarians who have tried to hide their influence, it is important to look at those reflexive filmmakers who do not: case in point, the polarizing Michael Moore. Moore came to prominence after his 1989 documentary, *Roger & Me*—detailing the closings of GM plants and the resulting affect on Flint, Michigan—and gained more attention with controversial films such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) on gun control, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) on the Bush administration, and *Sicko* (2007) on the state of healthcare in the [United States](http://www.studentpulse.com/keyword/united-states). Because Moore’s films overtly reflect his political agenda and biased opinions, many have criticized Moore for producing propaganda of little value. Professor and film journalist Ken Nolley believes that those who criticize Moore’s films tend to lash out at Moore’s “veracity and his ethics” more than the films themselves (Nolley). Many also disagree with Moore’s political platform so it is no surprise that one of the most controversial documentarians is one who takes strong stances on very polarizing issues.
Nolley’s argument can certainly be applied to *The Cove* as many critics seem intent on disparaging Psihoyo’s and O’Barry’s political viewpoints rather than discussing the quality of the film itself. Sonny Bunch’s review of *The Cove* is one such example in which the author’s own subjectivity clouds his commentary. In his review, Bunch writes that he does not understand why Dolphins deserve better treatment than cattle as they already live a free-range existence (Bunch). According to Mr. Bunch, “Mr. Psihoyos and Mr. O’Barry want to convince us that dolphins are sentient beings whose suffering at the hands of men should be considered criminal. They bombard us with fuzzy ideas about the intelligence and beauty of these creatures” (Bunch). Bunch’s review is a perfect example of how *The Cove*, similar to a Michael Moore film, draws the ire of reviewers more for its political content than its film elements. While Bunch reveals his opinions on the subject matter, he never once comments on the film’s artistic merits; something expected of an *art* critic.

The biggest criticism hurled at *The Cove* is that Psihoyos never truly allows the opposition to defend its opinions and practices and when he does, he “limits all counter-arguments to a few inarticulate or thuggish boobs” (Murray). Yes, the film is very unbalanced, however, complaints of *The Cove* being one-sided are unnecessary**;** there is simply no requirement or long-standing tradition of objectivity in documentary film. For Psihoyos’ calculatedly tendentious film, there would be no reason to achieve a half-hearted balance for the sake of appearing objective. It would be silly for Psihoyos to pretend to approach the subject matter impartially and disinterested when he is clearly not impartial himself. All documentaries have traces of subjectivity so a more “objective” version of *The Cove* would still ultimately slant towards Psihoyos’s mission. As the documentary tradition is not fair and balanced, *The Cove* does not have to pretend to be and adheres closer to “life itself” by remaining subjective.

We often talk of documentary film portraying “life itself” and have come to assume that there is a greater truth out there that the filmmaker is bringing us. However – as Bill Nichols eloquently writes – the truth of the matter is that, “documentaries always were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto “reality”; the film-maker was always a participant-witness and an active fabricator of meaning, a producer of cinematic discourse rather than a neutral or al-knowing reporter of the way things truly are” (Nichols, “Voice” 260). Not only has subjectivity always been a natural part of documentary film, but also it is also very prevalent in everyday life. Like documentarians, we all have opinions, biases, prejudices, and more that affect our everyday actions and behaviors. Subjectivity is a natural part of human nature and thus finds a way into all non-fiction films; if documentaries did not contain subjectivity, they would fail to truly portray “life itself.” We should stop thinking of documentaries as being objective and unbiased, having an impressive ability to show us an unattainable account of “reality.” Rather, we need to recognize non-fiction film as a subjective medium. By focusing on the struggles of Psihoyos, O’Barry, and other extremely dedicated activists while also overtly reflecting Psihoyos’ strong beliefs, *The Cove* directly replicates “life itself” and thus, is an extension of what the Lumière brothers started some 116 years ago.

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2012, Vol. 4 No. 05 | pg. ½http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/638/examining-the-foundations-of-documentary-film-through-the-cove