Breaking Boundaries: Blackfish and Bowling for Columbine Analysis

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word ‘documentary’? Majority of the population would say they are dry, lackluster, boring pieces of media created for old people who can’t make out that they’re boring. Whilst it may seem this way, there are inspiring documentaries that arise once in a blue moon, that actually have the power for greater change in society. For instance, “Blackfish” and “Bowling for Columbine” were met with both acclaim and criticism for the ways in which they present various issues, people and communities, however, these controversial documentaries ultimately reveal the reality behind significant societal issues prevalent in today’s society. Through pervasive persuasive techniques, these eye-opening documentaries help provoke critical reflection whilst enticing readers.

Directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite, “Blackfish” is a heartfelt story of how three people were killed in captivity by Tilikum, a notoriously aggressive orca. This psychological thriller whilst may be somewhat biased and can be considered misleading, its representation of orca captivity and its dangers in wildlife entertainment, struck a chord within society. One of the events that was depicted in “Blackfish” was in SeaWorld when a baby whale, Kalina, was separated from its mother, Katina, and moved to another entertainment park. A former SeaWorld trainer, Carol Ray, described the scene when the family was separated; “She (Katana) stayed in the corner of the pool, literally just shaking and screaming, screeching, crying. I’d never seen her do anything like that.” During this footage, the documentary cuts out all other music or voices and concentrates on the cries of the orcas, accentuating how low money hungry corporations like SeaWorld are willing to steep. “Blackfish” uses the combination of film and persuasive techniques to emphasise how heart wrenching and disturbing these scenes are and to think that a human was responsible for this immorality. Whilst “Blackfish” exposes the reality of wildlife entertainment, “Bowling for Columbine” is a surreal documentary that targets a critical societal issue in America, gun control.

“Bowling for Columbine” is a crime documentary directed by Michael Moore which focuses on why America has such an excessive rate of gun violence and their willful ignorance towards the issue. Throughout the film, Michael Moore uses logical appeal by presenting statistics on the number of gun related deaths per year to illustrate the severity of gun control in the United States of America. “How many people are killed by guns each year? In Germany; 381. In France; 255. In Canada; 165. In the United Kingdom; 68. In Australia; 65. In Japan; 39. In the United States; 11,127.” To discover the real cause behind why America depends so heavily on firearms, Michael Moore turns to a different point of view, coming from Marilyn Manson, who was targeted in the wake of the Columbine shooting due to his ‘angry rock music’. In the interview, the footage cuts in and out of conference of why Marilyn’s music is the root of gun violence, whilst Marilyn telling us why he isn’t. The use of persuasive techniques allows the audience to perceive how a part of the reason behind America’s violent crime is the culture of fear they have immersed themselves in. This culture of fear imbedded into the American society is how guns fall into the hands of the wrong people.

Fear was most likely the first thing that crossed Dawn Brancheau’s mind when she was dragged underwater, mutilated and killed by Tilikum. “Blackfish” explains how the beloved

SeaWorld trainer was petting the orca in just a few inches of water and had no reason to suspect that she was about to be ripped into pieces. Although SeaWorld claims no responsibility for the vicious attack, “Blackfish” argues that putting orcas, like Tilikum, in captivity, is not only dangerous for the killer whales, but also to any humans around them which puts the trainers at risk of injuries, even death. “Can you imagine being in a small concrete enclosure for your life when you’re used to swimming 100 miles a day?” The documentary utilises the tragic story of Dawn Brancheau to inform the audience how change and justice towards animal captivity may protect these beautiful and intelligent creatures, and the lives of peers or loved ones.

On April 20th, 1999, the last thing parents expected when sending their kids to school was their lives being put at risk. The Columbine High School Massacre was a school shooting and attempted bombing, the perpetrators being two twelfth grade students that brutally murdered 12 students and 1 teacher. “Something is wrong in this country when a child can grab a gun so easily and shoot a bullet into the middle of a child’s face.” Michael Moore evokes sadness and grief by showing footage shortly after the school shooting, of victims outside of Columbine and through tears they described how they had a gun pointed towards their head and begged for mercy. This scene makes us empathise with the victims, letting us comprehend the mere grief they are undergoing, and we are unable to fathom why anyone deserves to feel this way.

Despite criticism, “Blackfish” and “Bowling for Columbine” uses persuasive and film techniques such as music, interviews, and personal stories to enlighten how the documentaries can be a greater change for society. Highlighting societal issues such as animal captivity, gun violence, and their victims, the documentaries’ impacts stand the test of time with the number of killer whales held in captivity dropped to 59 orcas at sea parks and aquariums, and gun related deaths only rising proving America’s problem with their culture of fear and how it runs their lives. Ossie Davis once said; “Any form of art is a form of power; it has impact it can affect change. It can not only move us; it makes us move.” “Blackfish” and “Bowling for Columbine” moved the world by exposing the hidden aspect of wildlife entertainment and how gun control is still a vital societal issue prevalent today in the US.