"BLACK FISH, BLACK FISH, WHAT DO YOU SEE?": LOOKING AT THE FACES OF ORCAS IN ANIMAL ADVOCACY DOCUMENTARY FILM*

Claudia Alonso-Recarte
Universitat de València

Abstract

Animal advocacy documentaries have, in the last decades, established themselves as an identifiable subgenre of their own with strategic conventions such as featuring the gaze of the nonhuman animal "looking back" for moral shock and ethical purposes. This article examines the problematic gaze and face of a particular species, the orca, with regards to such convention, and sets out to analyze how Gabriela Cowperthwaite's *Blackfish* (2013) and William Neal's *Long Gone Wild* (2019) deal with the representation of orca faces, gazes, and bodies within their wider structural dichotomy of captivity and wilderness. To do so, the article first explores representations of orcas in fictional films and how they are connected to the wider context of the marine park industry. It then turns to the issue of facial representation and the image of interspecies bonding in the documentaries, and points out the editing strategies that determine the central role of the films' interviewees as guides in the meaning-making process of orca faces and bodies.

Keywords: Orcas, Documentary Film, Nonhuman Animal Gaze, Face, Animal Ethics, Captivity

"PEZ NEGRO, PEZ NEGRO, ¿QUÉ VES AHÍ?" MIRANDO A LOS ROSTROS DE LAS ORCAS EN DOCUMENTALES EN DEFENSA DE LOS ANIMALES

Resumen

En las últimas décadas, el documental animalista se ha erigido como un subgénero propio en el que se ponen en práctica una serie de convenciones técnicas destinadas a causar un impacto moral y empatía en el espectador. Entre ellas, destaca la representación de la devolución de la mirada por parte del animal no humano. El presente artículo examina la problemática de la mirada y del rostro inherente a la representación de una especie como la orca. Para ello, se analiza cómo los documentales *Blackfish* (2013), dirigido por Gabriela Cowperthwaite, y *Long Gone Wild* (2019), dirigido por William Neal, inciden en el modo de plasmación cinematográfica de los rostros, miradas y cuerpos de orcas, amparados por una dicotomía estructural oscilante entre el cautiverio y la vida silvestre. Con este fin, el artículo atiende, en primer lugar, a la representación de orcas en el cine de ficción y a sus conexiones con el desarrollo de la industria de acuarios. En segundo lugar, se analiza cómo el rostro y el nexo interespecie son representados en los documentales anteriormente citados, señalando los métodos de edición mediante los cuales los humanos entrevistados adquieren un papel fundamental en la atribución de significado a los rostros y cuerpos de las orcas.

Palabras clave: orcas, cine documental, mirada del animal no-humano, rostro, ética animal, cautividad

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The film industry, ranging from Hollywood productions to activist and wildlife documentaries, has had a pivotal role in shifting public attitudes about orcas (*Orcinus orca*) in the last decades. As highly intelligent apex predators endowed with complex emotional and social capacities (Marino 2014; Strager 2023), historically, orcas have inspired dread and fear. In the 1960s, with the commencement of what would soon become the multi-billion-dollar industry of marine wildlife shows with orcas, public sympathies towards them began to shift from their reputation as monsters and pests to that of "pets." The lucrativeness of performing orcas–whether in films or in circus-type shows held at aquaria— led not only to massive wildlife capture (and marine parks' sidestepping of certain laws and prohibitions regarding American waters by having the whales captured in other oceanic territories), but also to negligent corporate behaviors that ultimately cost the lives of three trainers. As a response to such corporate schemes and to the perceived subjection of orcas to systematic physical and emotional cruelty and abuse that takes a toll on their health, documentarians took on the subject of cetacean captivity to change the dominant narrative disseminated by the entertainment industry.

This article focuses on the use of facial shots of orcas in animal advocacy films, namely in Gabriela Cowperthwaite's celebrated game-changer, *Blackfish* (2013), and in William Neal's follow-up, *Long Gone Wild* (2019). The initial part of the title is meant as a reference to the 1967 children's book classic, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, written by Bill Martin Jr. and illustrated by Eric Carle, to emphasize the role of nonhuman animals as the objects of gaze but also as subjects doing the looking. The book's structural shaping around the reciprocity of the gaze, coupled with the sense of repetitiveness and presentation of humans' visual encounter with nonhuman others, reflects some of the motifs that will be discussed in this article. In the first section, I introduce how a selection of fiction and nonfiction films have influenced public perceptions of orcas and how the genre of such productions has had an impact on the wider cultural practice of orca exploitation in the marine park industry. In the second section, I analyze the strategies employed by Cowperthwaite and Neal in the representation of orca faces, with particular attention to how they are framed as part of the montage, how they speak to the captive/wild dichotomy that polarizes the debate, and how they contribute to the persuasiveness of their ethical message. I argue that despite the laudable and inspiring purpose of the films, such types of images can nonetheless be problematic given the artificiality of the editing that surrounds them, which directs the manner that the whales are purported to "look back" by relying on the rhetorical effect of the interviewees' faces and voiceovers.

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1. AN OVERVIEW OF ORCAS IN FILM

The unfortunate nomenclature of the species (said to derive from Orcus, the Roman god of the underworld and the dead) and of its other commonly used name (killer whale) sheds some light as to orcas' history as recipients of human scorn and the objects of awe and terror. Traces of such human contemptuousness are recorded all the way back to Roman historian Pliny the Elder, whose descriptions of orcas as monsters were refreshened by Linnaeus' taxonomizing and subsequent reports of sailors, fishermen and explorers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that created unflattering portrayals of them and their habits of pack-hunting (Leiren-Young 2016; Strager 2023). Western images of orcas as teeth-bearing, ruthless hunters were sewn into the cultural fabric of a massive whaling industry primarily interested in baleen species. Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and its subsequent film adaptations, although revolving around a white Sperm whale, happily played into the collective imagination of the ocean depths as a bestiary of ferocious leviathans. "The killer whale is well designed for a career of destruction and mayhem," Cook and Wisner wrote. "Its jaws are large, powerful, and armed with strong teeth... These mighty jaws and their terrible teeth are a kind of animated chopping machine which can tear great chunks from a giant sea animal and bite a large fish in half" (1963, 20). When not depicted as fiends, orcas were often regarded by human communities with whom they shared the seas, such as in the Lofoten Islands, as "robbers and thieves, pests, or menaces that should simply be wiped out" (Strager 2023, 14).

The mid-1960s represented a change in paradigm, in great part due to the film *Namu, the Killer Whale* (Benedek 1966), which told the story of an orca who grieves the loss of his partner, killed by local fishermen, and in the process befriends a marine biologist and changes the community's perception of his species. The film starred Namu, the first captive orca to survive beyond three months in captivity, who was bought and exhibited by entrepreneur Ted Griffin in his Seattle Marine Aquarium. Griffin attempted to provide Namu with a mate, who was soon resold to the recently founded SeaWorld San Diego–and thus began the branding of the "Shamu" stage name for the park's subsequent growing collection of (celebrity) orcas (Desmond 1999, 217-250; Huggan 2018, 58-64). The fact that Namu only survived for little more than a year in captivity did little to deter public demand for the exhibition of more killer whales. The International Marine Mammal Project reported in January 2024 that at least 166 orcas had been captured from the wild to be kept in captivity, and that today there are estimates of at least 54 orcas being held in marine parks across the world, with the United States and China leading the numbers (Ellis 2024).

Orcas' grief at the loss of their partners was also to become the motive behind the 1977 film *Orca*, directed by Michael Anderson and starring Richard Harris and Charlotte Rampling. Rather than a family film, however, *Orca* was an attempt on the part of Italian producer Dino de Laurentiis to capitalize on the success of the first instalment of *Jaws* (1975), and so delivered to audiences an action-packed revenge plot that again tapped into the monstrousness of killer whales. As opposed to Spielberg's depiction of great white sharks, however, Anderson's orca bull is triggered into

monstrousness by the misdeeds of Captain Nolan, played by Harris, who emerges as a Frankenstein figure of sorts by "creating" a creature whose vengefulness clouds his sentience, up until his "maker" meets his demise at the end of a chase that takes them to arctic waters. To convey the uncanny connection between the orca and Nolan, the film resorts to significant shots of the characters looking into each others' faces, emphasized by the use of zooms, point-of-view shots from the water surface, and close-ups of the whale's eye. The orca eye is difficult to discern in medium-to-long shots due to his black skin and proportions, but conspicuously "human" when focused up close due to the almond shape and what the film attempts to convey as tears (in contrast to the beady pitch blackness of Spielberg's unblinking great white). *Orca*'s "swelling Ennio Morricone soundtrack" (Verevis 2013, 274), compelling and poignant, also marked a stark contrast with *Jaws*' landmark simple, yet "pulsating, foreboding theme" (Schatz 1993, 18) by John Williams, exemplifying how the characterization of ocean predators could be taken to great lengths by musical score.

In 1993, *Free Willy*, directed by Simon Wincer, swerved orcas back to the family film genre, delivering an anti-captivity children's film classic where an orphan befriends a killer whale held at a local aquarium and sets out to free him–a gesture that marks the child's acceptance of his own foster family. The film relied on a heavy Disneyfication of orcas that was part of a larger network of common patterns in family films where nonhuman animals are "telepathically" connected with children or young adults, sublimated by visuals of interspecies contact through the act of touching and petting (Alonso-Recarte and Ramos-Gay 2022, 413-14). Despite the film's critical success and its impact on whale-watching tourism (Wearing, Buchmann, and Jobberns 2011), the irony was not lost on movie-goers who criticized the anti-captivity message at the expense of Keiko, the starring orca that had been captured in Icelandic waters as an infant. The Free Willy-Keiko Foundation's efforts to reintroduce Keiko in the wild were ambivalently interpreted by critics, some of whom regarded the 20-million-dollar initiative as an act of irresponsibility and a failure (Bossart 2007, 547)–as Keiko, up until his death in 2003, approached, but never became integrated, in wild orca pods— and some of whom regarded it as a success (given that Keiko lived the last of his years in good health and in a much more stimulating, natural environment). *Free Willy* and the plight to save Keiko contributed to the "rehabilitation" of killer whales in popular imagination away from the image of them as monsters, where "reconstructed whales [were] no longer resources to be harvested or even species to be saved, but rather individuals to be appreciated and respected" (Lawrence and Nelson 2004, 698). Genuine public interest in the wellbeing of Keiko, who would not be featured in subsequent installments of the franchise, fueled the skepticism toward the manufactured narratives of thriving captured orcas and cetaceans that conformed the signature storytelling of the marine park industry–a business that animal activists had been targeting for years.

It was not until the death of seasoned SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau on February 24, 2010, however, that the debate on captive cetaceans (and killer whales in particular) took a more serious turn. Brancheau was killed in SeaWorld Orlando by a male orca named Tilikum, who had also been captured near Iceland as a calf and

who had previously been involved in the comparatively less publicized deaths of two other people: Keltie Byrne, a trainer at Sealand of the Pacific, in British Columbia, and Daniel Dukes, a possibly demented vagrant who was found dead in Tilikum's pool (the factual circumstances as to his passing remain inconclusive). What led Tilikum to drown and maim Brancheau also remains the subject of speculation; whether an act of play or frustration, the killing evinced the ultimate unknowability and unpredictability of wild nonhuman animal species manufactured into pet-like personae for ticket sales. Aside from Brancheau and Byrne, another trainer had also been violently killed by a SeaWorld-bred orca in Loro Parque, Spain, in 2009 ("Una orca del Loro Parque" 2009; Montero 2010), and a trainer at SeaWorld San Diego had nearly drowned in 2006 when being repeatedly pulled underwater by one of the whales ("Caught on Tape" 2012). Brancheau's tragic death reignited heated debates about the ethics of orca captivity, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) pushed hard for the revising of regulations and working conditions to keep trainers from swimming with killer whales.

But the greatest backlash against SeaWorld and the cetacean captivity-entertainment industry came with Gabriela Cowperthwaite's acclaimed documentary *Blackfish* (2013), a film that traced the history of Tilikum and built its narrative around the confessions and introspections of repentant former trainers, whose experience at SeaWorld rendered them with the sufficient authority to make their accusations against the corporate giant believable. It did not help that SeaWorld refused to participate in the film either, as the oppressor's decision to disengage itself from media coverage is hardly read in a neutral note in activist discourses. *Blackfish* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013 and received critical acclaim. It was then distributed by CNN, Magnolia Pictures and Dogwoof, and became part of the Netflix catalogue in several territories, reaching widespread viewership and initiating the first stage of SeaWorld's downwards spiraling into public ignominy and financial disaster. The so-called "*Blackfish* effect," which can be quantifiably measured by million-dollar losses in revenue, compromised SeaWorld's credibility for stakeholders and visitors, and has become a frequent subject of scholarly study on how legitimacy crises are (mis)managed with PR responses, corporate restructuring, repackaging of products and the (mis)use of "education" as an ethical selling point in the animal entertainment industry (Chattoo 2016; White 2017; Woods 2018; Parsons and Rose 2018; Javanaud, Sanghani, and Young 2018; Waller and Iluzada 2020; Massey and Randriamarohaja 2019; Boissat, Thomas-Walters, and Veríssimo 2021).

Although *Blackfish*'s leading character of victim-turned-perpetrator (in a far less anthropomorphic light than Anderson's vengeful creature) allows for a more convincing focalization from a nonhuman animal perspective (and formalistically blends advocacy with conventions of true crime and the environmental and wildlife film genres), Cowperthwaite is careful about making full assumptions about Tilikum's headspace at the time of Brancheau's death, though speculations from trainers and scientists are put forth. Tilikum is also represented as part of a larger number of victims traumatically removed from their mothers (orca experts report that in the wild offspring remain with their mothers for the rest of their lives), sold back and forth for profit, forced to live in a small concrete tank with practically

no stimulation, made to perform for food and tossed into unnatural cohabitation with other whales who may belong to a different culture or ecotype. As journalist Jane Velez-Mitchell points out in a CNN clip included in the documentary, "If you were in a bathtub for twenty-five years, don't you think you'd get a little irritated, aggravated, maybe a little psychotic?" (Cowperthwaite 2013, 09:20-09:27).

Bill Neal's *Long Gone Wild* (2019) recapitulates on the same themes as *Blackfish* and resorts to a number of talking-head experts that had already appeared in Cowperthwaite's film (among them, former trainers Carol Ray and Jeff Ventre, and world-renowned neuroscientist and president of the Whale Sanctuary Project, Dr. Lori Marino). These figures do not address the camera directly (as typical talking heads would have it) in either film, but are instead presumably engaged in conversation with an off-camera interviewer whose verbal input is edited out. In addition, *Long Gone Wild* also welcomes a host of other authorities—including authors, scientists, and dolphin trainer-turned-activist Ric O'Barry, well known for his participation in Louie Psihoyos's acclaimed documentary, *The Cove* (2009)—and takes the conversation in new directions, including the growing market of wildlife trafficking and marine-park building in China, the argument about legal personhood, and the hopeful promise of whale sanctuaries as a place in which to retire performing cetaceans. Neither *Blackfish* nor *Long Gone Wild* rely on a narrator (though informational text is occasionally supplied) but follow instead the "string-of-interviews" (Nichols 1983) technique to give order and coherence to the abundance of images that range from archival footage to recordings of orcas in the wild and in captivity, SeaWorld propaganda, and still photographs, among other material.

The selection of films described above is limited to a number of representative productions that both influenced and reflected American attitudes towards killer whales from the 1960s up until the present day, but by no means are they the sole filmic resonances of orca representations. Wildlife films and programming, along with other fictional films (such as the three remaining *Free Willy* instalments) and documentaries such as *The Whale* (Chisholm and Parfit 2011), a Canadian production, have also participated in the continuing shifts in public perceptions of orcas. The dangerous exposure of trainers to captive killer whales would also be depicted in Jacques Audiard's fictional film *De rouille et d'os* (2012), a Franco-Belgian production, as part of the story's exploration of bodily and emotional trauma. Furthermore, the extent to which genre determines representation must be taken into consideration. *Namu, the Killer Whale* and *Free Willy* reproduced the requisites of the family film genre, including a reaffirmation of the nuclear, hegemonic (human) family. *Orca*, in the meantime, rode the fashionable wave of the revenge-of-nature genre that "(re)integrat[ed] human beings into the food chain, thereby questioning human exceptionalism," but that at the same time featured "human relationships that overshadow ecological questions" (Fuchs 2018, 178). As suggested earlier, genre determines the types of shots employed in the representation of the orca character. In the case of family films, shots showing physical contact between the human protagonist and the whale play into the lucrative image of the orca as a companion species—an idealization that marine parks capitalize on. In the revenge-of-nature genre, montages of the gaze exchanged between man and "monster" ambivalently

emphasize the antagonism and the communal interspecies recognition between the characters.

Blackfish and *Long Gone Wild*, meanwhile, not only belong to the documentary genre, which enjoyed renewed interest from the public at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Rich 2006; Smaill 2016, 2), and which itself entails a long epistemological debate as to the nature of stories' claims to truth and authenticity (Chapman 2009, 48-71; Aufderheide 2007), but they are furthermore part of a corpus of non-fiction productions aiming at animal activism and/or advocacy. This subgenre, which may loosely be defined as films that expose human abuse of nonhuman animals through industrial, ecocidal and cultural practices and traditions, has targeted sectors involving nonhuman animal exploitation and consumption since the 1980s, when People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and other animal rights organizations began producing and distributing their own videos (Finsen and Finsen 1994; Phelps 2007, 237-40, 265-70). These first videos greatly relied on material acquired in undercover investigations, which solidified the use of low-quality footage recorded with hidden handheld cameras as a signature authenticator of truth (Freeman and Tulloch 2013, 114). While these types of visuals continue to be instrumental in generating the type of "moral shock" necessary to inspire action (Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Jasper 2018), animal advocacy documentaries have also expanded their rhetorical repertoire, ranging from so-called "omnibus films" (Finn 2023, 75-88) that saturate viewers with nonstop images of animal suffering at a grand (even global) scale, to the use of humor, a greater reliance on verbal argumentation and reasoning, quasi-poetic constructions of the lives of singled-out nonhuman individuals, the involvement of celebrities, "filmmaker as protagonist" (Nichols 1991, 71) approaches employed in dramatic or thriller-type schemas, and the semiotics of the greater narrative of the Anthropocene, among other possibilities. Common to these diverse forms of storytelling is the attempt to instill empathy in the viewer by converting the exploited nonhuman animal object into a subject, and a quite common technique to do so is by focusing on the nonhuman animal face and their gaze "looking back." How this can be accomplished through cinematography and editing will depend on the filmmaker's own stylistics and strategic approaches. In this study, one pertinent question to ask is precisely how these indexes are put to use in the case of species with little phylogenetic resemblance to humans.

2. "THE FACE" OF CAPTIVITY

Nonhuman animal gazes and face-to-face encounters with humans have been the subject of philosophers ranging from Levinas (1988, 169; 1997, 151-53) to the playful variations explored by Derrida in his classic *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008). The documentary format, nonetheless, demands that we address the *framing* of the encounter, that is, the technological layering of representation that narrativizes an image as part of the fabric of the larger story being told. Here, formalistic choices regarding the moving or the still image (type of shot, angle,

chromatism, resolution, duration, sound accompaniment, motion, etc.) form an index that is part of the compositional logic of the film.

Blackfish and *Long Gone Wild* present several shots of orca faces, usually engaging contact with a trainer or looking at the spectator on the other side of the glass. One such shot in *Blackfish* shows for instance the upper back and head of a man in a wetsuit looking from behind the glass at a huge orca facing him and nodding her head, only inches away. The orca sticks out her tongue, and it is inferred, by way of editing and the superimposition of the voiceover of former trainer John Jett, that meaningful contact is taking place. "When you look into their eyes, you know somebody is home. Somebody is looking back. You form a very personal relationship with your animal," Jett notes (Cowperthwaite 2013, 05:19-05:28). This type of deixis takes place in *Long Gone Wild* as well. Towards the end of the film, when the interviewees' discourse revolves around the theme of children as the hope for a more ethical future for orcas, a still shot (courtesy of Wolfgang Kaehler) of a little girl, hands on glass and looking at the face of an orca on the other side is zoomed back, thus creating a more inclusive visual that shifts from the centeredness of the child into a fuller view of the orca and the face-to-face encounter. Incidentally, this is the shot used in the promotion of the film.

Discussions about the complex and developed brain of killer whales (and thus, of their highly evolved emotional and social capabilities) are connected with the meaningfulness of eyes in *Long Gone Wild*. Ex-trainer Carol Ray recalls how,

> When I looked into the eyes of the whales that I was working with, especially the ones that I was working with the most and I was most connected to, I saw a friendship. I saw, 'Hey cool, something to do, somebody to interact with.' I saw intelligence, I saw, 'What do you want me to do next?' I saw, 'How can I make you happy?' I saw all those things. (Neal 2019, 54:06-54:30)

These intimacies are superimposed on a series of stills that show the trainer in physical contact with an orca, with two of such showing the trainer leaning on the muzzle and then on the lower jaw of an orca sticking her head out of the water. Ray's intervention is followed-up by Jeff Ventre's similar impressions: "I mean, they're looking back. They're tracking you. They're watching everything that you do, and you definitely know somebody's home" (Neal 2019, 54:32-54:41). Ventre's words accompany slow-motion footage of a whale's head as she slides on the pool platform towards the trainer, who celebrates her arrival by kissing her.

In these cases, the image of the exchange of gazes is far removed from the type of montage delivered by Anderson in *Orca*. Yet despite their intention to advocate for the whales, they remain problematic at different levels. Firstly, images showing trainers' physical contact with the whales echo those popularized by the *Free Willy* franchise and the family film genre, in which interspecies encounter involves the submission of a wild nonhuman animal into pet-like status–the exact same degradation and form of manufacturing that the documentaries, as grand narratives, otherwise seek to deconstruct and denounce. Secondly, the conclusive remarks and supportive visuals of there being someone "home" suggest that such

intelligence and sentience are stimulated, measured and rendered visible by virtue of the interspecies bond with humans. And yet, the films at other times contradict the simplicity and naturalization of the trainers' belief in there being "someone home" by presenting orca minds as spaces of speculation and ultimate unknowability of the subjects as individuals and as a species. This is pointed out by Sperb (2016) in his criticism of *Blackfish*'s irresoluteness at the borders of sentimentalism and the awareness of narrative limitations. As Ray remarks in another instance in *Blackfish*, "At the time, I think I could have convinced myself that the relationships were built on something stronger than the fact that I am giving them fish. You know, I like to think that. But I don't know that that's the truth" (Cowperthwaite 2013, 34:52-35:08)–this time accompanied by footage of an orca having fish tossed into her mouth. As Sperb mentions regarding such quote, "[Ray] punctuates with a nervous, tentative laugh which in turn betrays the larger uncertainty about human relationships with animals which permeates the entire movie" (2016, 208).

Burt argues that film makes "a different type of contact" out of the exchange of looks between nonhumans and humans where "the look need not necessarily communicate anything as such but sets in play a chain of effects that reflects at the very least some form of shared understanding of context between human and animal" (2002, 40). Nonetheless, as he continues to point out, film also excites a tension in the representation of this interspecies gaze: on the one hand, it "often depicts the reinforcement of the bonds between human and animal," but, on the other, "it also multiplies the different ways of seeing the animal, which is a mode of fragmentation too" (Burt 2002, 40). *Blackfish* and *Long Gone Wild* seek, on the one hand, to reinforce the idea of interspecies bonding through the packaging of images of faces and gazes under the auspice of interviewees' voiceovers, as exemplified above. The documentaries thus frame images of captive whales' faces, superimposing themselves over the frame of captivity itself. As Berger notes, zoos epitomize the disappearance of animals in modernity, where "the fact that they can observe us has lost all significance" (2009 [1980], 27) and where they are made "marginal" (34) and appear "lethargic and dull" (33). Berger infers visitors' likely question to be "Why are these animals less than I believed?" (33). Marine parks, at a crossroads between the zoo and the circus, design shows around cetaceans and pinnipeds by resorting to movement, thus averting audience disappointment by focusing on the dynamism of motion. I will return to the issue of movement shortly; for now, suffice to point out that marine parks' illusion of thriving nonhuman animals in captivity is nurtured by a type of image of interspecies physical and visual encounter that the films themselves partly fall prey to as well, and that the only thing that polarizes the advocate discourse from the pro-captive position, in these cases, is the interviewees' insight, testimonies and facial expressions of their own—not the face of the whale in itself. It is through the interviewees that the orcas become, in the films, what we believe them to be.

The films' packaging of repentant interviewees with orca victims must, however, appear properly informed by scientific data. There is a tacit understanding–reinforced by the neuroscientific input supplied by authorities such as Dr. Lori Marino— that orcas have the potential to have a theory of mind, that is, that they

have a notion (a hypothesis) regarding what another individual may be thinking or feeling. As Marino points out in *Blackfish*, they have a part of the brain extended into the limbic system:

> The safest inference would be [that] 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. . . . Everything about them is social. Everything. It's been suggested that their whole sense of self is distributed among individuals in their group. (Cowperthwaite 2013, 25:46-26:26)

By virtue of the documentaries' emphasis on images of orca-human physical and visual contact, with a primary focus on the face, the type of scientific evidence and theorizing that Marino brings to the table can reinforce the idea that the social bond and distribution of the sense of self can also breach the species divide and form a connection with humans. Here, the belief that the films are indulging in anthropomorphism can clash with the opposite claim: that to refuse to acknowledge the possibility of interspecies bonds constitutes an affirmative act of anthropodenial, that is, the "*a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals when in fact they may exist" (de Waal 1999, 258). The documentaries' ethical take on this seems evident: orcas are in so many ways so much like humans that it is cruel and not in their best interest to keep them in captivity and condition them to a life of misery.

On the other hand and in all fairness, the films also "fragment" (to get back to Burt's terminology) the ways of looking at the nonhuman other by resorting to less problematic images. Significantly, such images tend to be of orca individuals and pods *in the wild*, where facial close-ups and whale-human contact are relinquished in favor of full-body shots (if recorded with underwater cameras) or partial views from the surface (through indexes such as dorsal fins, blowholes or heads spy-hopping). Movement here is important and strategically put to use: versus images of captive whales' repetitive, circular swimming in barren tanks and stagnant behaviors such as "logging" (floating quietly and still on the surface), and versus the frequent use of still photography for the representation of captivity, the films surrender footage of orcas in motion. These are not movements that connote the automation of circus performers or stereotypies; wild orca footage reflects pulse, vibrancy, dynamism, vitality, harmony with the environment–in other words, a thriving life. Such images inspire what Martha Nussbaum refers to as "wonder," which is "especially connected to our awareness of movement and sentience. We see and hear these creatures moving and doing all these things, and we imagine that something is going on inside; it's not sheer random motion, but directed somehow by an inner awareness, by a someone" (2022, 11). Wonder rejoices in the imaginative act, and in a way celebrates ultimate unknowability. What this type of sympathetic imagination supplies is an ethical means "to cross the species barrier—if we press ourselves, if we require of our imagination something more than common routine" (Nussbaum 2006, 355). The types of projections inherent to sympathetic imagination and wonder can render

evident the differences between ways of experiencing subjectivity and, perhaps more importantly, lead to moral judgments that can strengthen humans' appreciation and respect for others' dignity. Potentially, sympathetic imagination, in Nussbaum's framework, can envision nonhuman animal others as subjects of justice (Martinić 2022, 229). How scientific discourse can effectively function alongside the possibility of wonder and sympathetic imagination (as opposed to emerging as an inhibiting force) is of relevance. For instance, the mysteries of orca cognition are emphasized by Marino in *Long Gone Wild* as follows: "The kind of a mind that an orca brain produces is a mind that is sophisticated and complex beyond our comprehension. A mind that integrates feelings and emotions with thought. A mind that integrates vision and hearing in ways that we don't understand" (Neal 2019, 53:44-54:06). In this sense, the films echo the types of images that "[speak] to the limits of ethology, indicating that full knowledge of the natural world has not been achieved by science" (Smaill 2016, 120). To counter such limits and avoid a "dead end," however, they openly invite viewers to behold and to imagine what it is that we "don't understand" and lies "beyond our comprehension."

Less scientifically grounded discourses likewise gravitate around the sense of awe and wonder in the films. One such segment in *Blackfish* features OSHA expert witness Dave Duffus invoking the magnificence of orcas:

> The first nation's people and the old fishermen from the coast, they call them blackfish. They're an animal that possesses great spiritual power and they're not to be meddled with. I've spent a lot of time around killer whales, and they're always in charge. I never get out of the boat. I never mess with them. The speed and the power is quite amazing. . . . Even after seeing them thousands of times, you see them and you still [gasp] wake up. (Cowperthwaite 2013, 27:22-28:21)

Duffus's words are paired with inspirational musical accompaniment and images of a pod of wild orcas coming to the surface for air, creating a sublime landscape of black dorsal fins. The segment simultaneously features Duffus as talking head and as wild-orca observant from a boat, and the continuity between shots of the orcas and him aboard suggests that those are the visuals that he can admire from his position. Again, the extent to which these are neither close-ups of orca faces nor shots of their full bodies is revealing: considering the mystifying effect of voiceover-plus-moving image, the landscape of dorsal fins is incredibly "humanizing" insofar as it sublimates what the naked eye, unmediated by the technology of underwater cameras (and as if naturalizing and de-problematizing the technological format of the documentary itself) can realistically spot from our distanced, terrestrial environment. In contrast to the representation of the orca-human bond through visuals of interspecies contact, these segments suggest that it is in such wonder, allegorized by humans' ultimate inability to visually contain the totality of the "other" (and thus, symbolically, to control and subdue her), where the authentic relationship between humans and killer whales stands. And as such, the images represent the respectful, ethical way of looking at them. In this sense, *Blackfish* moves somewhat closer to the implications that Malamud identifies in the documentaries *The Lord*

God Bird (2008), directed by George Butler, and *Silent Roar: Searching for the Snow Leopard* (2007), directed by Hugh Miles and Mitchell Kelly, where "we *do not* see the animals [the ivory-billed woodpecker and the snow leopard, respectively] we have come to see . . . [W]e are not meant to see this animal. Its world is mutually exclusive with our own" (2012, 87). Fragmentation occurs the moment when difference is foregrounded, precluding the nonhuman animal's "looking back" at the human precisely because they are not meant to lead anthropocentric lives, though they do suffer the consequences of anthropocentrism, both in captivity and in the wild. The ethical stance behind these implications is delivered: however similar orcas may be to humans, they are still, to a great extent, incomprehensible to us, and they remain creatures about whom we wonder and imagine. Their "whaleness," on which their welfare and their wellbeing rest, must be respected.

Faces of orcas in *Blackfish* and *Long Gone Wild*, therefore, cannot be managed in the same way that many faces of other nonhuman victims are typically represented in animal advocacy documentaries where pain and suffering is rendered explicit in order to shove the viewer into moral shock. In her study of documentaries against the food industry, Vezovnik (2024) resorts to multimodal approaches by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in order to categorize the types of images of nonhuman victims that are prevalent. She thus distinguishes between two modes of communicative function: there are "offer" images, in which "the animals do not look directly at the camera. . . . The viewer is offered the image of the suffering animal as information about the animal's condition." The images "give the viewer time for contemplation and emotionalization" (Vezovnik 2024, 428). Secondly, there are "demand" images, where "the animals look the viewers directly in the eye . . . prompting [the audience] to take action by establishing an imagined relationship with [them]" (Vezovnik 2024, 429). "Demand" images, I argue, can have different desired effects depending on the species: the closer the species to the human (whether in physiognomic or domestic terms), the more likely the emotional connection. Great apes and monkeys, companion species, farmed nonhuman mammals, fur-bearing mammals, etc.—all these stand a better chance of effecting proper "demand" than birds, fish, reptiles or insects. And even within the mammalian class, differences are appreciable (most viewers would likely regard the gaze of a chimpanzee or dog as more soulful than that of a mouse). In the animal advocacy documentary subgenre, filmmakers go to great lengths to build a case for individuals and species whose environment, physiognomy and bodies are alien to human form. For instance, the accolades and critical success of Ehrlich and Reed's *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) suggest that, carefully strategized, film can circumvent the initial sense of interspecies "foreignness" and weave and repair the connections between the human gazer and, of all creatures, an octopus. The octopus' bulging eyes, paired with the magnificence of her movement, become integral to the syntax of the film, and reaffirm its wider message of empathy, respect and physical and spiritual harmony with the environment.

I would argue that part of the reason why *Blackfish* and *Long Gone Wild* struggle with their construction of traditional images of animal advocacy in which the suffering nonhuman victim "looks back" is that human viewers are irreparably limited when it comes to interpreting orca faces. Cetaceans can present

a particularly interesting case study for filmic representation of visual exchange firstly because of the aquatic environment they inhabit and secondly because of the lack of physiognomic resemblance with humans and their "lack [of] clear facial expression" (Marino 2014, 22-23). Perhaps this is why one would more commonly talk about a whale's head, as opposed to her face. For all of humans' admiration of the sublimeness of orca bodies and movement, *Blackfish* and *Long Gone Wild* go to show that the sense of alienness when looking at their face cannot be overcome solely through image, and so it must find in the interviewees' voiceovers and in their human countenances and facial expressions (given the constant, interruptive cutting back and forth to shots of talking heads) the support system needed to sustain the interpretative apparatus. It is not just a matter of the blackness of the skin and the visual magnetism of their white patches (called eyespots) that make orcas' eyes difficult to make out, but also their position. Even though orcas may have been upgraded to the category of charismatic megafauna–that is, they are large creatures that "have compelling features and interpretations to make them newsworthy" (Maynard 2018, 186-87)— their eye position affects the effectiveness of "demand" images. Nonhuman animals and predators with forward-facing eyes more easily lend themselves to anthropomorphism (Smith et al. 2012) and, therefore, to the deictic significance of a connection between themselves and the humans into whose eyes they look. But orca eyes are positioned on the sides of the head (monocular vision), providing them with excellent panoramic vision that serves a purpose in their natural environment. They cannot reproduce the type of "looking back" that we may identify in other species and typify into an identifiable strategy for advocacy, where pain, sorrow and vulnerability are discernible. The filmmakers are well aware of this, and creatively work around it. It is significant, for instance, that the posters and much of the promotional material of *Blackfish* use frontal, face-to-face shots of an orca (presumably Tilikum) who is conspicuously large relative to the size of the frame of the image. Here the viewer's intuition of the tensions or unsettlement proposed by the film is not so much derived from the orca eyes as it is from the alienness of his facing the viewer and the claustrophobic frame where he is contained. These are strains that the film promises to explain, and it does so through its active representation of orca bodies in communion with human interpretation.

Adding to the discussion of identifiability is humans' general inability to distinguish between individuals of the same species. We may rather easily tell the difference between individual dogs of the same breed, for example, because, with the evolution of domestication, we have developed the visual tools to appreciate such differences, but this is not necessarily the case with wild nonhuman species, especially when repetitive patterns of chromatism (say the hallmark black and white of all orcas), on which we would otherwise rely on for the identification of individuals, strengthens the illusion of homogeneity. Derek Bousé's well-known study of wildlife films' use of the facial close-up shot to create a "false sense of intimacy" with wild nonhuman animals thus articulates the timely question: "A facial close-up can be used to isolate a single animal, to individualize it and to establish a separate identity for it (as the basis of storytelling). But *can* a close-up of an animal's face identify it as an individual, given that animals of the same species often seem indistinguishable

in appearance?" (2003, 126). Sole images of orca faces in *Blackfish* and *Long Gone Wild* seem to suggest that the answer is no, and that therefore the plight for their wellbeing must be woven into the verbal input and facial support of the interviewees, or fabricated around the representation of them as creatures of wonder in the wild.

3. CONCLUSION

Like many other nonhuman animal species who have been sucked by the gravitational pull of consumerist culture and popular media, the image and reputation of orcas have been greatly influenced by their representation in film, which has symbiotically capitalized on and nurtured the marine-park industry of captive and performing cetaceans. Film has explored the representability of orcas and turned them into proxies that satisfy humans' exploration of nature, such as monsters or pets, by drawing on genre conventions and the rhetorical possibilities behind images of interspecies contact. The particularities of the animal advocacy documentary subgenre, however, evince the inherent tensions of representability itself, as in dealing with a species whose facial features are so singular, conventional means of representing the interspecies exchange of the gaze so as to inspire care and compassion seem insufficient, if not impossible. *Blackfish* and *Long Gone Wild* set the apparatus of nonfiction film to work to deliver orcas from the abusive anthropocentrism that they are subjected to by the entertainment industry, but, somewhat paradoxically, this cannot be done without the human face and word to add meaning to the orca face. The many countenances of the interviewees featured in both films and their array of communicative facial expressions and oratorial skills allow viewers to look at images of captive whales in a new light. However, the films' argumentative emphasis on orca subjectivity when paired with images of the whales engaged in visual and/or physical contact with humans should be questioned precisely because these images acquire meaning in the context of the story by virtue of the interviewees' visual and aural presence. Without the voiceovers and a meaningful, communicative understanding of the orcas' faces, the same images could just as easily be used to represent whales flourishing in captivity. The documentaries' dichotomous separation between captive and wild leads to forms of representation of wild orcas where the face becomes decentered; the implication perhaps being that in decentering the face from the image, a point is being made with regards to the actual relevance of human interaction in the everyday lives of thriving wild pods. Although undoubtedly affected by the Anthropocene, cetaceans are meant to live in a world in which humans are marginal elements to their existence. As such, the centrality of the face is replaced by movement and by full or partial body shots.

The films cannot help exercising representation and resorting to the facets of representability, for such is the very flesh of which they are made as narratives. One of their greatest merits is to acknowledge the limits of science and human insight into orca minds, and in these crevices we may also consider the image-as-representation as hopelessly limited as well. But representation can also reveal itself

as a portal that allows us to look at them in wonder and prompt our sympathetic imagination. This begins by letting *them* look where they were meant to look, and it should not be us.

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