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## Film Review

***The Cove*, By Louie Psihoyos. Santa Monica, California: Lionsgate., 2010.**

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## THE COVE

*The Cove* touches on a broader set of questions about the nature of international justice and what we should eat than the filmmaker presumably intended on tackling. The recent Academy Award-winning documentary *The Cove* centers on the work of dolphin trainer-turned-activist Ric O'Barry who realized through his work on a TV show that dolphins do not enjoy living in captivity and whose personal quest is to free dolphins from captivity and harm. O'Barry, who trained dolphins for the television program *Flipper*, sends a film crew to the Japanese port town of Taiji in a quest to reveal the locals' practice of killing and eating dolphins. For a man who sees the liberation of dolphins from SeaWorld as a moral imperative, the killing and eating of dolphins in Japan is a crisis of epic proportions that must be stopped immediately.

Much of the film is spent capturing the bureaucratic rigamarole of the International Whaling Commission, an intergovernmental body that regulates the whaling industry. According to the IWC's web site the organization's tasks include, "provid[ing] for the complete protection of certain species[,] designat[ing] specified areas as whale sanctuaries [and] set[ting] limits on the numbers and size of whales which may be taken" (<http://iwcoffice.org/commission/iwcmain.htm>). In *The Cove*, the IWC is portrayed as a gang of drowsy bureaucrats who protect large cetaceans at the cost of smaller ones. Worse, the civil servants that attend the IWC's meetings turn a blind eye to Japan's killing of whales for

supposedly scientific purposes and are more than willing to take Japan's money in exchange for voting Japan's way.

Clearly the consumption of whales and dolphins as food is, to put it kindly, off-putting to Westerners. But might this be a case of cultural imperialism? How might a Hindu living in India react to filmed footage of the horrors that transpire in the countless slaughterhouses that dot the American heartland? Is the cry of "cultural relativism" enough to stop the conversation of whale and dolphin slaughter in its tracks?

For his part, Ric O'Barry gives short shrift to the cultural argument. He interviews a handful of Tokyo residents who are surprised to hear that people eat dolphins in Taiji. With a documentary film that may be enough, but there must be more to this angle than the views of a trickle of Japanese city dwellers. Marshall Sahlins (1978, p. 173) in his seminal work *Culture and Practical Reason* writes that, "The principal reason postulated in the American meat system is the relation of the species to human society." Horses and dogs are given human names, and are treated as "subjects." Dead cows and dead pigs are given names that disconnect the animal from the food item: cows become beef, pigs are pork. These animals are treated as "objects" (pp. 174-5). The notion that horses would be served up as food led to a disgusted protest in Connecticut, for instance (pp. 172-3).

Yet, how are horses different than cows? One is bred for consumption in America, the other is not. But the line between what we think is morally neutral to eat and what we find morally repugnant is surely not an objective one. It is drawn by culture. Dogs are man's best friend. Cows are not.

And yet, as Robert Nozick (1974) argues, there is no good moral reason for eating any kind of meat. Nozick contends that if we were offered the chance to attach ourselves for life to a machine that would pipe experiences—good ones—into our heads, most people would turn down the opportunity. Nozick says that there are two reasons for this. First is because "we want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them" and secondly, "we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain sort of person" (p. 41). In sum, we want to enjoy the experience of participating in our own life and doing it on our own terms for ourselves. If the meaning of life for humans comes in shaping it as we see fit, then the same applies to animals. Nozick asks whether it might be acceptable for an alien race that is morally more advanced than humans to use humans for the same purposes we use animals: for food, for medical testing, for labor (pp. 45-6). Obviously, any self-respecting human would say that it is not acceptable to eat our species just because you are morally wiser than us.

The same logic, however, applies to animals. If we like to live our lives as we see fit and find meaning in doing so, then who are we to judge how animals choose to live out their days? A goldfish may not have the brain activity of a piano virtuoso but that alone does not mean that the piano virtuoso deserves to kill the goldfish. A cow "wastes" its day staring at the ether, chewing grass, and milling about, yet how one chooses to spend one's time does not preclude one from

deserving to live. The same arguments that are used to excuse us from killing animals: they're dumber than us, they don't do anything, they don't understand what's happening, would sound remarkably callous and even sociopathic if applied to the human race. If a man enjoys sunsets more than playing the stock market, does that make him less of a man? Is a less intelligent individual less worthy of life? Clearly the answer is no. Everyone deserves to live their life as they see fit. They, further, can find meaning in whatever they choose to find meaning in.

So what do we say to the Japanese fish dealer who states that, "it is our culture to eat dolphins?" (<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/02/11/japan.dolphins/index.html>). Of course, culture alone may not be enough to excuse a behavior. It is traditional in some societies to stone a woman to death for having premarital sex. That cultural practice is clearly abhorrent for many reasons, the most obvious of which are that it is homicidal and misogynistic. But telling people what they should and should not eat, while we ourselves munch on sentient life forms, strikes me as Orientalism.

The climax of *The Cove* comes with a few minutes of video that O'Barry and his crew captured of dolphin being speared in the cove in Taiji. The shrill cries of the dolphins fill the air, and blood fills the water with such immediacy that it is jarring. Fishermen on a boat throw spears into one dolphin, then another, letting them bleed to death before, it is assumed, capturing and gutting them.

The view behind the meat industry's veil is always appalling, whether it be the descriptions contained in Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* or the recent documentary *Food Inc.* A lot of moral gymnastics must be done to justify the consumption of animal meat. We clearly don't need it to survive. You can get B-12 injections and iron supplements to fulfill your dietary needs. Yet, though I do it with less frequency than most, I eat meat. I am not innocent in this dialogue. I know that there is little moral justification for consuming the flesh of a deceased being, and yet I continue to do so. Labelling that being an object like "lamb chops" or "steak" helps, but so does the consideration that I try to eat meats that have been killed humanely and have been raised in good conditions.

That fig leaf, though, only covers so much. The movie *The Cove* does more than it sets out to do. It aspires to get us to rise up and end the consumption of dolphins. But by viewing life through the eyes of someone who truly loves non-human creatures, the film gets us to see that there is little moral reasoning for killing and consuming any animal.

## References

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