

**A DISCUSSION OF DOCUMENTARIES**

***THE MOST HATED FAMILY IN AMERICA (2007)***

**AND**

***MURDERBALL (2005)***

## *Outline*

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**Thesis statement:** The documentaries *The Most Hated Family in America* and the award-winning *Murderball* carry some eye-opening truths concerning issues innate to the human being and the society; the excellent and skilled work of the documentaries' teams of makers, as well as some special and effective film-making techniques deliver a powerful message that the rest of the world cannot but take heed of.

## ***Introduction***

The documentary as a genre has long ago earned a reputation of the most academic, matter-of-fact and least entertaining, life-asserting piece of cinematography that is not really worth the time of an average TV viewer. With the movies like the ones under the present discussion, the genre is surely moving on, evolving into something a lot more “exciting”, though no less informative or authoritative, and taming the new horizons where touching the human heart with a story truer than that of a feature film is more than welcome indeed. We will deal with the documentaries called *The Most Hated Family in America* and *Murderball* in an attempt to discuss their quality and magnitude in the context of the present-day documentary.

### ***The Most Hated Family in America: a message that will make you shiver***

The film presented by the BBC documentarian, Louis Theroux, aims at helping the world learn about a religious group now present and acting in the U.S., and, we must, say, it is a totally successful work on the part of the author. Choosing to live with the family at the heart of this religious group, being the Westboro Baptist Church, Mr. Theroux shows his true and earnest intention to get as much information as possible first-hand and pass that on to the rest of us as a veritable source to evaluate the situation by. Louis’s sincerity and openness towards the family clashes every now and then against the wall of firm and tough religious views that would be hair-raising for most; however, his obviously honest attempts to "set things straight" with the notorious group are mingled with the total rigidity of the Phelps family members' outlook, and the viewer, much like the author, is left wondering what kind of religious experience could ever lead to propagating such a message.

Starting out as a new man in the setting, a guest to the Phelps family, whose grandfather is the founder of the Westboro Baptist Church, Louis visits the homes of the

family members, the church, casting some light on its activities, and, more importantly, the pickets that the group organizes against the nation's perverted lifestyle, simplifying that down to homosexuality. And it is the pickets that have brought so much hate against the church members, for the message of hate and the wrath of God coming to destroy America backfires with the very same hatred at the Phelps family and Westboro Baptist activists.

On the whole, the documentary reserves place only for a few comments on the documentarian's part, who asks many questions instead, and it is from the answers that we cull the information about the lifestyle and beliefs of the Westboro group. The film is rather dynamic, and the camera moves about, sometimes being rather instable, representing a perspective of a human on-looker. Such an approach makes the viewer feel like a direct participant of the situation: when Louis is somewhat taken aback by some bedazzling moments, so is the viewer, as if looking around at the faces of others in search of support or explanation. With the variety of angles, high and low, in moments most crucial to the understanding of the situation, the picture keeps the viewer alert and ready for a new surprise. Establishing shots give a good idea of the setting and put the watcher into the picture with regards to the situation about to unfold. The transition from still shots to dynamic ones and back conveys visual rhythm called to stress the true-to-life nature of the situation. The visual rhythm can also be traced in the shifts of camera angles and perspectives, as if putting the viewer into a position in which she/he can behold that which is happening from different angles, and in that almost all-pervasiveness know that there is but a tiny place for any doubt.

Louis's conduct in all scenes is very skillful; to attract attention to himself as someone offering a case to judge, he is in the foreground, but moments later we find him "giving the floor" to someone else. All in all, the camerawork is done in such a manner that the dialogue between the documentarian and the heroes invites a third-party for close participation, and we willingly step forward. Real-time scenes of pickets and certain occasions (walking down a

street, driving in a car, verbal confrontation) leave the watcher amidst the situation with no "I am above this" advantage and prod to natural and right-on-the-spot responses, so to say.

Often, the external composition, that is, the relationship between two adjacent shots at the point of cutting between them, betrays the film-makers' idea to have the viewer travel across moments and space, jumping forth, and sometimes back, and leaving us almost helpless in the face of the vibrant and ever-changing life.

As has been said above, Louis Theroux tries to let the main characters of the documentary speak for themselves. He is largely non-provocative, though his questions, as simple and casual as they may be, draw out answers that tell a lot about the stubbornness of the mostly ungrounded views of the church. Hatred of God is brought on the nation through virtually the only group that is not "heading for hell". The message of salvation, which Mr. Theroux tries to hint at to the believers of the group is simply dismissed and replaced with the rigid prophesying of the doomed curse that hangs above the head of the nation. And we meet the Phelps family members at the beginning soaked with hatred, the hatred of God, as they themselves call it. Moving along, we learn that, but for their make-me-shiver viewpoints on salvation and Old-Testament-like prophesying of death upon all transgressors, these people are almost normal and definitely nice. Moreover, their lifestyle betrays some rather strong family values like care and devotion. And in our eyes, this part of their nature evolves to show some commendable features. However, doctrinally they remain not evolved and challenging until the very last moment. Old pastor Phelps does not evolve, being depicted as a defying crude man who knows nothing of respect towards the collocutor. The contrast between what these people appear to look like (wear usual clothes, drive cars, do sports, go to school, have jobs, etc.) and what they preach as seemingly the core part of their "gospel" ("God hates fags", "America is doomed", "Thank God for all His punishment" etc.) is stunning.

Louis Theroux answered many questions about the people of the Westboro community with his documentary. However, the main one, i.e. "How can these people embrace the message of God's hate without striving to win souls for Christ?", appears to be rhetorical. He presented the point of view of the people rather carefully, one should say. Owing to the work, for many, the Phelps family is probably not so much hated as pitied. The group's message that will make you shiver still leaves you wondering about the destiny of the preachers themselves.

### ***Murderball: beyond what these eyes can see***

The *Murderball* documentary is more than a fact-presenting piece of work; it is a saga of life of fame and fervor, strength of character and recognition in the place where all these are not looked for more often than not. The life of people suffering from quadriplegia but being fervent and skilled sportsmen, the champions of the so-called Murderball game, or the Quad Rugby. With the fabulous work directed by Henry Rubin and Dana Shapiro, we plunge into the world of physically disabled people, whose struggle in life puts them head-and-shoulders above many of those who can operate all their limbs without any impairments. The main disability pertinent to these people, as they themselves claim is hidden in their minds, not in their bodies. Didn't you know that?

From the very first seconds of the film, we just know it: it's not about pitied handicaps trying to get with through the day their problem; it is about strong men, who might suffer from physical disabilities, but whose "drive to excel" has not been wiped out. In fact the heroes of the film show us what our eyes at first couldn't see: if you "use all you've got" with devotion and faith in the better, you can go further than you ever thought. And the desire to move on in life after life-changing (not life-crushing!) tragedies has taken the heroes of the documentary to places they never dreamt of in the first place.

The documentary places us in the position equal to the people in wheelchairs. All the perspectives are those from the position of a person sitting in the wheelchair. Low angles used in camerawork as if exalt these disabled people, make them either stand above or at the eye-level of the viewer. And when we see the up-right standing people in the film, we glance at them from a wheelchair. The perspectives of camera fixed near the rolling wheels low to the ground convey the atmosphere of dynamism, telling us: this is real sports, fast, rough, and liberating. The external composition keeps up the dynamic pace of the movie, especially in the “action” scenes of the quad rugby games. Shots, dynamic and still, weave into the tapestry void of any linear sequence, we keep traveling across the time and feel captivated at the sight of this voluminous picture. Nothing of the flat mundane shooting is allowed in the film: if shots are still, they are only establishing shots or those of personal interviews. When anything pertains to sports and competition, life within and without the quad rugby field, it is effervescent, unbound, flourishing. The visual rhythm of many scenes is impressive indeed: who could think that quad rugby can be so dynamic, so breath-taking; shots of scoring and ball passing convey the artistically elaborated external composition without which the documentary would’ve tasted less of an adventure. Also, the combination of real time and compressed time is very effective, to my mind. The two and a half years embodied in the 85 minutes seemed to have lasted both long enough to embrace the stretch of times and fast enough not to get bored somewhere along the way.

The evolution of characters is shown from a few perspectives as well. We praise the film-makers' successful endeavors to cover not only the professional lives of the Paralympics athletes, but their personal lives and family affairs. These Murderball men are complete personalities in all aspects of human life, bringing fulfillment to the lives of their family members, making their spouses, brothers and sisters, and children to be proud of them. Nothing that is present in the “normal” human is alien to these people; yet more, their love of

life, their struggle for reaching new heights and conquering new ground amidst what others call a disaster is not only surprising; it is inspiring. Joe Soares, Mark Zupan and others grow professionally. The game they play is more than a pastime or a profession for them; it is part of their identity and an indelible proof of the fact that human body limits in no way the human spirit. The point of view of the quadriplegic sportsmen not only deserves attention; according to the movie, it is admirable.

Speaking of the visual rhythm within the documentary, we need to say it is also strongly represented through shot sequences, camera motion, and even animation (Bob's dream retold). The dynamism of camerawork takes the viewer to the culmination so many times, often cooling off with a fade-to-black, and the compressed time combined with real-time scenes shot from a direct participant's perspective is nothing but a brilliant approach to embracing the extended period of training and preparation that yields the good fruit of amazing performance.

The heroes of the documentary stand before the viewer as real as they can be, with all inner struggles and insecurities, ambitions and longings. Daring to think that the story of these people is somewhat adorned or exaggerated by the compassionate directors is a crime. Nothing, not a single shot, not a word, not a hint of intonation points to the slightest possibility of such claim.

By the time the viewer has traveled to the end of the 2.5-year-long journey with the main characters and the USA and Canada Quad Rugby teams, she/he is confident that there is no way for despair or social misperception with regards to the handicapped people. And it is the very core message of the documentary. It is the good news, the news of believing in living the life using all that one has, that these men bring to the world by visiting others who share their problems, setting a good example before them and encouraging to ward off

despair once and for all in exchange for a rewarding life, the only hints of impairment in which would be the dysfunction of certain limbs.

This deep and genuine documentary shows the public that the things which one's eyes can see as doom or a verdict are not doomed or sentenced to endless despair. Like a wheelchair, they can be turned into an attribute of a breath-taking game.

### ***Conclusion***

As we approach the end of this discussion of the two documentary films that left a mark in the world of cinematography, we would like to confirm one final time that there is always room for understanding, even of those who hate you and think it righteous, as *The Most Hated Family in America* has proved; there is always room for hope, even if we see nothing more than a maimed body, hope vested in the strong spirit, as *Murderball* has sincerely shown. It is yet wonderful that there are people owing to whom we are helped to remember essential things and our very hearts are revisited by these awesome truths.