

Trafficked in America – Forced Labor and American Obligation

“Until our laws and our systems and our society hold responsible everyone who profits from human trafficking, we are not ending human trafficking” (Altan & Cediél, 51:11-23). Immigration attorney Sonia Parras voiced this claim in *Trafficked in America*, a documentary investigating labor trafficking within the United States. PBS Frontline, the producer of this film, presents this same argument, asking its viewers to think critically about the implications of modern day slavery in the United States. *Trafficked In America* works to convince Americans of the seriousness of labor trafficking through emotionally appealing diction and imagery, indisputable visual evidence, and the credibility of relevant individuals.

Trafficked in America employs fervid, compelling diction in order to convey the severity of labor trafficking within the United States. The documentary immediately cuts at the heart of the viewer, saying, “This is a crime that hides in plain sight... It’s probably just one of those things that you don’t want to know” (Altan & Cediél, 0:01-11). Through this opening line, the directors, Daffodil Altan and Andrès Cediél, promptly introduce the audience to the message of their film. Using bold, direct language, they introduce this argument that labor trafficking is a grave issue that federal and state governments and their citizens are unwilling to address. Even during interviews, special emphasis is placed on these startling declarations that will shock the audience. John Glessner, a man who watched labor trafficking unfold within his own egg corporation, says, “I mean do you suspect that this is going on? Probably. But do you really wanna try digging into it?” (19:50-20:03) The flippancy in Glessner’s statement ignites an anger within viewers – shouldn’t individuals with his degree of power do something to stop such an inhumane process? Through the inclusion of statements like Glessner’s, *Trafficked in America* ignites a fire within viewers to enact change regarding labor trafficking.

PBS Frontline also utilizes photographs and video clips to impart the immense gravity of labor trafficking to Americans. Throughout the documentary, the contrast between the frigid, lifeless fields that hold the farms that the forced laborers work within and the beautiful, green landscape of their home in Guatemala is stark (Altan & Cediél, 0:49-1:10, 9:31-9:44). The directors of *Trafficked in America* use imagery of these landscapes to not only reflect the aesthetic quality of the environments themselves, but also to indicate the change of fortune for people who are trafficked to the United States. As viewers witness the change from an idyllic, family-oriented lifestyle to one marked by violence and fear, they grow to understand the magnitude of the heartache these victims must endure. Likewise, the graphics of *Trafficked in America* clearly display the dark nature of the subject. Oftentimes throughout the film, words like “enslaved” are pasted against a dark background in a large, somber font (Altan & Cediél, 25:20-25), and portraits of human traffickers are portrayed to appear like mugshots (34:30-35). The grim colorings of these graphics effectively convey the dark connotation that PBS Frontline wants Americans to associate with labor trafficking. Through something as simplistic as the palette of their illustrations, PBS Frontline emotionally impacts their viewers’ perceptions about forced labor.

However, *Trafficked in America* does not exclusively rely on emotional appeals – PBS Frontline also incorporates visual footage that appeals to the audience’s logical reasoning. In the introduction of the documentary, a video taken inside one of these massive chicken farms is shown, in which a child laborer tells firsthand what it is like to work in this environment (Altan & Cediél, 2:14-54). While the description of working in the egg industry is horrendous, the footage within the actual farm says what a million words never could. Corpses of dead hens cover the bottom of coops, feces fall into the workers’ unprotected eyes, and the conditions are

clearly unhealthy for both employees and animals. Altan and Cediél use visual evidence like this throughout the film to verify the claims made about labor trafficking. Another forced laborer speaks about the appalling state of the overcrowded trailer he was made to live in saying, “The house was in complete disrepair” (Altan & Cediél, 3:07-4:03). However, this statement pales in comparison to the actual situation that the trafficking victims were living in – glass and dust litter the dingy tiles, the bottom of the trailer is pulled up to reveal children’s bedding and shoes underneath, and a five-gallon bucket serves as a makeshift toilet. By including video proof of the filth that trafficking victims are made to live in, PBS Frontline forces its viewers to reckon with the reality of forced labor and its implications for its survivors.

Trafficked in America also captures the attention of its viewers through the reputation of both its producer and the distinguished individuals interviewed throughout the film. PBS is regarded among Americans as a well-respected media outlet and is typically considered to be fairly bipartisan. As a result, PBS’s content garners the attentiveness of Americans nationwide, crossing socioeconomic and political boundaries. Because of this, *Trafficked in America* reaches a broader audience and better communicates its message. In addition, the many pertinent individuals featured within the documentary aid in gaining the audience's trust. Over the course of the film, the UC Berkeley Investigative Reporting team speaks with immigration attorneys (Altan & Cediél, 51:11-23), the US Secretary of Labor (15:15-30), and even Pablo Duran, Sr., the ringleader of a massive labor trafficking network (40:10-44), who are all experts in their respective fields. PBS Frontline employs the testimonies of these figures to convey the reality of the horrific forced labor situation in America. Because PBS reinforces the credibility of their information, viewers are more receptive and attentive to the issue illustrated within *Trafficked in America*.

In conclusion, *Trafficked in America* uses a myriad of rhetorical techniques to appeal to Americans' emotions, reasoning, and sense of their credibility in order to persuade them of the pressing concern of labor trafficking within the United States. Through intense language and graphics, irrefutable video evidence, and corroboration by relevant individuals, PBS Frontline presents its argument in an enthralling manner that both educates and incites action within the audience. Viewers of *Trafficked in America* must deliberate on what their own obligation is as Americans in stopping forced labor in their nation.

Works Cited

Altan, Daffodil and Andrés Cediél, directors. *Trafficked in America*. YouTube, FRONTLINE

PBS, 12 Jan. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp9E5nkr-wQ. Accessed 24 Sept. 2021.