



# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 697, Interview with Louie Psihoyos

**Mariann Sullivan:** Welcome to Our Hen House, Louie.

**Louie Psihoyos:** Oh, very glad to be here.

**Mariann:** It's a pleasure to have you here. We're very excited. I'm such a huge fan, and I'm sure many of our listeners are as well.

Obviously, we want to get into the individual movies, each of which has had so much meaning for so many people. But before that, can I just ask you kind of a big question? Would you say there's a through line to all of your work?

Could you give us the theme?

**Louie:** Oh boy. Well, I'm a photographer. I was a photographer with National Geographic over the course of about 18 years. And people think National Geographic... They think of beautiful pictures, but to me, it's like, how could you use beautiful pictures to change the world?

And I know that sounds like I must be full of myself, but it's the truth. You're reaching one person at a time with anything you do, whether it's a podcast or a world-class photographic magazine. You can use those pictures to entertain, or you can use those pictures to entertain and change the world. Change that person. And when you change one person, you're changing the world.

I'm not saying that everything I did was always doing that, but that was always the motivation. Like how can you use photography, this very powerful arrow in your quiver, to change things? When I worked for National Geographic, they had 11 million subscribers; four people saw each one, so 15% of America. 44 million people saw the magazine every month.

It took about a year-a year and a half to do a story. But the through line is- I think the world's off balance, severely off-balanced. It's called Shifting Baseline. You know, scientists call it Shifting Baseline, where one generation has to adapt to the diminishment caused by the previous one. The world's still a beautiful place, don't get me wrong, but we could do so much better to preserve it for future generations. It's been likened that, ecologically, we're borrowing more money without paying off the debt, and the debt is just being more conscious of what we're doing to the planet.

So if there's a metaphor, a through line, I think it's like, I feel like given the talents that the team and I have, it's like we're crew members of the ship that's about to go over a waterfall, or something, or into a storm, and once in a while we're allowed to get up there and do a slight course correction.

We're not able to heal it completely, but we're able to keep mitigating some of the damage. I used to think, you know, let's make the world a better place than we found it, but now I think, let's at least leave the world a better place because we came this way. That the world's a little bit better on course, and then it'll be up to the next generation of children to sneak up to the pilot house and the controls.

But at least we can illuminate the way a little bit.

**Mariann:** Yeah, actually, this is really beautifully said. The line that goes with our organization is "change the world for animals" and yeah. Of course, we're not gonna change the world for animals, but of course, you are...you do what you can.

**Louie:** \*laughs\* I disagree with that.

We're doing it! We're doing it at scale.

I mean, they were killing 23,000 dolphins and porpoises every year for human consumption in Japan about the time that we made that film, started making that film. The last year, I remember that they had statistics, they killed 1,610 in Japan.

It's down over 93%. Not just because of that film but because of the activism around it. The awareness it created in the Japanese people that they now know that dolphin and porpoise meat is toxic. It's riddled with all sorts of heavy chemicals like mercury. Mercury being the most toxic, non-radioactive chemical in the world.

You know, they were eating it as like a health food in Japan. That's not happening at scale anymore. So I mean, I wholeheartedly disagree with this idea that we can't make a difference.

**Mariann:** I certainly didn't mean to sound like that! When we're talking about animals, just changing the world for one of them is an entire life. It's an entire life.

You don't have to change the entire world. You can do what you can, and you have done an enormous (amount). Let's talk about *The Cove*. Let's start there. Was that the first movie you ever made?

**Louie:** It was. Yeah.

**Mariann:** Is there anybody else who won an Oscar for the first movie they ever made? \*laughing\*

**Louie:** Well, Annie Costner, Kevin Costner's daughter, used to work with me. I was doing our second film *Racing Extinction*. I had dinner with her father and her down in New Orleans, this was during the Gulf Oil spill, and I was just coming off of *The Cove*. And I said, "It's really hard to think about your second film being a success after your first one does so well."

And he says, "Tell me about it. My first film I ever did was *Dances with Wolves*." I think it won like six or seven Academy Awards. There're three films I can think of that had sort of similar narratives, *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*, and *The Cove*.

Ex-military guy goes to some natives, in the case of the *Avatar*, that are nine feet long and blue. Same thing with *The Cove*. Finds out they're more intelligent and sentient than he realized and then creates a rag-tag army to vanquish his own species. So that was kind of the narrative through line of all three of those films.

But yeah, I never even thought about awards when we were making *The Cove*. We were just saying, "Well, let's get this seen somewhere. Anywhere."

Then there was this huge, huge upheaval. This is during the banking crisis of 2008/2009. And I think six or seven of the big distributors went out of business, just were vanquished from the earth, and so there was very little place for a film like ours to be seen.

We got into Sundance, we won Sundance. It was really difficult. And then we just went on this...I didn't know there were so many awards. *The Cove* became the first documentary in history to sweep all the film guilds. It won about 70 top film awards, from Sundance to the Academy Award. But the North Star was always like to change what's going on over there.

And I remember a philosophy student telling me...it wasn't...He's a philosophy teacher...teaches for UCSF, and he said, "You think you're gonna change the world with the film?"

I said, "Well, that's the dream!"

And now it has! We dream worlds, right? You dream. You change the world with stories, you don't change them necessarily with information. If the information strikes that emotion and the people's hearts, then you have a better chance. Some people change, but a very small percentage of the population actually will change behavior based on what they know. You have to use that information to get at their heart somehow. And I think that's what storytelling does.

And I think when you get...the medium of movies are so powerful, I call them the most powerful weapon in the world, I think, that we have for social change. Mark Twain said, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

And I think when you have the right words, the right pictures, and the right score, the right music coming together with the right story, you create a lightning storm of synapses in the brain. So that when people come out of one of our films, you're like, "Oh my God, the world's a little bit different."

We're using the same sort of devices that Hollywood uses. It's a thriller, you know. *Rolling Stone* said that *The Cove* is a cross between *Born Identity* and *Flipper*. We constructed it like that. It's almost like a legal brief.

A great litigator will tell the jury a story. And take them to a place that they couldn't imagine. And at the end of the day, the verdict is how do you get the jury, which is the individual audience member, to go look at their lives a little bit differently and say, not just, "Oh, that was a great film." Who cares about that? There's a lot of great films out there, and they make a lot more money than we do. But to me, our North Star is how do you change the world?

How do you change that one person in the seat so that they change their diet? They change the way that they look at the natural world. They change the way that they look at their place in the universe. Their eyes get open, maybe for the first time, in a way that hasn't been done before.

And that's the challenge that we face, is that there's so much information right now, which is wonderful. It's a beautiful thing that we have these incredibly powerful devices, always within an arm's length. Right now, we're not trying to get likes and millions of people to follow us. We're just trying to change each single person that sees our content. And in a meaningful way. So I'm always thinking about the audience.

What are you saying to them? What are you gonna say with this scene? What are they gonna get out of it? How's this gonna build on the narrative? They come out of the theater, they're thinking, "My life has just changed."

**Mariann:** Yeah, I totally agree with you, and that's one of the things I really wanted to focus on, especially talking about stories.

I mean, people are moved by stories. I think one of the great achievements of your movies is, well, at least the ones that deal with...particularly *The Cove* and *Racing Extinction*, is to tie the loss of these animals, the loss of species, to the tragedy and loss of one animal. The way you dealt with the rays in *Racing Extinction*, I think, was particularly moving.

You actually brought that animal to life. That's really hard to do. And you also kind of do it with the people, highlight the emotional side of the environmentalists. So, so often, these guys frequently, a lot of them, just seem like scientists. They're not used to expressing themselves emotionally, and you manage to catch them at the moment that they're starting to tear up, and you just see that.

Is that a big goal of yours, to kind of bring in both the animal story and the story of the people who care about them?

**Louie:** Absolutely. You know what? I've been working with scientists since I was in my twenties now with *National Geographic*, you know, doing science stories for them. You go out to dinner with a scientist, and they're telling you these amazing stories, and you think, "Oh, I just can't wait! I can't wait until the writer gets that. I want to get that!" But when they get in front of the writer, they turn into PhDs all of a sudden. Part of their brain clicks on where they're thinking they're really speaking for the seven people that they're trying to

impress. Their muses. Instead of thinking of the audience, they're thinking of, you know, "How's this gonna affect my profession? What are my peers gonna think of me?"

**Mariann:** That's how they've been trained too. They're trained to talk like that.

**Louie:** Yeah. And they're much more unguarded one-on-one because they have to do it because they're scientists.

They have to hedge...they have to be overly conservative and not be screaming. And here we are in the middle of a mass extinction event. This change of ecosystems on a grand scale that the Earth has never seen before, except when a comet hit the planet 66 million years ago. And we're sitting around putting thermometers on it and doing acidity readings and all this stuff.

All that needs to be done, of course, but we're not taking action. And what we try to do is interpret those physical laws into something that people can read. Now, let me give you a stat that I find phenomenal. There were 7,000 studies done previous to the 1964 US Surgeons General's report that smoking is hazardous to your health.

7,000 studies. 30 years later, we were still smoking on planes. There was still smoke in restaurants. There was still smoking in bars, and the industry was crying about how they're gonna lose all this money, and people wouldn't fly if they couldn't smoke, et cetera, et cetera. That never happened, but that allowed this to go on for three decades.

What happened? The lever there was secondhand smoke, right? That was the lever. And so this is important, I think, with the animal rights side. Something that we've learned is, and you know, everybody listening to this is probably an empath. They feel deeply about animals, and that's why we're here together, and that's what motivates us.

And we think if we could only get people to think exactly like us and feel like us, they would act like us. But the studies show that there's only about six or 7% of the population will change their diet based on animals or climate. And therefore, it's not a matter of another billboard, another documentary showing mass inhumanity to animals.

It's really, how do you flip a lever? What's the secondhand smoke for the animal rights movement? And there's a lot of them, and I just don't think we're pushing on the right ones. If you only have a cohort of six to 7% of the population that

will hear your message, you're still about three to 4% shy of creating the tipping point for change.

So, there's some great studies that show that for the science of social change, you need 10% of the population, not 9%, nine and a half, not seven. 10% of the population a hundred percent committed to the truth. And then that will be the lever that starts to flip. It'll be unstoppable. I talked to the lead author of that one particular study, and he sent me the paper, and it had about three pages of algorithms in it.

I called him back up. I said, "Listen, can you explain this to me like a kindergartner? Like what is this all saying?" He said, "Well, it's like if you're trying to create steam, you'll never be able to do it until you get water up to a boiling point of hundred degrees Celsius, 212 degrees Fahrenheit. That's the tipping point for social change. Otherwise, you're just heating up water." And he said, "You could do that till the end of time, but it won't create steam. So 10% of the population, a hundred percent committed. There's some numbers that show that once you get to 30%, then people are doing it just because other people are doing it.

There's other studies that show that the moteliors, hoteliers put a little placard you see in the bathroom. It said, "you'll save this much energy if you hang up this towel and reuse it just like you do at home." Nobody does it. Very few people will actually do it. But you put a placard that says, "78% of the people that use this hotel room hang up their towels," then statistically more people will.

**Mariann:** I love that. I just love that.

**Louie:** So, and that's not to say that we're lemmings or that we're stupid. It's just to say that's just the way it is.

**Mariann:** We're primates, and you know, there are tendencies. Not lemmings, exactly, but we like to act as a group.

**Louie:** Yeah. So how can you use all the tools at your disposal? And so when we did the film, *The Game Changers*, it was very studied.

Everybody in that film was an animal rights advocate. Almost everybody. But we knew that there were some white papers that were done by the Vegan Mafia that said, "What's wrong? We're collectively, over the decades, hundreds of millions of dollars into this movement, and nothing's happening."



And a white paper showed that people had this belief that it was normal, necessary, and natural to eat this way. And it was really the men who were the obstacles to adopting the diet. Because women still primarily...primarily, I'm not saying always, just primarily, buy the food and cook it. And a guy because he is marketed to so heavily about- you need meat to be strong and endurance & ability. And so we just attacked that full-on. And we used James Wilkes, who's a killer. He teaches the Federales and the Navy Seals how to subdue people with their bare hands. So any guy looking at James Wilkes will say he's anything but the typical vegan, you know, he was like the anti-vegan.

And then he goes he gets injured, finds out what he needs for recovery, finds out that the gladiators were, in fact, mostly vegetarians, et cetera, et cetera. And his story takes us on that venture and that film... You know, Merl Edge did a study that said over a 15-year period...the film's only been about for about four years...but they said over a 15-year period, 75% of the worldwide interest in plant-based diets is because of that film.

**Mariann:** I don't doubt that at all. I'm pretty familiar with all of the movies and that's the one that you show people who you think you can never talk into it. That's the movie.

**Louie:** But we use science, we use the studies, we use the methodology.

You know, there's another white paper done that said, "Who will guys listen to?" Sports Heroes and Ivy League...people at the top of their profession from an Ivy League background. We used Walter Willis, head of nutrition at Harvard, the head of anthropology at Harvard, et cetera, et cetera. Those are all like top people in the field, and it was effective.

Those are expensive movies, but they're not like a Hollywood movie, where they cost hundreds of millions of dollars. But for a few million, we're changing the world. So to me, it's just a matter of how do you get the funding to do these films. And how do you find that lever?

The world doesn't need another film. They need another film that's gonna help us become a little bit more one.

**Mariann:** One of the things that I felt was one of your levers that you use so effectively is appealing to people's sense that they've been deceived, that things are hidden from people. I mean, that's really true in *The Game Changers*. This is shocking information to people, that this food might be good for you. And they've really been deceived about it.



But about all of the films, I mean, they're deceived about how much cruelty there is to animals. They're deceived about how many wild animals that we're losing. That's particularly true in *Racing Extinction* when you get to the end, and you highlight this beautiful photographic imagery on the buildings that I'd like to talk about as well. And people are wrapt because they really don't know this, and they don't know it because they've been deceived.

Is that one of the ways that you talk to people? And I wonder whether it resonates with you personally that you felt that some of these things were shocking to you and that you had been deceived.

**Louie:** Well, deceived is a strong word. I'm thinking of, let's say, *The Game Changers* and doctors. I think a lot of the research doctors know this information, but you talk to the average doctor in America, they have no training at all. And I mean no, like, maybe one hour of nutritional study in their whole medical career. Like one hour, and that could be what do you put into the IV bag?

Hippocrates said, I dunno, 2,500 years ago, "Let food be thy medicine." And now we're understanding more than ever it's the fringe doctors, the ones that do lifestyle medicine, that were on the outside, that are becoming on the inside now because it's this crazy idea that what you put in your mouth and what you do to your body, let's say moderate exercise, might be actually helpful.

Now they're finding that there's incredible advantages to a whole foods plant-based diet and moderate exercise in conjunction with other things like good sleep, whatever. Things that we should have learned a long time ago. But if our doctors don't know...

I think money is a huge motivator. So when you go to things like dietary guidelines that they do every five years, those are political guidelines, and then we have to understand that. This is what the politicians are telling us, but it's filtered through all their lobbyists. And who are the lobbyists? They're not the people growing broccoli and alfalfa sprouts. They're the people growing beef and big ag and big pharma. You know, I don't think big pharma has a say in the dietary guidelines, but it's certainly politicians' constituents in cattle-growing states, or chicken-growing states, or pork-growing states. All they're lobbyists for nutritional guidelines. So, in that sense, we're definitely lied to. Yeah, absolutely.

So give people information or counter information to it, and then they can go look it up themselves. I probably can't talk about it too much, but I'm doing a big Netflix special right now on food, and I'm so excited by it.

It's a four-part series, but it's just been incredibly eye-opening because I want to know... Well, yeah, I probably can't talk about it too much. It's coming out on January 1st of 2024. But it's gonna be powerful. I think it's going to be one of the most effective films done in this movement, and because we have four parts to deal with it, and we're doing it in kind of this thriller style as well, I think we'll have a chance to bring in the animal rights side of it in a way that can slip it in there.

Because if you've been to a CAFO, 99.1% of the animals that we eat come from these confined animal feeding operations. And if anybody has ever been in one, it sears your brain. The smell, the conditions, and this is... we're talking every bit of McDonald's, every burger you've ever put in your mouth, every... you know, and people say, "Oh, I get my chicken from, you know, free range."

Well, free range isn't what they think it is, you know?

**Mariann:** No, of course not.

**Louie:** Sometimes cage-free just means that they have about less than a notebook paper of area on a feces-filled floor to trudge around in their own filth.

**Mariann:** It's all nonsense. It's all nonsense.

And even when people say it, they basically mean, you know, once they went out to a restaurant and they ordered the free-range, or whatever. Nobody's doing it all... Well, maybe a few people are, but yeah, it's all nonsense. It's all horrifying.

**Louie:** Yeah. So how can you open people's eyes to that?

And I think we're at that point that we can start to move those dials, you know?

**Mariann:** Yay! I hope you're right. I'm so glad you told me that you're making this, and I'm so frustrated that you then said, but I can't tell you anymore about it, but this is very exciting news!

**Louie:** It's exciting when you start to see the data that comes out of this.

It's so important. This information gets out there, but it's just like this information is out there. It's just that it hasn't been channeled in an entertaining vehicle.

**Mariann:** Exactly. And people don't wanna know, so you have to get past some resistance.

Like people aren't going to dial in to necessarily follow the social media that's going to tell them this. They would like to not know, but it doesn't mean that they will refuse to know if they're shown in a way that they can digest it.

**Louie:** Remember that transitional period, maybe it was 10 or 15 years ago, where you had your friends or relatives that would go smoke, and they would try to get away with it at a restaurant. Or they'd go excuse themselves in between courses, and they go out and have a smoke together. And then it became like, "Oh, they're one of those people," and they became ostracized. I think we're seeing that happen with meat now.

Where do you live?

**Mariann:** Oh, I live in upstate New York, Rochester.

**Louie:** Okay. Well, it's a little bit more rural, maybe. I think in the urban centers, it's happening.

**Mariann:** I teach animal law, and I'm very, very familiar with all the numbers and what's happening, like, more familiar than I wanna be.

**Louie:** Okay. Well, Tony Saba, who's a futurist, I remember him giving a talk at an environmental conference, and this was back in the early two thousands. And to be an environmentalist back in the early two thousands was to be like the fringe of the fringes.

I had one of the first three electric cars in Colorado in 2002, a fully electric Toyota Rav. It was powered by 114 solar panels, and I was so excited by this thing. I went and bought two more cars, and so I had half the electric vehicles in Colorado.

**Mariann:** Oh my God, I love it. I love it.

**Louie:** And I thought I discovered the holy Grail, right? It's like, my God, this car's amazing.

**Mariann:** It's magic.

**Louie:** People were like, “What did it cost? How far does it go?” Back then, it was like 120 miles. But boy, it didn't cost me anything for gas! It didn't have to go to an oil change. I didn't have to go and sit and wait at a Jiffy Lube reading stupid magazines \*Mariann laughs\* for an hour or be told to come back in two hours. I'd hate garages and fixing cars, and there's very little to go wrong with an electric car, and I was paying for it like pennies per mile as opposed to \$5 a gallon.

Anyway, it took so long to get that word out. Now let me give you an idea. Okay, so that was a 2002 Toyota Rav. I bought it a few years later. In *Racing Extinction*, we took a Tesla Model S, and we turned it into like a Bond car for the environment. We wanted to make like a sexy environmental car. So, it's the first car in the world to have an electroluminescent paint job we could change...

**Mariann:** Right. With Leilani Münter? She's been on the podcast.

**Louie:** Yeah. We drove that car together out of the Tesla factory, and she wasn't on the road with it for a minute, and she turned to me and said, “Every other car on the road just became a relic.”

Now, we were interviewing Elon Musk for that film. This was in 2012. And we were gonna interview him in October, and he wrote back and said, “Can we change the interview to the end of next quarter?” And I said, “Sure. Why?” He said, “Well, I could go bankrupt.” And 10 years later, he's the richest guy in the world.

These 10-year increments are really important to remember. And I was bringing up Tony Saab, the futurist. And I had a great-grandmother who was born in the 1880s. 1880s!

So she was like in her twenties when horses...and she was from New York. She used to swim in the East River. The Bronx used to be the Bronx's farm, that was a family.

**Mariann:** I just have to say, I had a grandmother who was born in the Bronx in the 1880s, so, who knows? \*both laugh\*

**Louie:** Well, so when there were all horses back in the 19 hundreds, the famous picture taken, I think it was down Broadway, of the Easter Parade of 1900. It

was all horses except for one car. 13 years later, it was completely reversed. It was all cars and one horse.

My great-grandmother said that it stunk in New York. You know, there's 20,000 tons of horse manure in the streets every day. Horses would die; nobody would pick them up. There are 60,000 gallons of urine. You could smell New York from six miles away. Well, you know, sailing into the city.

So it was anything but pretty, now cars have become something else, but horses weren't what we thought it was. There are flies and smell. Bring those smells into the offices, into the schools, et cetera, et cetera. You know, in 2000...was it 2007, we were hitting the number two keys six times in our flip phones to text a capital C. So these changes happen really quickly.

**Mariann:** Yeah, quicker and quicker every day.

**Louie:** Yeah. And so I think...

**Mariann:** You watch a TV show from 10 years ago, and you don't even understand the tech they're using. \*Louie laughs\* The phones look ridiculous.

**Louie:** \*laughing\* Exactly. So these things it's happening pretty quick.

Obviously, it's not as quick as I would like, but instead of moping about it, what are we gonna do about it? And we're doing something about it. And to me, it doesn't feel like work. It just feels like a gift. Like to do something meaningful. I'm excited every night that I go to bed, I think I can't wait to wake up in the morning and do something to put these pieces of the puzzle back together. To put these films together.

We're working on six films right now.

**Mariann:** Can you tell us more about any of them other than the Netflix one, \*sarcastic emphasis\* which you won't talk about? \*Louie laughs\*

**Louie:** Well, I did. I probably talked too much about it already. \*Mariann laughs\*

We're doing one on the Leuser ecosystem. It's called *The Last Place On Earth*.

The Leuser is a national forest in Indonesia. It's the last place where wild animals like tigers, elephants, rhinos, and orangutans are in the wild together,

and we're focusing on these mostly local activists that are getting back these illegal palm oil plantations and letting them...they regenerate quickly back into forests. So we're following them. These four activists.

We're doing a film on plastic pollution solutions because plastic is a huge problem. But we find...I think that's the lever with this is the human health angle with plastics. Listen, I run an organization called the Oceanic Preservation Society, and I can't tell you how many times I've gone to the ocean and I can't even hop in because of all the garbage floating in there.

The last two times I was in Europe, I didn't even get in the water because I was looking down there, and it was like a landfill, like an aquatic landfill floating by.

And okay, so the problem is...

**Mariann:** But you're making a movie about solutions, though, not just about the problem.

**Louie:** Right. But here's the lever.

Like, three years ago, when we started the research on this film, we thought, "Well, let's look at all the films that have been done." And, you know, it was like, "Oh my God," they were so depressing. How many more rivers of plastic do you...or gyres of plastic do you...you know, we know that. We've always been thinking, "What's the lever?"

And the lever, I think, is the human health angle again, right? It's that they didn't have ways to measure microplastics before like they do now, but now they've found, it's just in the last year, they found microplastics in the placenta of fetuses. They found it in breast milk. They found it in the brains of people, the chemicals, the plasticizing chemicals, and the phthalates that are used to soften or harden plastics.

Those chemicals are now in our body and they're obesogens. They're affecting our intelligence. They're affecting our...what's called an obesogen...It's like our weight. It can genetically affect not just your own weight but your progeny's weight four generations down. We think that's the lever.

Once people understand these plastics are making their way, this kind of toxic trespass is coming into our bodies. That's gonna be the lever. Then the trick is...unlike *The Game Changers*, the film about plant-based athletes. You can be

convinced to say, "Okay, I'm gonna go to the grocery store. I'm gonna spend more time in the veggie aisle now."

**Mariann:** It's pretty easy to fix.

**Louie:** Yeah. This one, you can't do it so quick. But what we can do is highlight laws that should be made like they do in the EU. We've only outlawed, I think, a few dozen chemicals here, and they have like over a thousand in the EU.

And there should be tens of thousands that need to be studied before they get put into the bloodstream of infants and, you know, people anywhere. But the industry doesn't want that done. But we'll do a film about that. And we're doing a film on female big-wave surfers. They've got pay parity in the sport of big wave surfing.

**Mariann:** That sounds like fun.

**Louie:** Yeah, that's a good one. And boy, we got one on the Fermi Paradox and the Great Filter. Which is, essentially, there are all these existential threats that are out there besides just humanity that create a need for us to potentially get our DNA or life on the planet into another solar system.

**Mariann:** That's like really the opposite of the female surfers movie. That one doesn't sound like fun at all.

**Louie:** Well, Leilani's doing that...

**Mariann:** Total existential risk.

**Louie:** Leilani's doing that one. Yeah.

**Mariann:** I wanna get back to another question about making movies. I guess some of the movies that you're planning on will involve these kinds of issues, but there's some stuff in your movies that's really horrible.

I mean, it's horrible to see. It's upsetting, and I'm just always curious- as a filmmaker, how do you judge how much to show so that people don't just shut down or turn it off? Where do you draw that line?

**Louie:** You test it. When we did *The Cove*, that was done with hidden cameras. We snuck into the cove using thermal cameras and drones, and night vision.



You know, we used all the tech that we had available to us, but we had to go back and retrieve these fake rocks that had cameras hidden in them. And when we came back, we had 40 hours of footage, and I thought...and some of it was just like so horrible. I was thinking, "Okay, I'll let the editors deal with this stuff. They'll figure it out." And I was looking over the shoulder of another editor, four editors that are all looking at this footage. And the footage was really central to the film. It was a small part of the film, but it was central to it.

These were the first hard drive cameras ever made by anybody. And Sony, we had these prototypes and the hard drives. There wasn't even a way to get the information off of them for a year, so we kept on just replacing the hard drives, the internal hard drives, and we stacked them up in the air conditioning ducts of the hotels in Japan. We had runners every day that would whisk these hard drives back to America, DHL, or FedEx. And we had this stack of hard drives we could finally look at like a year later because they developed the technology to actually do that.

And I thought, "Okay, I don't have to relive that. Let the editors do it." I was looking over, I had a question for one editor. Another editor was scrubbing over...Well, scrubbing means there's like a scroll bar, and you could just basically drag your mouse over this image or this video. And you can watch it in real time and have it be four hours and 10 minutes, or you could scrub it and watch it in 10 seconds. And editors get lazy, and they scrub through it really fast, looking just for some action. Then they'll slow down and take a look at it. And on the screen, it was just an image of...one of the cameras we set in the cove, and it was looking down at the cove, and they'd just killed the dolphins.

And you don't see any dolphins, but it's all red. It was just surrealistic, you know. It was like something out of a Stephen King movie because the water had turned just like full of blood. And so looked all calm, and you could hear the birds chirping. This editor's scrubbing through it. I saw this little black blip come up, and I go, "What was that?"

He goes, "Well, nothing. Nothing." And I said, "No, go back. Go back!" And we took a long time to find it, it was very glitchy. What it was was they'd send divers down like snorkelers to go down because when they kill a dolphin, the dolphins go down to the bottom. They don't float.

And so they sent these divers down to retrieve the bodies. And this diver had come up, and he blew blood out of a snorkel. He looked around, and then he went back into the water and had these yellow fins that disappeared slowly into the blood as he dove back down. And I thought, "That's so powerful."

You don't see any dolphins at all. But, it says something about how routine it was to them, that they're swimming in it. It just became this incredible metaphor, and I thought, "Well, I can't rely on these editors to come up with the good stuff." So I sat and watched it all myself. It took a month, and I was in absolute tears going...I mean, I'm not saying just metaphorically.

I was like crying in my studio. Back then, PS headquarters was in the backyard. I would just be like, "Oh my God. I'm gonna have to look at this stuff again." I remember saying to myself, "If there's a God, let those animals' lives not be wasted in vain. Let me get something out of this."

And what we had come up with was that...I hate horror movies, and I realized that we had a really wicked, potentially wicked horror movie. And I hated horror movies growing up. And I went back and watched all the ones I didn't wanna see when I was a kid, all the Hitchcock films. And I noticed that in the best of them, Hitchcock created these...

You could see like Rebecca, the film Rebecca. It's about this woman that does this atrocious murder, but like it's all done with lighting and music, and innuendo. And there's one scene in *The Cove*... and so I went back and tried to find all those pieces, all those kind of surrealistic pieces. There was one scene that we did, we built an underwater camera that had a rock in it, you know, it was like a concrete rock, and we put it in the cove, and it was voted best scene in a movie that year.

Here's the scene...and people say, "Oh, that was so horrible." But you didn't see anything. What they saw was it was like in front of a fern, underwater fern, a school of stinging catfish come by, and then you hear the boats coming in the distance and the dolphins screaming, and then you hear the pipes banging because that's how they get the...You know, that's how we set this up before. That's how they get the dolphins to corral them into the cove. This wave of underwater sound that scares the dolphins, and that's how they herd them into the secret cove. And then you see the water go turn from green to red.

And it's not fake. And what you saw, all the horror was in your head. And in the film, in *The Cove*, the people say, "Oh, that scene was so hard to watch." But if you look at it, you never see a harpoon go directly into a dolphin. You witness a lot of horrible...you see a baby dolphin jump out of the water. Obviously this horror going there and it dives onto the rocks by a fisherman's feet and rolls back down.

It was all surrealistic stuff, and we realized that we could tell the story with just a very little bit. Your impetus is to show everything, and it's too much. A little bit of violence goes a long, long, long way.

**Mariann:** Oh, I totally agree. That is a fascinating story, and I really hear the spirit of Hitchcock within that.

I mean, I don't watch any modern horror movies because, exactly, they show too much. It's that anticipation or that imagination, imagining what's going on beyond and the use of sound. That is a fascinating story. I'm really glad you told it to us.

The other thing that I think that you use so effectively, at least in both *The Cove* and *Racing Extinction*, not as relevant to the other movies, is this sort of undercover operative kind of story, which you took part in.

Can you tell us a little bit about why? I think that was really effective. It gave us a feeling of adventure to the whole thing. But can you just tell us a little bit about what it's like to do that and how scary it is? If it's scary, I assume it is, because it looks really scary.

**Louie:** Way more scary, especially when you're in a foreign country, you know?

We still do. For the series I'm doing on food for Netflix, we did a few undercover things, and it brought me right back to those days. It is still scary, even when it's in America. You're exposing something that people don't want, and you're affecting their income, you're affecting their livelihood.

You're saying something about who we are, and you're using those people as proxies. I mean, there's a reason that they have ag-gag laws because if people saw where the food comes from... I mean, look what happened to dolphin hunting in Japan after we got in there with cameras and exposed what happened.

The business went down 60% in the first year. I'm actually proud of that. And the town says we've made them into villains. Whoa, okay. I didn't make them into anything. I just showed what happened. Yeah. People see our films, and they say, "Oh, bring me out on an undercover operation." And I go like, "You really don't understand what that's like."

And I remember this one person I was hanging out with, and I said, okay, there's actually something I've gotta go do at a store here in San Francisco. We had masks on, this was during the pandemic. I can't tell too much about what we

were doing, but we had buttonhole cameras and you know, a couple different hidden cameras.

And right before we got there she said, “I can't do this.” And, and we had a car waiting outside. We're in..

**Mariann:** I hear her. I totally hear her.

**Louie:** Yeah. Yeah. It's, it's like, okay, now imagine you're in China. You're faking being an illegal shark oil salesman, you know, that you're buying thousands...

**Mariann:** And they're probably fairly tough people. I mean, they're in a tough business.

**Louie:** Oh, and plus, they have the government behind them. And so, like, I'm assuming you could disappear pretty easily in China.

**Mariann:** But, in the US, we have ag-gag laws, but you know, a lot of them have been held unconstitutional.

And a lot of states don't have ag-gag laws, and a lot of film has been taken of what's going on in factory farms. In fact, animal protection groups have been doing that for a while. And it changed things a lot. Before then, it was just like this black box, and nobody had any idea, but it hasn't changed things that much. What can be done with that kind of footage that makes it more moving to people?

I'll go back to the film that you did of the manta rays because they're wild animals. You could compare the horror with the beauty, and it's so hard to do that with animals in factory farms. They just look like victims.

And tell me, what is it? Why doesn't that film get out and make people...we're so horrified that this is going on, and when people really register...this happens all the time with my students. I teach animal law. Some of them have never seen it before, and when they see it...they're forced to watch it because it's in class, and they have no choice.

And they're in shock. Absolute shock. But this is their world. This is where all their food comes from. What's the disconnect? I mean, we have some film, but it's not getting to people the way your films have.

**Louie:** Well, I think it's probably not wrapped up in the right story, the right package. And we're doing it with this new Netflix series that I'm working on, and I think it's going to be very effective.

But, you know, I've only seen the first two episodes together, and I'm pinching myself because I think that it could be really good. All these ideas, they start out as a dream, like a collective dream. You get a bunch of really talented people together, and you think, okay.

This is how I start out talking to the crew. I said, "I have no idea how we're gonna put this all together, but we're gonna start out here, and at the end of the day, I want people to be thinking about what they're putting in their mouth, what they're putting on their plate. Because what they're putting on their plate can change them, and it can change the world. So how we get there, exactly, I'm not sure. We're gonna be doing this together."

I'll be a ring leader, but it's really kind of a, if I had to explain, it's like a dysfunctional government. I'm trying to be like maybe a president where you need a really powerful judicial and executive branch. You need great editors, you need great producers. You need other people to give notes.

And we test our films a lot. At least three times with audiences and not friendly audiences. They don't have to be...it's better at some points, like towards the end, to not have people that know the story as much like how to make a movie. You want to hear it from an audience.

It's like, what are they getting? What's their takeaway? And sometimes, sometimes you're giving people the information, but you're not giving it at the right time or in a way that they can hear it. And this all goes back to storytelling.

You listen to comedians hone their craft, and you see like a Netflix special. They'll work it for like a year and a half before they do a Netflix special. And you think, "Well, does it take a year and a half to come up with all those jokes?" It takes a year and a half to refine them. They're checking on timing. They're checking on wording. Going back to what Twain said, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

They're trying to have that hit. They're trying to create that lightning and they want to kill. The good ones are doing social change, social commentary. They're getting people to look at themselves, but we're trying to do that, and I'm

assuming that people are maybe getting delivered the joke, but they're not hearing the tone or the delivery or the story or the why of it.

It's a craft. It's an art, and it's a craft. You know, we have to test our films, just like an actor does, in front of an audience and watch the reactions and listen to their commentary and evolve. You're iterating, right? It's not like everything we take is gonna be amazing. It's like, but you can get to amazing if you keep your north star tight, if you always keep that in focus.

Now I think the problem...maybe in some ways, we have a little bit easier task than some filmmakers. And I don't mean to compare myself to...

**Mariann:** I cannot imagine how you have an easier task. Tell me.

**Louie:** Because what most of them are trying to do is just make money. You know, butts in seats, \$10, and a box of popcorn. You know, how do you judge the success of a movie?

It's either by how much bank does it make? How much mayo? They've only made 27 million their first weekend. Oh, that director's never gonna work again. Well, if we made \$27 million on a documentary, we'd be like...well, first of all, it'd be like, "Okay, how many more docs can we make outta this thing?"

But I think if you say, "We know what reaction that we want from the audience." Not that everybody's gonna feel the same after they see a film, but if it's just out there trying to entertain people, then it's like, so what? You know? People do it at a very high level. There are quite a few narrative directors that are always thinking about, I wanna say, the same genre that we're doing.

It's not documentary, but it's like they're trying to maybe use films to do everything as well, to be entertaining and push the envelope for cultural change. But you know, we're doing it on pennies on the dollar compared to what they're doing it on.

**Mariann:** But it seems to me that your job is much harder than anybody's job because you're trying to tell people things that they don't wanna know, or at least I think they don't wanna know them.

But the thing that you do have is you have total truth on your side. Like it's just all you have to do is tell the truth and somehow get people to listen to it cuz it's all true.

**Louie:** Well, they say tell the truth, but that's what the scientists think too.

**Mariann:** But you have to say it in a way they can hear it.

**Louie:** Yeah. Like there's this wonderful woman, Shanna Swan, she's a researcher, and she's been working on phthalates and bisphenol, these are the plasticine chemicals, for the last 20 years of her career. Top researcher in the field, not getting anywhere, and she just realized, I've gotta do something.

Now she's on Joe Rogan, she's on Comedy Central. She's letting them use her as a way to get these bigger stories out there, but she's probably losing credibility (to) some of her peers because she's speaking out in these unconventional venues. But now she's reaching an audience that they'll never be able to reach.

**Mariann:** I think academia gets way too insular, and there are too many great minds just not communicating with people in times when information is desperately needed.

**Louie:** Yeah, but here's the thing, like even like the secondhand smoke thing, that was data-driven, right? You won't remember the name of the researchers who did those studies, but you remember the effects. And it was mostly activists and organizations working with that information to interpret it for politicians. Of course, you need both. The politicians need to go to the voters and say, "Here's what the science shows." I think I can tell one story because it's really out there in the news. Mayor Eric Adams was an incredible character. People on our crew... We interviewed him several months back, and some of the work crew said, "Oh, you know, New Yorkers, they either love or hate the mayor." And some of them hated the mayor until they heard his interview and they were like, "I love that guy!" \*Mariann laughs\*

**Mariann:** He's a charmer. He is.

**Louie:** Oh, he's got this story. You know this...

**Mariann:** Yeah. His story's unbelievable.

**Louie:** Oh yeah. I mean, his whole family was diabetic. He was diabetic. He got...

**Mariann:** He was going blind, literally going blind!



**Louie:** And then once he was able to heal himself, he was like, “A lot of people out there in New York, just like me.” We have the biggest hospital system in the country. We have one of the biggest school systems in the country. And now he has meatless Mondays and Plant Forward Fridays.

He has, I think it's nine or 11 area hospitals, they all default to vegan meals, so you're not feeding people the meal that got them into the hospital in the first place. And I was like, wow. That's huge because then you know...that little maxim, you know, if you could do it in New York...there's no place as divided as New York for people.

But when you get hospitals that are serving vegetarian meals or vegan meals at a hospital.

**Mariann:** It's unbelievable. It really is.

**Louie:** He's just one of those game-changers.

**Mariann:** Yeah. Really extraordinary. I could talk to you all day because, obviously, you can talk. You are not just behind a camera. You also can put some words together. \*Louie laughs\*

So this has just been a joy, Louie. I'm so glad that you were able to join us. Thank you so much, and I'm gonna ask you a few more questions on our bonus segment.

**Louie:** All right, well, great talking to you, and I hope your audience is entertained!

**Mariann:** \*laughing\* I'm sure they are.