

# **Nature Films: A Look at the Ethics of (Mis)Representation**

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Current work regarding nature films tends to center on historical accounts of their evolution and contribution to scientific understanding, or alternatively their contribution to the popular understanding of science. Questions concerning the representation of nature and the ethical implications of these representations have, for the most part, been addressed primarily as a response to the widespread use of digital technologies. More recently, scholarly interest has stemmed from a concern regarding the relationship of the depictions of animals and ideas of human gender and sexuality. My project here is to engage specifically ethical deliberations surrounding the depiction of the natural world. I seek to establish that narration practices in films contain the greatest cause of concern, given the audience's role as voters, consumers, and ecological agents.

Throughout this paper, I use the terms “nature film” and “wildlife film” interchangeably. By utilizing the term “film”, I mean to employ the broadest sense of the term in order to also incorporate television series. I discuss the popular wildlife genre intended for wide consumption, whether for theatre release or for television programming. The majority of scholarly interest and literature on nature films has stemmed from the British tradition of film making, though there is a quickly emerging body of work on nature films coming out of the United States. This paper follows suit and solely focuses on American and British films.

I argue that nature films exacerbate the accumulated misunderstanding of something as paramount as the natural world. These films are portrayed as uncomplicated depictions of scientific facts and simple truths about animals and the ecosystems they inhabit. However, with the utilization of tactics ranging from staging and recreations to digital editing, there is much more to wildlife films than mere depictions of empirical data. If how we treat others is based on how we see them (Dyer, 1993), then there is legitimate cause for concern over representations contained in nature films. This concern need not be based on a direct concern towards animals themselves, so I will omit any discussion of our responsibility to accurately represent the natural world as a responsibility towards non-human animals. Instead, I argue that this responsibility is felt qua person as these depictions are shaping our relationship with the world around us. Thus the consequences derived from nature films can be thought of as detrimental, regardless of the nature of our duties towards animals.

Finally, I seek to establish a necessary incompatibility between accurate representations of the natural world and film itself, given the nature of the medium. What appears on our screens when we watch a nature film has more to do with the expectations of the viewers, established production practices, and media economics than it does with the actual natural world. Thus, we observe wildlife films presenting a selective, manipulated representation of nature. I

argue that this representation is harmful to us as social, political, economic and ecological agents. I begin by discussing the instances of misrepresentation that are the most prominent and most damaging in nature films.

Throughout the history of nature films, creative editing has always had a strong foothold in the genre. Nature films have always been subject to the ‘law of the tool’, where commonplace manipulations in a film were directly related to the technology available at the time. Films like *Bring ‘Em Back Alive* (1932), *Wild Cargo* (1934), and *Fang and Claw* (1935), were produced by Frank Buck who specialized in fabricating savage fights between animals who would have otherwise avoided each other in the wild. In the early days of the genre, these fabrications were mostly produced by direct manipulation of the material scene, where animals were starved and agitated then forced into a confrontation. In the case of predatory scenes, film makers would only need to obtain a “two-shot”, in which two animals were established as being in the same frame together. After the establishing “two-shot”, it was acceptable to later film the remaining shots needed to produce a full sequence with other animals and utilize editing in order to formulate a cohesive scene.

The correlation between representation and technology proved particularly troublesome with the advent of digital tools such as computer-generated imagery (CGI). Producers of nature films, before constrained by material reality before the camera, now had the ability to augment as they chose and with subtlety. Practices such as adding or subtracting animals from a scene, digitally retouching the colour of landscapes to make them appear more vibrant, or erasing the presence of roads or skyscrapers from the shot all became an acceptable method to produce films (Bousé, 2003). Before, where a “two-shot” at least established that there was some guarantee of authenticity, the arrival of digital technologies undermined even that small guarantee.

In the post-production, where digital technologies have altered the ways that nature films were consumed by the audience, narration added another instance of potential deception. Narration necessarily offers us a coerced image of the natural world. The two most prominent instances of this type of coercion stems from the portrayal of animal practices as singularly hetero-normative, or the portrayal of the natural world from either a distinctly evolutionary or a family-based perspective depending on the audience the film is marketed towards.

The question of sexual practices in the animal world is usually expressed via the narration that accompanies a nature film. Beginning as early as 1950, television shows such as *Adventure* and *Zoo Parade* depicted nature as consistent with the cult of domesticity that appeared in the suburban home. These shows focused on parenthood, traditional gender roles, and presented the nuclear family as inherently valuable while purposefully omitting aspects of the lives of animals that were not so easily domesticated (Mitman, 1999). These excluded aspects usually included mating behavior by males that threatened the heterosexual picture of the animal world. When these threatening scenes are included, they are narrated in order to produce an understanding of potentially homosexual practices as bizarre, puzzling, and barring any relationship to pleasure. In *Killer Whales: Wolves of the Sea* (1999), male orca whales are shown congregating together in a fashion that suggests intent to mate. The whales rub their penises together, then later travel to

roll themselves on a pebbly beach. The narrator asymmetrically describes the former behavior as bizarre and puzzling to scientists, and is brushed off as most likely a play for dominance within the pod of whales. The behavior of the whales rolling themselves on the beach is described instead as a product of the pebbles simply feeling good to the whales. In nature films, certain animal behaviors are acceptably explained in terms of pleasure-seeking, unless they undermine a traditional hetero-normative script. If an explanation of an animal behavior in terms of pleasure-seeking would undermine that script, such explanations are avoided, even at the cost of expressing bafflement.

The most striking example to illustrate the impact of narration on the consumption of a film is the contrast between the BBC's series *Planet Earth* (2006) and Disney's theatre release *Earth* (2007). Both nature films were cut and edited from the same footage, though each presents a markedly different depiction on the natural world.

*Planet Earth* was released during a time in Britain when evolution enjoyed the height of popular acceptance as a theory. This was after the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the head of the Church of England, had publicly supported the teaching of evolution in schools. This context is felt throughout viewing *Planet Earth*. The film employs narration by David Attenborough, a knighted zoologist who began his film making career in 1954. Attenborough's voice is deep, authoritative and male, reinforcing a sense of objectivity within the film. Attenborough's descriptions can be characterized as "scientific", in the sense that they reference the biological processes and very seldom rely on emotive descriptions.

In contrast, Disney's *Earth* is marketed as a depiction of the migration paths of four animal families in the wild. Instead of Attenborough as the narrator, *Earth* employs family-friendly James Earl Jones. Jones' style of narration is reminiscent of the 1950's *Adventure* and *Zoo Parade* style narration, where animal lives are reconciled with nuclear family ideals and predetermined gender roles. *Earth* was released in the United States, where the debate between intelligent design and evolution is still a relevant one. Undoubtedly, this fact played a role in the depiction of the lives of animals. Instead of utilizing biological discourse, where behavior is said to be a product of a species' adaptation, the animals are instead described as motivated by anthropomorphic concepts, like love. However, this type of representation is no far departure for the Disney company. Disney's films were the first to depart from Frank Buck's style of depicting nature as a hostile and violent environment, anthropomorphizing animals in order to gain an empathetic reaction from the audience.

An animal's anthropomorphized role in film can shape our perception of it and serves to carve out its place within our world. The best example of this is the development of the perception of the dolphin as a playful, friendly, charismatic, highly intelligent animal. This characterization began developing in the 1950's, where before the dolphin was regarded as a cheap and accessible specimen for scientific research. Today, our vision of the dolphin goes as far as to shape environmental policy. The most successful policies that gain a wide support base tend to focus on specific marine mammal protection, while policies that focus on ecosystem processes have difficulty attracting support (Mitman, 1999).

Although nature films are represented as uncomplicated depictions of the natural world, in reality they are not merely representing animals in accordance with scientifically observable fact, but utilizing tactics such as narration and CGI to reconcile the natural world with the industry's socio-economic agenda. These tactics have serious implications for the viewers as these representations mediate the picture of the natural world. This picture is one that informs choices regarding interpersonal relationships, political allegiances and priorities, scientific funding structures, and even broader issues of ecology.

CGI and other digital technologies have been argued as the most harmful element of nature films (Bousé, 2003). If film producers have the utilize their capability to erase signs of human encroachment with the digital elimination of roads or buildings, the audience receives an depiction of nature as expansive and untamed. The picture that is left behind is a picture of nature that exists alongside the person, where nature is seen as distinct and separate from ecological agents. Digital tweaking produces an audience with a distorted sense of the status of the ecosystems portrayed and their relation to human living. When most people receive their information about the natural world via nature films, distorted representations inform the choices that the audience could later make, for example, regarding environmental policy.

Though CGI poses a particularly strong dilemma for nature films, I argue that it is instead the content of the narration that accompanies a film that poses the most potential for harm. This is because narration can have normative implications for the audience. The narration of a film is the most explicit instance of the presentation of a film's content as evidence of scientific fact, as the genre's connection to anthropology and biology implies a commitment to objectivity (Russell, 1999). Narration is also the site where "scientific fact" is massaged into anthropomorphized or zoomorphized discourse, pointing to both animal and human behaviors as natural and therefore normalized.

The broader genre of documentary film has taken on critique over the years for precisely these shortcomings. Documentary films are criticised as another conservative institution, used to reinforce the ideological status quo (Johnstone, via Aitken, 1998). Films considered to be in the documentary category purport themselves to be objective and therefore truth-telling, thereby denying their epistemic location as producers of knowledge. Thus, the audience is never made aware of the many ways in which the material scene has been coerced or manipulated. Because of these factors, documentary should not be seen containing superior representational practices than fiction films in the sense that they are equally liable to be instruments of repressive ideology, and therefore equally to be resisted (Rothman, 1998). Nature films do not seem to side-step any of these critiques levied against documentary films in general; indeed, they seem to be perfect examples of many of these more general problems with documentary films.

With the amount of financial investment secured in the production and consumption of nature films, it seems as if none of these critiques will be dispelled any time soon. There are those that argue that because of the extensive budgets of some nature films, the narrative structures conceived by the author are implemented with no limitations derived from budgetary considerations (León, 2004). However, this type of argument fails to take into consideration that budgetary pressures are felt to profit from a film's consumption. This is the process that

develops a nature film into a coerced image derived from audience expectations, established production practices, and media economics. For example, fictional narration strategies are utilized to create a mass appeal to the audience, like in the case of Disney's Earth.

Nature films are presented as simple depictions of observable fact, though I argue that films depict much more than just scientific observations. Though digital technologies play a role in the formation of a misguided understanding of the natural world and the extent that cityscapes have encroached upon the "untamed wilderness", I argue that it is actually the narration structure of a film that poses the most potential for harm. The narration is necessarily coercive because it can't help but reflect the epistemic location of the narrator. Furthermore, nature films are driven by influences of the film industry, where financial considerations drive the content received by the audience. I argue that these factors produce nature films that are harmful to the viewing audience.

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