

ECOPORNOGRAPHY AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF EXTINCTION:  
THE RHETORIC OF NATURAL HISTORY FILMMAKING, 1895-PRESENT

A Dissertation

by

LISA NICOLE D'AMICO

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Chair of Committee,	M. Jimmie Killingsworth
Committee Members,	Sally Robinson
	Janet P. McCann
	Robert Shandley
Head of Department,	Nancy Bradley Warren

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation builds upon the relatively young fields of visual and environmental rhetoric and analyzes the rhetoric of natural history filmmaking, focusing on the ways in which the genre illustrates the complex relationship between contemporary culture and the environment. Each text demonstrates how the constructs of “nature” and “wilderness” perform necessary cultural work by representing particular ideals that change to meet the public’s shifting needs. Nature performs various roles, serving as a source of knowledge, solace, wonder, mystery, anxiety, truth, identity, and affirmation. The dominance and immediacy of visual culture make the natural history film, along with advertising, one of the most significant sources of meaning regarding the natural world. These films employ familiar syntactic and semantic cues such as sentimental parent/offspring interactions, authoritative narration that limits the ability of the audience to interpret freely, and a musical score that influences the viewer’s emotional response to certain scenes. The net result of these rhetorical practices is a distancing of the viewer from the natural world that destabilizes the attempts of many eco-political programs to emphasize the interconnectedness of ecological systems and their components.

The emergent genre of big-budget nature films (BBNFs) is a distinctly modern and extremely popular take on natural history filmmaking that has more in common with summer blockbusters and wildlife theme parks than its predecessors with an unprecedented ability to influence public perception of the natural world. Even as

environmental concerns become increasingly dire, the BBNF tends to commodify death and extinction, avoid political engagement, reduce engagement with nature to its most sentimental and violent moments, perpetuate the perceived separation between humans and their environment, and provide a soothing escape to a virtual environment that too often seems unaffected by climate change and habitat destruction. The BBNF has the potential to undermine environmental and conservation efforts. It also exemplifies what some ecocritics have termed “ecopornography,” an exploitative representation that objectifies its subjects, encourages viewers to develop identifications with unrealistic images rather than their real-world analogs, and helps enable unethical behavior toward the environment and nonhuman animals. At stake in this dissertation is a deeper understanding of how natural history filmmaking affects the public’s awareness of (and role in) the environment.

## DEDICATION

*To William Victor D'Amico, my favorite traveling companion*

*To my sister, Susan Michelle Edmonds, who gets me like no one else does*

*To my mother, Shirley Connell Edmonds, whose love never wavers*

### *In Memory*

*Loren Duane Edmonds (1941-1997)*

*Who always told me I could do anything*

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In 1997, as a college freshman at Wichita State University, I joined the academic quiz team, where I met a mysterious and taciturn man whose intelligence and good looks I found both intriguing and a little intimidating. Sixteen years later, that man is my husband, and our lives together have been nothing short of wonderful. Together with our cats, Dinah and Bobcat, we have tackled challenges small and large and become all the stronger for it. I cannot thank Bill enough for his love, support, and understanding, and for random *Family Guy* quotes just when I need them. I love you.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: A DISCOURSE IN CRISIS

I fear that people have been turned into passive voyeurs of nature rather than engaged participants in cohabiting with nature. I sometimes think that the natural history programming has left people with a sense that it is all okay out there . . . when in fact even as the program makers have been out there capturing this stuff on film they know that it is disappearing under their very eyes.

—Jonathon Porritt, Chair, UK Sustainable Development Commission,  
*Planet Earth: The Future*

As readers of image texts, we must always be aware that the photograph does not reveal the truth.

—Margeurite Helmers and Charles A. Hill, *Defining Visual Rhetorics*

In “Nature’s ‘Crisis Disciplines’: Does Environmental Communication Have an Ethical Duty?” Robert Cox identifies environmental rhetoric as a discourse of crisis, a discourse founded upon the tensions between the mediated and narrated concepts of wilderness, environment, and nature and the very real terrains and animals these narratives attempt to represent. The 2005 Conference on Communication and Environment, where Cox delivered a version of this essay as the keynote address, focused on the ways in which “wilderness is mediated through various technologies [such as] photograph, television, film, computers” (qtd. in Cox 12). The conference’s focus demonstrates the importance of environmental visual rhetoric because of its role in constructing contemporary concepts of nature, conservation, and extinction. Environmental visual rhetoric, a relatively young field of study, has emerged in the wake of serious questions about whether environmentalism is dead, as Michael Shellenberger

and Ted Nordhaus polemically suggest in *The Death of Environmentalism*. Even nature writing has been said to be dead; after an editor from *Orion Magazine* made the statement at an Earth Day event in 2010, its demise was the topic of a recent conference sponsored by the Association of Studies in Literature and the Environment (ASLE). As much as it is a discourse *of* crisis, then, environmentalism certainly seems to be a discourse *in* crisis, from within and without, pulled in many directions by the wide variety of perspectives it encompasses and pushed aside in times of economic uncertainty when environmental concerns are trampled by promises of jobs and economic stimulation. Cultural perceptions of climate change vacillate even with the temperature; in the hot summer months, it is frequently referenced, while in the winter it becomes a punchline for glib journalists reporting on homeowners “shoveling all that global warming off their driveways.” When energy prices are high, the public demands progress on the exploration of alternate sources such as wind farms; when prices drop, support for these alternatives does the same. Environmental rhetoric in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century isn’t dead, but it *is* searching for an identity.

Sidney I. Dobrin and Sean Morey’s edited collection *Ecosee* (2009) advances environmental visual rhetoric and provides groundwork for a much-needed alternative discourse that has the potential to both transcend the fluctuations of crisis and provide the necessary methodology to “understand the role of image and visual representations of nature in constructing the politics of nature and environment” (4). One of the most familiar manifestations of these visual representations is the emergent genre of big-budget nature films (hereinafter, BBNF). A distinctly 21<sup>st</sup>-century phenomenon, the

BBNF, with its unprecedented budget and popular appeal, has an extraordinary ability to (re)frame the general public's perception of endangered species and threatened habitats. If, as Cox states, "Dominant systems of representation of 'environment' influence societal deliberation about and/or response to environmental signals, including signs of deterioration of human health, climate, or ecological systems," it is essential for environmental discourse to identify and analyze dominant systems like the BBNF to understand their role in global eco-politics (14). Despite its enormous commercial success, however, the BBNF has yet to attract much attention from scholars in visual and environmental rhetoric.

This dissertation represents an initial step in filling that gap by analyzing the visual rhetoric of the BBNF, examples of which include *The Blue Planet: Seas of Life* (2001), *Planet Earth* (2006), *Life* (2009), *Great Migrations* (2010), *African Cats* (2011), and *Frozen Planet* and *Chimpanzee* (both 2012). Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to identify the BBNF's place in the broader history of television and cinematic nature films and to define the role of the BBNF in the remaking and re-envisioning of the philosophies of environmentalism and conservation in the early 21st century. In order to do so, this project analyzes the development of natural history filmmaking as a genre, from its beginnings in the late 1800s to today, with a particular focus on the evolution of the semantic and syntactic cues and rhetorical features that are characteristic of modern natural history filmmaking in general and BBNFs in particular. The analysis takes account of the agents of production, historical and cultural contexts, marketing and distribution tactics, rhetorical strategies, common themes of the genre (such as the myths

of untouched spaces and pristine wilderness), and the filmmaking practices and post-production techniques that enact these themes.

This dissertation argues that the success of the BBNF has little to do with environmental awareness and that the genre actually perpetuates not only a variety of misconceptions about the environment but also a phenomenon that eco-critics have dubbed “ecopornography.” These films tend to commodify death and extinction while offering audiences a virtual environment filled with the rare and scarce that provides a relief, distraction, or fantasy of escape from the challenges of living in a degraded environment. With new BBNFs scheduled for release and more in production, it is timely to address the question of how eco-critics, environmentalists, and conservationists should react to the BBNF and the ways in which it advances or undermines the agendas of various eco-political programs.

This study builds upon and advances two relatively young fields of scholarly interest: visual rhetoric and environmental rhetoric. In *Reel Nature*, Gregg Mitman’s study of 20th-century nature photography and documentary contends that people seek out both wildlife films and wildlife parks such as Disney’s Animal Kingdom in a nostalgic attempt to encounter nature “untainted” by humans. Mitman analyzes Disney’s True-Life Adventure films of the 1950s, children’s wildlife television series of the 1950s-80s, and the iconic *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom* series, which began in 1963 and, according to Mitman, heavily influenced baby-boomers’ notions of nature (150). Mitman, in his reception study of *Wild Kingdom*, quotes a television reviewer from the *San Francisco Chronicle* who praised the show during its early years: “One of

*Wild Kingdom*'s admirable qualities is its honesty about its subject. This is nature *as it is*" (151, my emphasis). In disputing this claim, Mitman focuses on the artifice of these films and parks and how the manipulation of filmmakers and theme-park designers constructs myths and contributes to the perceived division between humans and the natural world. Narrating his trip to Denali National Park, Mitman notes that his fellow park visitors looked at the wildlife in the park as if they were watching a film, excited by brief dramatic encounters with predators and quickly bored by "the serene and subtle qualities of this vast Arctic landscape. The camera had shaped our expectations, defined our experience" (207).

In another example, Mitman describes a chance personal encounter with a hawk and its prey during a walk to work in an urban area, and notes that the hawk and starling and the children's toys, chain-link fence, and passing traffic are all part of the hawk's environment. Mitman imagines how the scene would have been (mis)represented in a wildlife film, and ends with a call for ethical interaction with the natural world. *Reel Nature*, published in 1999, addresses a trend in nature films of the 1990s that Mitman compares to snuff films, in which scenes of gory death are emphasized and "made more intense than [any] actual experience would be" (208). Mitman is among the first scholars of visual eco-rhetoric to document the ways in which these films separate humans from "nature" and reduce interaction with nature to short and dramatic vignettes that, in turn, shape our concept of the natural world, thus providing insights into some of the defining characteristics of what I have identified as the big-budget nature film.

Bart H. Welling also addresses the complex issues of representation in nature films in “Ecopornography: On the Limits of Visualizing the Nonhuman.” Welling analyzes and proposes an expanded working definition of “ecopornography”—a term coined by deep ecologist Jerry Mander in 1972—and examines several modern examples of “ecoporn.” Welling describes ecoporn as “a type of contemporary visual discourse made up of highly idealized, anthropomorphized views of landscapes and nonhuman animals” (57). Designed for “quick, easy, visual consumption,” ecoporn is defined by its use of feminized images of the wilderness as a thing to be conquered and possessed by a masculine viewer, who voyeuristically peeks at not only seductively posed wildlife but at explicit sexual acts and scenes of violent death. Welling critiques ecoporn “as trope, as mode of representation, and as ethical problem” (53-4). Like Mitman, Welling approaches the challenges of (re)presenting nature in film as an ethical problem. Unlike Mitman, however, whose study is framed chiefly by new historicist and film studies methods, Welling’s critique demonstrates the influence of feminist and gender critics such as Anne McClintock, Susan Griffin, Donna Haraway, Linda Hogan, and Annette Kolodny in his analysis of ecopornography in terms of power, eroticism, and the gaze.

Welling argues that ecopornography is pornographic (and not simply *like* porn) in that it transforms the subject into an object for consumption by the viewer. He further contends that the “apathetic consumerist response [that results] should be exactly what environmentalists work to unsettle, not promote” (56). Despite a few notable examples of nature films that attempt to interact with wildlife in more ethical ways, the majority of



nature films, and the BBNF in particular, promote the very “apathetic consumerist response” that Welling warns against.

The connection between the environment and consumerism is made evident in numerous studies. In *Enviropop: Studies in Environmental Rhetoric and Popular Culture*, Mark Meister and Phyllis M. Japp suggest that “Popular culture (through the powerful modes of advertising, board games, newscasts, print news, cable television, greeting cards, film, and animated cartoons) teaches us to emphasize nature’s ‘use-value’” (1). Meister and Japp argue that “when nature is defined as a commodity for consumption, it becomes, in a capitalistic society, culturally significant,” adding that “the rhetorical function . . . of Enviropop discourse is its highly anthropocentric associations that, in either words or imagery, link nature and environmental issues with economics” (2). In “Economics, Environmental Policy and the Transcendence of Utilitarianism,” Geoffrey Hodgson argues that much of environmental policy and even the way we think about nature is influenced by utilitarianism, which “presumes that all means find their justification in the ends they serve, and . . . this end is seen as individual satisfaction or ‘utility’” (48). Hodgson suggests that “building economics on non-utilitarian foundations” is a possible method of shifting valuation from utility to cultural and institutional economics. In “The Relations Between Preservation Value and Existence Value,” Jeremy Roxbee Cox analyzes the concepts of “intrinsic value” (which are things with moral standing) and “object value,” as well as the difference between “things valued *because they are beneficial to the valuer* and *things valued for other reasons*” (104, emphasis in original). One of the great challenges facing

environmentalists is to fundamentally redefine how we ascribe value to nature, moving away from value based on utility (whether that is monetary, aesthetic pleasure, or otherwise) to viewing preservation as a duty or believing that the satisfaction of preserving things experienced by the valuer gives those things value. While satisfaction may also be considered utilitarian in that it benefits the valuer, it is far more conducive to long-term conservation than ascribing value based on monetary or aesthetic worth. This dissertation addresses not only contemporary perspectives on the valuing of nature, but particularly how the BBNF perpetuates the ways in which species and locations featured in the film become valued by viewers.

Other ecocritics have addressed the issue of commodification of nature, with the goal of bringing nature writers and other lay-ethicists into the discourse. For example, in *What's Nature Worth?*, editors Terre Satterfield and Scott Slovic attempt to “[bridge] the gap between a literary community that, in subtle and intuitive ways, has thought deeply about the value of nature and a policy-oriented group of scholars that seeks to develop better tools for representing and discussing environmental values” (2). In this collection, nature writers such as William Kitteridge, Terry Tempest Williams, Simon J. Ortiz, and Ofelia Zepeda explore the ways in which narrative can be used to develop environmental values and counter the tendency to reduce nature to its use-value. These narratives respond to the perspective of separate human and “natural” worlds by offering compelling accounts of living as a part of a vastly interconnected ecosystem. Nature films have the potential to utilize the kind of narrative appeal that Satterfield, Slovic, and the nature writers in the collection advocate, but unlike the latter, nature films have

popular appeal far beyond the limits of the nature-writing genre. This advantage makes nature films, especially the immensely popular BBNF, both a powerful “tool for representing and discussing environmental values,” as Satterfield and Slovic advocate, and an important subject of study for ecocritics.

While to date there have been no published scholarly analyses of the BBNF, several critics have offered studies of contemporary nature documentaries from a variety of critical and rhetorical perspectives. For example, Brett Mills examines the BBC wildlife documentary series *Nature's Great Events* (2009) in the context of speciesism and animals' right to privacy. According to Mills, speciesism, like racism or sexism, is founded upon the idea that particular groups are superior or inferior, and therefore do not deserve equal moral consideration. Mills contends that

In order for exploitation to be accepted, it must be constructed as a moral act, and it can be a moral act only if the rights of those who are exploited are deemed worthless or secondary. To see animals in this way ignores the ‘ample behavioural, physiological, and evolutionary evidence to support the idea that animals suffer from fear and anxiety.’ (198)

While nature films can be important tools in environmentalism and conservation, Mills emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations in the filmmaking process and the risks and returns of voyeurism and exploitation of animals in the interest of enhancing environmental awareness and behavior. In “The Work of Environmentalism in an Age of Televisual Adventures,” Luis A. Vivanco asserts that “the visual medium’s demands and representational processes can constitute and reshape the very nature of ecopolitics,

emphasizing the fantasy spectacles of adventure over the hard work of collaborative social and political action in actual historical contexts of political–economic inequality and conflict” (7). While Vivanco’s primary focus is the late Steve Irwin, he makes important connections between Irwin’s “Tarzan” persona and the “otherwise exemplary claims of contemporary environmental activism and activists who champion habitat protection, animal rights, and biological diversity [but who] are often uncannily complicit with long-standing and problematic tropes of adventure, danger, man-over-nature, and even the spectacular figures of fictional and real adventurers of another era” (5). The problematic trope of environmentalism-as-adventure is also consistent with the tendency to reduce nature to its use-value.

One study on a subject similar to the BBNF is Phil Bagust’s examination of another recent trend in nature documentary filmmaking: the “virtual ecosystem.” In “‘Screen Natures’: Special Effects and Edutainment in ‘New’ Hybrid Wildlife Documentary,” Bagust considers the more traditional nature documentaries made by Disney and the BBC and compares them with recent CGI films such as the *Walking with...* franchise (e.g., *Walking with Cavemen*, *Walking with Prehistoric Beasts*, *Walking with Dinosaurs*), which were produced by the BBC and shown on the Discovery Channel in the U.S. He also analyzes so-called “blue-chip” documentaries, which he claims tend to include mega-fauna, spectacular scenery, drama, and anthropomorphized animals, while avoiding history, politics, people, and overt use of scientific method (219). Bagust’s description of the “blue-chip” documentary is similar to the concept of the BBNF, other than it does not address the budget or the technology used to film and

produce the features, elements which I contend are also essential points of analysis to understand the significance of the BBNF on contemporary concepts of environmentalism and conservation.

Much of the recent scholarship pertaining to the contemporary nature film focuses on two recent and popular films: *March of the Penguins* (2005) and Al Gore's filmed lecture *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). In "The Re-Visioned American Dream: The Wildlife Documentary as Conservative Nostalgia," Angela J. Aguayo explores the ways in which conservatives and opponents of marriage equality point to the representations of monogamy and family in penguin society as "proof" from the natural world that heterosexuality and monogamous relationships are "natural." With its Voice-of-God narration by Morgan Freeman, the surprising box-office hit was lauded by conservative leaders and Christian fundamentalists for its apparent affirmation of "traditional family values." Lauren C. Stephen presents a similar argument in "'At last the family is together': Reproductive Futurism in *March of the Penguins*." Stephen seeks to "articulate alternate ways we can view emperor penguin behaviour and relationships in order to complicate and resist the dominating and simplifying humanist narratives by which *March of the Penguins* seeks to know and represent them" by identifying the de-emphasized queer behaviors of the penguins and their (lack of/mis-) representation in the film (104). There is nothing new about using nature to support particular worldviews; Disney carefully edited the True-Life Adventure films and added sentimental narration that "sanctified the universal 'natural' family as a cornerstone of

the American way of life” during the Cold War era (Mitman 111). The same rhetorical strategies are apparent in the BBNF.

Perhaps no environmental text since Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) has sparked as much controversy as *An Inconvenient Truth* (hereafter, *AIT*), perhaps because it is one of the few texts that both takes a strong, jeremiad-style stance and became well-known to the general public. While popular reception of the film varies from hearty approval by environmentalist publications and the mainstream press alike to vitriolic dismissals by the voices of Big Oil and other climate-change deniers, most scholarly interest focuses on the rhetorical strategies of Gore and director Davis Guggenheim. Robyn Eckersley analyzes both Gore and Guggenheim’s rhetorical strategies and the conservative political rhetoric in the United States and her native Australia that characterizes the contexts in which the film was produced and received. In particular, Eckersley notes Gore and Guggenheim’s emphasis on “the individuation of responsibility”—an approach that provides useful ways for individuals to modify their behavior but “leaves existing political and economic structures unchallenged” (443). In “(Environmental) Rhetorics of Tempered Apocalypticism in *An Inconvenient Truth*,” Laura Johnson also notes the film’s advocacy of individual responsibility, but argues that it reflects the film’s contention that there is not one environmental rhetoric, but many. Johnson’s argument is noticeably influenced by Nordhaus and Shellenberger’s *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* and M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer’s essay “Millennial Ecology: The Apocalyptic Narrative from *Silent Spring* to Global Warming.” Johnson analyzes

Gore's rhetorical strategy, examining both his visual evidence and his verbal rhetoric to support her argument that Gore tempers his apocalyptic style by maintaining an authoritative voice, which she contends improves the film's appeal to a wider audience.

Kathryn M. Olson argues that Gore's film is a case study in effective rhetorical leadership and social activism. As evidence, she cites "conversion" responses by two previous climate change deniers: film critic Roger Ebert and Australian writer Dave Hoskin, both of whom expressed their skepticism and expectation that the film would be "essentially provincial left-wing stories for a provincial left-wing audience" but who came away convinced that "there is no other view that can be defended" (Hoskin qtd. in Olson 90-91). Unlike Eckersley, who contends that the individuation of responsibility in the film undermines attempts to enact changes at the national level, Olson argues that emulating Gore's rhetorical strategy can be effective in demanding "top-down policy change" (91). The studies offered by Aguayo, Stephen, Johnson, Olson, and others demonstrates the complex discourse surrounding environmental visual rhetoric and the need to understand the influence of texts like *March of the Penguins*, *AIT*, and BBNFs because of their ability to reach a wide audience that is capable of individuating responsibility and demanding top-down policy change.

In addition to ecocriticism, this research also builds upon documentary film studies, particularly the theoretical framework offered by Mitman, Brian Winston, Carl Plantinga, Bill Nichols, and Laura Mulvey, among others. Critics like Winston and Plantinga offer analyses of the agents of production, subjects, and audiences of documentary films, with an emphasis on their social and political significance. In

*Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond*, Winston discusses films by John Grierson, Robert Flaherty, and Paul Rotha to support his argument that documentary films often “[run] away from social meaning,” often as result of their desire to be broadly appealing or because sponsors resist politicizing the film (42). One such example is Rotha’s film *Shipyards* (1935), a documentary about the construction of a new luxury liner. The film originally contained voice-overs representing the workers, who muse about how “women will walk here in silk dresses . . . Don’t suppose they’ll think of the bloke that hit the blinking rivet” (qtd. in Winston 47, ellipsis in original). The film’s sponsors balked at *Shipyards*’s social critique, mild as it was, and replaced the commentary with a dispassionate “newsreel commentator” narrative (47). As a result, Rotha’s attempt to create consubstantiality between the audience and the film’s subjects is seriously undermined; the identification that occurs as a result of this post-production manipulation is rather between audience and the iconic “Proud British Worker,” who is doubly stripped of his voice (once by the filmmaker’s voice-over, and again by the newsreel-commentator replacement). While Winston does not employ the terms “identification” or “consubstantiality” in his discussions of documentary filmmaking, these concepts from the modern rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke are useful in locating and analyzing the rhetorical situations of documentary films. I contend that Winston’s argument that documentary often runs away from social meaning is illustrated by the BBNF, which eschews almost all discussion of environmentalism in favor of aesthetic effects.



Plantinga, in *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, characterizes documentary (or “nonfiction film,” as he calls it) as “a medium of truths and deceits, recording and manipulation, biases and balance, art and mechanical technique, rhetoric and straightforward information” (222). He notes that “all films are rhetorical in the sense that they imply an ideological position toward their subject,” but differentiates between what he calls “open-voice” and “formal voice” films, wherein the former eschews overt argument and the latter embraces it (123). Plantinga cites numerous examples of films that employ a “formal voice” and very much advocate for the social meaning that Winston denies. Winston and Plantinga both demonstrate the risks and returns of documentary filmmaking that either takes a deliberate rhetorical stance or, by refusing to do so, often results in taking one tacitly.

To analyze BBNFs, particularly in regard to how they (re)frame our perception of endangered species and threatened habitats, I examine the agents of production, intended audiences, and contexts of use of various BBNFs. I also consider the values to which the agents of production appeal in order to *sell* (a word I use deliberately) their vision of nature to the consumer. As with most visual media, these appeals are transmitted both visually and verbally via the onscreen images and the narrator’s script, necessitating a methodology that accounts for a wide variety of scripto-visual media. I selected a representative sampling of BBNFs in order to identify rhetorical trends among them and to situate this very recent cinematic phenomenon within the larger discourses of environmentalism, conservation, and natural history filmmaking. My methodology combines established rhetorical analysis patterns for both verbal and visual rhetoric,

such as those described by Killingsworth in *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric* and Hill and Helmers in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, with the historicized analyses typified by documentary film studies by Plantinga and Winston and the discourses of environmental (visual) rhetoric exemplified by Killingsworth and Palmer's *Ecospeak* and Dobrin and Morey's collection *Ecosee*. While each chapter of my dissertation focuses on a related aspect of the BBNF, my overall methodological approach focuses on the rhetorical exchange between agents of production and the audience and the contexts of use for these unique film projects. Following is an overview of how I use rhetorical analysis to link a variety of discourses.

In *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric*, Killingsworth proposes a model of appeals which involves four elements: three positions (author/agent of production, audience, value) and a medium of exchange (e.g., verbal communication, written communication, television, radio). According to Killingsworth, “successful appeals *move* the audience, the result of which is the alignment of the three positions” (1, emphasis in original). Killingsworth analyzes appeals to authority and evidence, time, place, body, gender, and race, as well as appeals through tropes and narrative. In his discussion of appeals to the body, Killingsworth offers the examples of Carson's *Silent Spring* and Aldo Leopold's “The Land Ethic” to illustrate different ways that nature writers make ethical connections between environmental issues and human bodies. Carson identifies natural features with human experience, describing “scars of dead vegetation” and trees with a “weeping appearance” in the aftermath of pesticide use and industrial pollution (qtd. in Killingsworth 68). Carson also points out that the health or sickness of the natural

environment is tied to human health; poisons used to control pests or unwanted plant growth are part of the ecosystem and often find their way into human food and water supplies; in this way, she also appeals to the reader's desire for health and safety. Like Carson, Leopold uses limited personification to persuade readers to extend the same ethical consideration afforded to men and women to the land. If, as Kenneth Burke argues and Killingsworth emphasizes, identification is dependent upon the ability of the appeal to close the distance between the author/agent of production and the audience, appeals that identify nature with human bodies must transcend the tendency to disconnect humans from nature.

One way to counter that disconnection is to identify shared experiences that emphasize consubstantiality (to use Burke's term) and minimize difference. In his chapter on "The Appeal of Narrative," Killingsworth describes the rhetorical challenges facing authors who have little or nothing in common with their intended audience. By reading a narrative, the audience can "try on" these unfamiliar experiences, and the author can attempt to close the gap between author and audience and establish consubstantiality, thus facilitating persuasion. According to Killingsworth, "Narrative offers a powerful approach to community building through its metonymic (associative) and metaphoric (identification) functions" (149). Narrative's ability to offer a wide variety of possibilities for association and identification makes it a common rhetorical method, particularly in nature writing and filmmaking. In my dissertation, I will apply Burkeian concepts of identification and consubstantiality and use Killingsworth's model of rhetorical exchange to guide my analysis of BBNFs.

Visual culture demands that rhetorical analysis accounts for the full range of verbal, visual, and scripto-visual texts that permeate our daily lives. In *Picture Theory*, W. J. T. Mitchell refers to “the pictorial turn,” or the shift to a culture dominated by images (11). Mitchell traces the pictorial turn, a term he adapts from philosopher Richard Rorty’s concept of the “linguistic turn,” to Wittgenstein (11-12). Mitchell observes significant “general anxiety of linguistic philosophy about visual representation” and cites that anxiety as evidence of the advent of the pictorial turn (12-13). The problematic concept of representation is central to both Mitchell’s analysis of the pictorial turn and his term “imagetext,” which attempts to supplant the concept of a picture-discourse dichotomy with a term that better reflects the complexities of the image. More than ekphrasis, the imagetext reflects the discourses of the visual, the “readings” of an image as “a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality” while simultaneously accounting for spectatorship and visual literacy’s resistance to explication in terms of textuality (16).

In *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, Hill and Helmers consider issues of intertextuality and semiotics to formulate theories of the “indiscipline” of visual rhetorics and argue the apparently infinite scope of the field, as images and texts are vastly interconnected and signify each other in a seemingly unending chain of meaning. To demonstrate how vast these interconnections are, Hill and Helmers offer a rhetorical analysis of the now-famous photograph of three New York City firefighters raising an American flag at Ground Zero on September 11, 2001. Named *Ground Zero Spirit*, Thomas E. Franklin’s photograph is heavily narrated, evoking connections to the famous photograph of

Marines raising the U.S. flag at Iwo Jima and even farther back in history to the American Revolution, as represented by the paintings *Spirit of '76* (ca. 1875) by Archibald MacNeal Willard and *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851) by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze. Viewers of Franklin's photograph view it both synchronically and diachronically, simultaneously observing the image as it represents the present and as an image that both represents the past and was created in the past. Hill and Helmers contend that "we also view contemporaneous images with a knowledge of their precursors and their previous meanings" (12-13). They begin by analyzing the composition of the photograph, noting what is included (e.g., firemen, the ruins of the fallen towers, the half-raised flag, the dust) and the many interconnected connotations for each of these elements (all first responders, capitalism, American resilience, the illness caused by exposure to the lingering cloud of dust), as well as what is excluded (the wreckage of the planes, the hijackers themselves, the victims, the many ordinary citizens who united to help with rescue efforts), as well as the arrangement of the included elements and their relative placements and significance. By showing how extensive the intertextual connections are between Franklin's photograph and attendant cultural and historical discourses, Hill and Helmers' analysis of *Ground Zero Spirit* demonstrates why the indiscipline of visual rhetoric resists boundaries. My study of BBNFs is significantly influenced by Hill and Helmers' methodology; while their study focuses mainly on still photographs, the same principles of intertextuality, synchronic and diachronic viewership, composition, and exclusion apply to film.

The usefulness of Hill and Helmers' insights can be demonstrated in an analysis of the controversial and devastating scene from the "Ice Worlds" episode of *Planet Earth* in which a starving polar bear is forced to resort to attacking a walrus and receives mortal wounds as a result. Its death is reported by the narrator, who says little about the reason for its desperate attempt to find food (the disappearance of the polar ice cap) and its actual death is not shown. Responding to criticism in an interview with Jarre Fees for *Television Week*, *Planet Earth*'s executive producer Alastair Fothergill argues that "the polar bear is not used to make a statement in the series . . . but the lack of comment might be just as powerful, as 'the polar bear has now become the symbol for global warming'" (32). In other words, Fothergill is relying on the viewer's familiarity with the intertextuality of the image of the polar bear to evoke concerns about global warming so that he will not need to discuss it at any length—or with any passionate urgency—in the voice-over. The image of the polar bear (and it is useful to note that we are dealing with the *image* of the polar bear, not an *actual* polar bear) is one of the most narrated images of the natural world; like *Ground Zero Spirit*, we view the image through a complex web of discourses.

The full scope of scripto-visual rhetorical analysis is useful in understanding the complex exchanges of documentary filmmaking. In *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, Plantinga offers an example of how rhetorical analysis can be used in film studies. Though he is a film studies scholar, Plantinga organizes his text by rhetorical element: iconography, visual rhetoric, voice and (appeals to) authority, structure, technique, and so forth. He discusses very few nature documentaries, but

Plantinga's analytical model offers a sound basis for the rhetorical analysis of the twentieth-century nature documentary. He analyzes several organizational patterns for documentary film, including what he refers to as "formal narrative structure" (124). Characterized by its arrangement of a chronology of events, the familiar structure of a narrative nonfiction film is, according to Plantinga, what most viewers expect to encounter in a documentary. In *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Nichols "examines the styles, strategies, and structures of documentary film" with the goal of developing a theory of documentary film (ix). His approach, like Plantinga's, is rhetorical: rather than analyzing a series of films, Nichols uses the Aristotelian model to focus on the exchange between author and viewer. In the chapter "Sticking to Reality: Rhetoric and What Exceeds It," Nichols concentrates on types of appeals used by agents of production and differentiates between rhetoric and "excess," as defined by David Bordwell as "everything that cannot be absorbed within a theory of narrative comprehension" (141). Nichols calls this excess "history" (as theorized by Fredric Jameson, based upon Louis Althusser's concept of history); it might also be described in rhetorical terms as "context." Nichols emphasizes the importance of considering excess/history/context in the rhetorical analysis of the documentary (indeed, of any type of visual rhetoric).

Film scholar Winston analyzes films by documentary pioneers Grierson, Flaherty, and Rotha. Using narrative, these filmmakers attempted to create identification between their audiences and the subjects of their films. Grierson tried to "sell" the British Empire to a world that in the early 1930s was progressive enough to regard the

concept of Empire with more than a little derision via a narrative of British colonial life as “a co-operative effort in the tilling of soil, the reaping of harvest, and the organisation of a world economy” (Grierson qtd. in Winston 37). Winston offers a rhetorical analysis of two similar 1935 films, Rotha’s *The Face of Britain* and Arthur Elton’s *Housing Problems*, narrative documentaries sponsored by the Central Electricity Board and the gas industry, respectively. He begins with the agents of production (the CEB and the gas industry), who had definite motivations to (mis)represent the social issues that the films address. Winston argues that these films represent social issues such as poverty, environmental injustice, unemployment, and so forth as “problem moments”—moments that will pass in the unfolding history of Britain thanks to the enlightened electricity and gas industries and the Ministry of Labour (49). *The Face of Britain* and *Housing Problems* thus use narrative not only to help viewers identify with the struggles of the subjects of the films, but also to convince the audience that social problems are both transitory and necessary, “thus sandwiched between a wonderful past and a beautiful future” (49). Winston analyzes the agents of production, the intended audience, and the contexts of use for each film.

Documentary film critics are not alone in advancing the use of rhetorical analysis in film studies; fiction film theorists have also recognized the value of using rhetoric as a methodology for critique. Texts such as Bordwell’s *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* offer first steps toward using rhetoric as a methodology in film studies, while more recent publications like David Blakesley’s collection *The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film* have advanced the



practice considerably. Blakesley's methodology reveals the influences of both film criticism and rhetoric. He argues that "the consequences of the rhetorical turn for film studies are significant and provocative" and the essays in the volume show that the rhetorical approach to film studies amplifies its range and scope (13). Plantinga, Nichols, Winston, Bordwell, and Blakesley demonstrate how rhetoric can and should be used in film studies and establishes a strong methodology for the analysis of the nature documentary and, ultimately, the BBNF.

My analysis of BBNFs is also informed by the emergent fields of environmental rhetoric and environmental visual rhetoric. In *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*, Killingsworth and Palmer analyze the "patterns of rhetoric typically used in written discourse on environmental politics" and identify "ecospeak," a "makeshift discourse" that renders meaningful debate and action impossible through reductive rhetoric and endless feedback loops of meaning (1, 8). Killingsworth and Palmer argue that "the intractability of social problems like the environmental dilemma is due to the inability of concerned discourse communities to form adequate identifications through effective appeals" (7). They analyze numerous works that illustrate various perspectives on environmental issues, from scientific activism to the environmental impact statement and ecotopian discourse, revealing the presence and effects of ecospeak in these media and revealing how participants in these discourses can use language to counter ecospeak. Ecospeak pervades the nature film, especially the BBNF; representations of nonhuman animals and their habitats reflect the same discourse-limiting rhetoric that Killingsworth and Palmer note in print media. For

example, BBNFs such as *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth*, and *Life* tend to reinforce the perceived separation between humans and “nature.” Nonhuman animals are objectified and almost never share the frame with a human; often, the camera focuses on an animal, then pulls back to reveal that the shot was taken from up to a kilometer away, revealing no visible human presence in the vicinity. The narrator’s script emphasizes nonhuman animals’ dependence upon humans for protection and conservation. The scripto-visual cues in the BBNF reinforce the concept of nature as a separate “thing” that humans have power over, to conserve, ignore, or exploit as we see fit. One of the goals of this project is to determine the extent and effects of ecospeak in the BBNF and how they affect viewers’ concepts of nature and humanity’s place in it.

While *Ecospeak* focuses on written texts, Dobrin and Morey’s edited collection *Ecosee: Image, Rhetoric, Nature* examines “the study and the production of the visual (re)presentation of space, environment, ecology, and nature in photographs, paintings, television, film, video games, computer media, and other forms of image-based media” (2). Dobrin and Morey argue that the environmental dilemma is a problem of images and imaging, as well as ethics, epistemology, and discourse. *Ecosee* expands the scope of environmental rhetoric to the visual, bringing together “a range of disciplinary works to coalesce various efforts to better understand the role of image and visual representations of nature in constructing the politics of nature and environment” (4). Like Hill and Helmers, Dobrin, Morey, and their contributors study “images not just for their environmental focus and how they represent the environment but also how that image fits into the larger ecosystem of images and texts” (10). In “A Rhetorical Look at

*Ecosee*,” Morey offers a study of the semiotics of *ecosee*, analyzing how various images, texts, and discourses define and inform one another to construct nature, rather than represent or explain it. Morey also answers the question posed by Cox in “Nature’s ‘Crisis Disciplines’” with a resounding “yes”; that is, environmental communication does have an ethical duty, and indeed, many of the essays contained in the collection reflect that belief.

One such example of an *ecosee* essay that reflects both the usefulness of rhetorical analysis and the ethical impulse in environmental studies is Welling’s essay on ecopornography. Welling cites numerous examples of images and films that contain ecopornographic elements, analyzing some of the agents of production (usually the on-screen hosts), audiences, values, and media. In particular, Welling’s analysis of National Geographic nature documentaries touches upon some very key issues, including the separation between humans and the “natural” world, the illusion of an unmediated experience of nature, the manipulation required to get the animal subjects to perform the desired actions, and the effects of the camera/narrator’s “godlike” point-of-view. Welling also notes that many nature films that seek to “recast” formerly vilified species like wolves and great white sharks as “misunderstood” or symbols of ecological balance do so “without interrogating the deeper imbalances and schisms at the heart of how we represent, see, and live in the world” (59-60). Many BBNFs employ the strategy of featuring what Welling refers to as “charismatic megafauna,” in some cases attempting to redefine them in such a way as to make them “worthy” of conservation—without addressing the imbalances and schisms (63).

Ecopornography's relationship to human pornography remains largely unexplored; Welling's analysis is mainly focused on the question of power, which is central to the discourse surrounding human pornography. José Knighton and Lydia Millet have also theorized about ecoporn and its similarities to human pornography—Knighton in context with nature photography and Millet in comparison with centerfold pictures. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter frames sexuality in terms of power rather than gender and characterizes pornography as devoid of social context, thus enabling it to reinforce the “false universals of sexual archetypes” and reducing the actors to “instruments of pure function” (16). Like Carter, the essays in Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson's collection *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* theorize about who has power in the production and consumption of pornography and erotica. In the introduction, Carol J. Clover argues that “the debate on pornography is always linked, however covertly, with the debate on high and low culture” (3). Erotica, according to Lynda Nead, is a form that “allows the viewer to be aroused but within the purified, contemplative mode of high culture” (qtd. in Clover 3). The language used by Carter, Clover, and Nead has meaning in the discourse of ecopornography. A viewer can identify “false universals,” “sexual archetypes,” and “instruments of pure function” in nature films; the dominatrix who holds power only in the bedroom is analogous to the once-vilified and marginalized nonhuman animals who are now featured as the protagonists of nature films. And as for Nead's description of erotica, the BBNF, with its high-definition slow-motion scenes of explicit sexual activity and gory death, offers an acceptable way for a viewer to experience the violent and the erotic within the context

of a “high-culture” artifact that is simultaneously evocative and yet deemed suitable for prime-time television.

The following chapters build upon these pioneering efforts in the first concentrated study of the BBNF in light of its history, contexts, ethics, aesthetics, and rhetorical appeals. Chapter II, “A Genealogy of Natural History Filmmaking: Tracing the Roots from Rome to the 1940s,” begins my analysis of the history and reception of the nature documentary from the early days of silent cinema to the 1940s. This chapter surveys the evolution of common tropes and motifs of the nature documentary genre during its first decades. I argue that, as an increasingly urban population turned to nature documentaries to supply information about the natural world, the nature documentary became both a source of knowledge and a contributor to the perceived distance between humans and the natural world. This chapter begins with a very brief overview of the earliest manifestations of the exploitation and commodification of wildlife: the Roman Coliseum, the menageries of Europe, and the traveling circuses of the United States. Against this background, the study of specific films unfolds with analyses of the earliest silent, black-and-white, single-reel film shorts on aspects of nature—streams, exotic zoos, insects, and arachnids—as well as some of the earliest known examples of fakery in natural history filmmaking. Innovative early natural history filmmakers like Ole Olson, Oliver Pike, James Williamson, and F. Percy Smith consistently pushed the boundaries of the possible, inventing new filmmaking technology that permitted them to reveal secrets of the natural world that astounded audiences. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, documentary films became a focus of the burgeoning debates over the

morality of movies. This chapter also includes analyses of the masculinist narrative of the expedition film, particularly Theodore Roosevelt and Paul Rainey's African hunting trips, the films of Martin E. and Osa Johnson, and footage of Captain Scott's ill-fated attempt to reach the South Pole. The final section analyzes a variety of notable and groundbreaking natural history films from the 1910s-1930s. As my analysis demonstrates, each film is very much a product of its time and reveals some unsettling truths about both cultural prejudices and the role of nature in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter III, "'Truthiness' and the Culture of Longing: Nature Films of the 1940s-Present," continues the study of the natural history film in historical context, tracing the continuing evolution of the genre from the advent of television to the familiar nature programs of today, many of which take their cue from the popularity of "reality TV." In the wake of World War II and its trauma, as well as rapid urbanization and suburban growth, nature (and nature shows) became an importance source of both solace and knowledge. This chapter covers early nature shows such as Disney's *True-Life Adventures*, the iconic series *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, *Wild America*, and *Nature*, as well as the first of many National Geographic specials, with a demonstration of how filmmakers controlled, manipulated, and even falsified the content of their films and theorizes what effects this manipulation had on audiences and their perceptions of the natural world. The chapter analyzes several series produced by iconic naturalist Sir David Attenborough. The chapter concludes with the nature film as we know it today—as the domain of the nature showman and reality television.

In Chapter IV, “Replication and Disconnection: An X-Rated Rhetoric of Ecopornography,” I build upon the work of Mander, Welling, Knighton, and Millet in identifying the cultural work of ecopornography through an analysis of the processes by which it is produced and consumed. I argue that human pornography and ecopornography are similar in their characteristic decontextualization, recontextualization, fragmentation, replication, and disconnection. I analyze the origins of the term “ecopornography” in the context of the conflicting discourses of rapidly increasing energy demands and burgeoning environmental awareness of the early 1970s. I argue that the ongoing political battles over pornography are largely rhetorical clashes, with all participants attempting to control the parameters of the discourse in order to strengthen their relative positions. The two major federal commissions on pornography—the 1970 commission and the 1985 Meese Commission—reflect these rhetorical maneuverings as anti-pornography and anti-censorship activists and politicians representing a variety of ethical positions fought not only over what pornography *is*, but whether it should be allowed to exist at all. I contend that the idealized replications in both human pornography and ecopornography lead audiences to develop identifications with these unrealistic and objectified images rather than their real-world analogs. Finally, this chapter argues that voyeurism and objectification create disconnections between the audience and the (eco)pornographic subject, a separation that helps enable unethical behavior toward both the environment and toward others.

Chapter V, “Natural Places and Virtual Spaces: Commodification of Extinction and the Rhetoric of the Big-Budget Nature Film,” analyzes the BBNF as an emergent

genre that continues the pattern of commodification of nature introduced in Chapter II and combines the conventions of natural history filmmaking identified in Chapters II and III with the rhetorical practices of ecopornography examined in Chapter IV. I argue that the BBNF, to enhance its popular appeal, incorporates the semantic and syntactic cues of the modern blockbuster superhero/action film and creates a virtual environment very similar to the modern zoo and wildlife theme park. The BBNF commodifies extinction by assigning a market value to rare and endangered species and habitats and further exploits them to sell a film that substitutes for a “real,” firsthand nature experience. I build upon the theoretical work of critics in zoo and ecotourism science to identify the ways in which watching a BBNF mirrors these practices. Finally, I maintain that BBNFs, like other virtual environments, perform the cultural work of promoting “good feelings” in viewers and providing an escape from the harsh realities of habitat destruction, climate change, and extinction. While BBNFs are certainly sources of important information about animals and habitats from around the world, these benefits are outweighed by their tendency to perpetuate the perceived separation between humans and our environment and provide an all-too-ready (and all-too-successful) escape from increasingly critical conservation and environmental issues.

The conclusion to this dissertation analyzes natural history programs that demonstrate the type of ethical engagement that Cox calls for in “Nature’s ‘Crisis Disciplines.’” As this dissertation suggests, as a genre, natural history films’ engagement with critical environmental and conservation issues is inconsistent at best. At worst, programs like the BBNF do rather the opposite of ethical engagement by



avoiding and often actively downplaying the effects of human-caused threats to habitats and animals even as these effects drive the content of the shows. The *Last Chance to See* multimedia project, begun in the 1980s and revived in a 2009 television series of the same name, uses very different rhetorical strategies in its attempts to appeal to the audience to act to help protect and save a variety of animals and habitats. The hosts of *Last Chance to See* (Stephen Fry and Mark Cawardine) take a page from Sir David Attenborough's style of documentary filmmaking and travel to numerous countries to document the status of a list of nine endangered animals and their habitats—a list developed in the mid-to-late 1980s by Cawardine and his original partner in the project, Douglas Adams. *Last Chance to See* is an example of the kind of ethically engaged environmental communication that offers an alternative approach to the distancing caused by many other nature documentaries.

## CHAPTER II

### A GENEALOGY OF NATURAL HISTORY FILMMAKING:

#### TRACING THE ROOTS FROM ROME TO THE 1940S

Cultural values, technology, and nature itself have supplied the raw materials from which wilderness as artifact has been forged.

—Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature*

Gregg Mitman's assertion that wilderness is an artifact "forged" by mankind is a deliberate ironic inversion of Aldo Leopold's claim in *A Sand County Almanac* that "Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization" (264). While Leopold writes that civilization was built out of wilderness, Mitman argues that it is wilderness itself that is an artifact. Indeed, for many, our concepts about "nature" and "wilderness" are so mediated that what we think of as "wilderness" is actually a construct. Images of the wilderness construct are everywhere, from advertising to the publications of conservation organizations, inundating us with retouched, "greenwashed" illustrations that seem to represent a different world than the one we inhabit. A search for "nature" on Google Images results in literally *billions* of images, and only the smallest fraction contain humans or evidence of human presence or could be construed as "realistic." Most are highly idealized, taken under controlled conditions, manipulated with color-enhancing filters, and designed to be used as desktop wallpaper or screen-savers. Google Images suggests "nature wallpaper," "nature backgrounds," "beautiful nature," "green nature," and "nature scenes" as related

searches, which offers insight into both the most common search terms users utilize and how they intend to use the images they obtain. As issues of conservation, habitat destruction, and global warming remain highly controversial and politically charged, many ecocritics and environmental writers have turned to the fields of rhetoric and visual rhetoric for strategies to address these challenges in meaningful and productive ways. As part of their strategy, critics, writers, and activists need to consider the impact that representations of nature, wilderness, and nonhuman animals have in our visual culture, particularly in regard to how humans conceptualize their place in their environment.<sup>1</sup>

Nature documentaries play a significant role in both the formation of the construct of “wilderness” and the ways in which humans see themselves as part of—or separate from—their environment. From the genre’s earliest beginnings, humans and their environment have been cast in conflict with each other. Many of the earliest proto-nature documentaries were the silent, black-and-white travelogues brought back by the “great white hunters” of the United States and Europe, who ventured to Africa, Asia, and South America to stalk, kill, and stuff a variety of exotic species. The hunters’ incursions into this “remote” space, their encounters with the natural surroundings and

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<sup>1</sup> The term “greenwash” was coined in a 1972 article by former Madison Avenue advertising exec Jerry Mander to describe efforts by various companies to change their corporate images in the wake of the publications of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, Paul R. and Anne Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* in 1968, the founding of the EPA and the first Earth Day in 1970. Power companies in particular attempted to affect public perception of their practices and services by emphasizing family and nature in their advertisements. It was all a sham: according to Joshua Karliner, “In the year 1969 alone, public utilities spent more than \$300 million on advertising--more than eight times what they spent on the anti-pollution research they were touting in their ads.” utilities spent more than \$300 million on advertising--more than eight times what they spent on the anti-pollution research they were touting in their ads.”

its inhabitants, and the “spoils of battle” they carried triumphantly home reflect this oppositional positioning between humans and their environment.

The advent of filmmaking technology enabled hunters to return from their travels not just with the stuffed carcasses of their kills and thrilling stories but actual film footage of the kill and, in some cases, the indigenous people of the area. These films, originally screened for the hunters’ families and friends, began to make appearances in local movie houses. At the same time, much as “big fish” stories enhanced the hunters’ tales, the films began to reflect embellishments made to augment the drama and danger of the hunt and pique the audiences’ interest in order to make the films more popular and profitable. Prey animals were not the only victims of the filmmakers’ fakery. Just as encounters between the hunters and their prey were manipulated for maximum dramatic effect, indigenous peoples were frequently directed and/or coerced into participating in the films. This deliberate misrepresentation reinforced the imperial impulses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by depicting indigenous peoples as childlike and savage, and therefore in need of colonial “guidance” and control.

Throughout the twentieth century, an increasingly urban population turned to documentaries for nostalgic glimpses at seemingly Edenic nature and an important source of limited contact with the natural world. Early films such as Martin and Osa Johnson’s *Jungle Adventures* (1921), *Simba: The King of Beasts* (1928) and *Wonders of the Congo* (1930) present encounters with exotic animals and native peoples that were staged to create drama, increasing popular appeal and profitability. These tactics continued in the natural history programs of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Popular

television shows such as Disney's True-Life Adventures series (1948-1960), *Zoo Parade* (1950-1957), *Animal World* (1968-1976), and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* (1963-1988) became highly influential in shaping the ways audiences conceptualized the natural world from the comfort and safety of their living rooms. Demonstrating remarkable naïveté, one television critic from the *San Francisco Chronicle* gushed, "One of *Wild Kingdom's* admirable features is its honesty about its subject. This is nature *as it is*" (qtd. in Mitman 151, my emphasis). Filmmakers perpetuated an illusion of pure observation while at best filming under carefully controlled conditions and at worst deliberately interfering with and even killing their animal subjects.

Galloway et al. describe incidents in nature documentary filmmaking when the filmmakers cause injury and death to the animals to obtain the desired dramatic footage. Disney filmmakers working on installments in the True-Life Adventure series were among the worst offenders; they created the myth of lemming mass suicides by throwing lemmings off a cliff and filming their fatal fall. In another incident, a cinematographer threw a tame lion into a river and filmed him as he tumbled over a waterfall as part of a segment on lions taking to the water to catch prey (Galloway et al. 326). The cruel deaths of these animals are testimony to the lengths filmmakers may go to inject drama into their films. An investigation by *the fifth estate*, a Canadian newsmagazine airing on the CBC, exposed the practice of fakery in wildlife documentaries, citing examples as old as the 1909 film *Hunting Big Game in Africa*. As a result of these often bloody manipulations, viewers' perceptions of the natural world were frequently based not on personal experience or even reliable recorded observations but on carefully edited

misrepresentations. Encounters with nature were reduced to abbreviated, sensational, and sentimental vignettes to increase the appeal of nature programs. As wilderness shifted further from a place to a thing, an idea, and a construct, and the genre of natural history filmmaking was driven by fakery, sentimentality, and escapism, the BBNF was born. In the last decade, the BBNF has fundamentally shifted viewers' expectations not only for nature documentaries, but for wildlife encounters as well. While the BBNF is a recent phenomenon, the characteristics—one might say, the genealogy—of the BBNF are visible in the various forms of nature documentary that developed throughout the twentieth century. Formed at the confluence of big-budget Hollywood blockbusters and more traditional documentary fare, the BBNF owes much to both, as well as earlier examples of the ways nature has been commodified and forced into the role of entertainment for humans.

To understand the role of the BBNF in contemporary concepts of environmentalism and conservation, this chapter traces its roots in the changing relationship between people and their environment during the last two millennia. It begins with a brief overview of the clearest precursor of the modern nature documentary: the wild animal shows of Roman colosseums and the menageries of the Age of Imperialism. Against this historical background, this chapter then analyzes the history and reception of various nature documentaries from the early days of cinema to the advent of television. The next chapter focuses on natural history filmmaking during the latter half of the twentieth century, after the popularity of television made it possible for filmmakers to bring images of nature into the American home. This survey identifies the

tropes and motifs of the nature documentary genre with an eye to how and why those characteristics evolved during the 20th century. I will argue that the nature documentary, as a descendant of the wild animal show and menagerie, became both a source of knowledge and spectacle as well as a contributor to the perceived distance between humans and their environment.

### **A History of Commodification and Bloody Spectacle**

The long history of commodification and exploitation of nature and scarcity evident in the BBNF is already visible in the wild animal shows in Roman colosseums and the menageries maintained by a variety of European sovereigns and aristocrats beginning in the Middle Ages. Exotic animals were generally sources of bloody spectacle in colosseums; most infamously, an estimated nine thousand animals were killed during the inaugural games of the Roman Colosseum in 80 A.D. (Whatmore and Thorne 438). The slaughter of animals brought in from all corners of the Roman Empire was one of the numerous sources of spectacle featured in the Colosseum, which also included gladiatorial combat and reenactments of famous battles fought on both land and water. The extravagance served as spectacle and escape for the audience while simultaneously proving the wealth and expansiveness of the empire in gory conspicuous consumption that continued until the Emperor Honorius banned gladiatorial combat at the beginning of the fifth century A.D. (Whatmore and Thorne 440). The most common type of exhibitions in the Colosseum were the *ludi circenses*, which featured chariot racing as well as trained animal acts. One popular diversion was staged hunts, in which

the floor of the Colosseum was transformed into forests or even flooded for sea battles. Wild animal combat involved both people and nonhuman animals from all corners of the empire—the more “strange and uncivilized,” the better. According to Whatmore and Thorne, the animals were brought in to Rome via military supply lines and political patronage and used in a variety of spectacles, including animal-on-animal fighting and the execution of “criminals, Christians, deserters, escaped slaves and enemy captives.” These same conduits supplied animals to menageries, exotic pet markets, and gladiatorial schools throughout the Roman Empire (Whatmore and Thorne 440). Exoticism and ethnocentrism combined with a love of blood sport to create a culture of commodification and exploitation that led to the wholesale slaughter of both people and animals, and even the extinction of many species, such as the *pantheras Graecas*.

The consumption of “exotic” people and nonhuman animals is hardly unique to the Roman Empire. In *Mediating Nature*, Nils Lindhal Elliot argues that the tendency to commodify nature parallels imperialism, as nationalistic countries fought and maneuvered to claim other lands, bring back specimens of rare and unusual species, and develop taxonomic classifications and nomenclatures. While a few remarkably perceptive imperial governors (whom Elliott refers to as “proto-environmentalists”) noted climate changes and other environmental degradations that they attributed to deforestation, the typical imperial pattern was to exploit and destroy the people and use up the land of the invaded country (94). At the same time, back home, many wealthy inhabitants of these imperialist countries sought to create “picturesque enclosures”:



In England in particular, the growing differences in the distribution of wealth enabled the landed gentry to invest fabulous sums in the creation of idealized landscapes in their estates. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the gardens in such estates, and the paintings commissioned by their owners, were to play a major role in defining what counted as nature. (Elliot 94)

The gardens and paintings alluded to by Elliot are clear precursors to nature documentaries. Elliot links nationalism, capitalism, and imperialism to illustrate how the commodification of nature is related to the exploitation of labor and resources both at home and abroad.

One popular type of picturesque enclosure was the menagerie. Menageries, which were costly to build, fill, and maintain, were less frequently used for blood sports (as the Romans had used their Colosseum) but were certainly indicators of status and wealth. According to James Fisher, early examples include the three menageries owned by Emperor Charlemagne in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Located in present-day Netherlands and Germany, Charlemagne's menageries housed elephants, monkeys, lions, bears, camels, falcons, and many exotic birds, many of which were gifts from Asian and African rulers (Fisher 40). William the Conqueror's menagerie at his Woodstock manor was enlarged by his son, Henry I, during the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The best-known menagerie in Great Britain, the Tower Menagerie in the Tower of London, was begun by King John circa 1204 and housed big cats in what became known as the Lion Tower. The Tower Menagerie was a popular tourist attraction until it was closed by the Duke of

Wellington in 1835, its animal inhabitants moved to what is now London Zoo (“Big Cats”). Various rulers and aristocrats on the European continent also had menageries, including Emperor Frederick II, who had three in Italy. The Sun King, Louis XIV of France, built two: one at Vincennes, the other at Versailles. With its large circular central pavilion ringed with animal enclosures and cages, the menagerie at Versailles was very different from the Vincennes menagerie. Vincennes had a rectangular courtyard with balconies above where the king and visiting dignitaries could watch bloody battles (Robbins). When the animal fights at Vincennes ended around 1700, the remaining animals were moved to the menagerie at Versailles, the design of which became the model for menageries and eventually zoological parks throughout Europe.

Human or animal, on two feet or four, the colonial attitude was much the same. From the early Americas to Renaissance Europe and well after, the “human zoo” was a common feature in colonialist or imperialist countries. Often set up as an exhibition of racist and colonialist ideology, as well as social Darwinism, human zoos also frequently featured people with disfigurements or unusual conditions, such as little people, giants, conjoined twins, and microcephalics. One well-known example of the “ethnological exhibition” style of human zoos is the *Jardin d’Agronomie Tropicale* in the Vincennes forest of Paris. Originally conceived in 1899 as a garden featuring plants from the tropical regions of France’s colonial holdings, the *Jardin d’Agronomie Tropicale* became a human zoo, complete with replicas of villages from Madagascar, Indochina, Sudan, the Congo, Tunisia, and Morocco (“Ruins”). These “villages,” arranged in pavilions reminiscent of the menagerie at Versailles, were inhabited by more than

35,000 men, women, and children who were brought to the human zoo from their homes throughout the French empire, where they were observed by more than one million visitors before the exhibition's closing (Nessy). Now a cause of great embarrassment for the French, the *Jardin d'Agronomie Tropicale* was closed and allowed to become overgrown, its buildings crumbling, and though it has been nominally open to the public since 2007, it has few visitors.

While the menageries of the landed gentry were accessible almost exclusively to aristocrats and their families, the traveling menageries of Europe and the United States were run by showmen and attended by ordinary people interested in seeing exotic animals from faraway lands. In the United States, menageries and circuses often traveled together instead of separately, enabling visitors to purchase a single ticket to see human circus performers and animal exhibits, as well as the always-thrilling combination of the two: the lion tamer and his big cats. The most famous American touring circus, Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus, touted itself as the "World's Greatest Menagerie" (Hancocks 87). Permanent and traveling menageries offered encounters with exotic animals from distant places that few people had the opportunity or resources to visit.

The use of exotic animals in Colosseum shows, European menageries, and American circuses had a number of effects on how humans viewed nonhuman animals. Animals became a source of spectacle in bloody fights, menagerie cages, and performances with trainers. At the same time, they were symbols of status and wealth for empires, rulers, and aristocrats; today, some wealthy individuals still own exotic

animals for the same reasons. To circus and traveling menagerie attendees of both the past and present, animals are presented as commodities. As commodities, animals exist for our entertainment and our pleasure, to live, reproduce, fight, and often die as we see fit. The worth of these animals is determined by their use-value rather than their intrinsic value: nature in service to humans. Mark Meister and Phyllis M. Japp suggest that “when nature is defined as a commodity for consumption, it becomes, in a capitalistic society, culturally significant” (2). The cultural significance of nature is evident in the popularity of nature documentary series throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a population farther and farther removed from its natural environment and increasingly aware of the dwindling numbers of certain species began to seek both knowledge and solace in nature documentaries.

### **The Nature Film in Context**

In *African Game Trails: An Account of the African Wanderings of an American Hunter-Naturalist* (1910), Theodore Roosevelt writes that “There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm” (xxi). Early wildlife filmmakers attempted to capture some of the spirit and mystery of the wilderness that Roosevelt alludes to through the emerging medium of film. Mitman argues that nature films “have sought to capture and recreate an experience of unspoiled nature. They have blended scientific research and vernacular knowledge, education and entertainment, authenticity and artifice” (3). The complex relationships among these elements is one of the reasons nature films present such a

challenge for analysis; examining any one part without considering the others permits only a partial understanding. Visual rhetoric, because of its engagement with the elements Mitman enumerates, plus the historical, cultural, and ethical contexts in which the films are produced, the interactions between agents of production and their audience, and intertextuality, is well suited to such an analysis.

As an amalgam of art and science, the nature film can reveal as much or more about its creators and audience as its subjects. The development of nature filmmaking and its conventions reflect shifting cultural trends around the world, particularly in the United States and Britain, where the majority of the most well-known, widely distributed, and influential films are produced. Changing social norms are frequently manifested in nature films via the narrative, which is produced by editing footage into coherent storylines and adding voiceover narration. Norms may gain a measure of “authenticity” with some viewers if the latter perceives them as arising from the “natural order” of things, particularly if that viewer believes the so-called “natural order” reflects the influence of a Creator. For example, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when filmmaking was in its infancy and nature films began to appear, the films frequently reflect cultural trends such as ethnocentrism, racism, and classism, which were part-and-parcel to the imperialist dogma of the day. Natural history filmmaking often includes footage not only of nonhuman animals, but also so-called “natural” people, including indigenous peoples. In early nature films, these indigenous peoples are frequently described as “savages” who are less evolved—both culturally and physiologically—than the Caucasian filmmakers and audience. They are, in effect, animalized. As such, the

filmmakers can imply that they themselves and their ideal audiences are “naturally” superior to their movie subjects, ostensibly justifying the inequalities of colonialism and racism that pervade some 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century films.

In such cases, appeals to nature are attempts to appeal to a kind of “ultimate” authority—that is, an authority whose weight exceeds all others and trumps all counterarguments. In *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric*, M. Jimmie Killingsworth uses religious discourse as an example to illustrate how appeals to ultimate authority function rhetorically. A preacher who is attempting to persuade his or her congregation may cite the Bible as an authority, and if this discourse community collectively accepts the Bible as an authority (of significance or absolute), his or her argument will carry greater weight than if he or she supported the argument with other types of evidence. But, as Killingsworth points out, this type of appeal may work only if the discourse community shares a belief that the authority is significant or absolute; such an appeal would not, for example, be very effective for a non-Christian, or even a Christian for whom the Bible lacks significant authority on the issue or value in question. Killingsworth has characterized appeals to authority as at best contentious and at worst fallacious. Killingsworth argues that “modern rhetoric . . . attacks the very idea of absolute authority” and tends to focus on how types of appeals vary between audiences and discourse communities (13). Appeals that may be effective within one community—such as using the Bible as evidence in a sermon to parishioners—will be less effective with another audience that lacks the same common ground, such as the participants in a college course on biology or literature.

Nature films and their makers can appeal to numerous discourse communities with various audiences. In the early-to-mid twentieth century, some filmmakers and/or their financiers used appeals to nature to justify ethnocentrism, racism, and colonialism to European and American audiences who, to varying degrees, shared these sentiments. In other cases, nature films have been co-opted by various parties and used as evidence to support claims that certain behaviors are “natural” or “unnatural,” or that nature (as a stand-in for a Creator) favors particular behaviors, family structures, or ethical decisions. Pollo et al. point out that attributing human morals to animals—or projecting these morals onto animal behavior—can lead to misunderstanding and even to unfair condemnation of animals for their actions; for example, “showing some mating, sexual and parenting behaviours of animals can enforce in the public the idea that some family relationships are ‘natural’ and therefore morally good also for humans” (1358). In “The Re-Visioned American Dream: The Wildlife Documentary as Conservative Nostalgia,” Angela J. Aguayo explores the ways in which conservatives and supporters of heterosexual marriage point to the representations of monogamy and family in penguin society as “proof” from the natural world that heterosexuality and monogamous relationships is “natural.” Aguayo notes that the documentary film *March of the Penguins* (2005), with its Voice-of-God narration by Morgan Freeman, has been lauded by many conservative leaders and Christian fundamentalists for its apparent affirmation of traditional family values as being the “natural” state that “back-sliding humans have all but abandoned” (Scott qtd. in Aguayo 142). The narrative of the film encourages identification between the human audience and the penguin subjects, with the

“naturalization” of values such as monogamy and heterosexuality in the middle. The case of *March of the Penguins* is only one of many examples of the ways in which nature films reflect both political and social agendas and cultural trends. The history of the nature film and its evolution during the late 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries demonstrates the myriad of ways that these films are very much a reflection of the historical, cultural, and ethical contexts in which they were created.

### **Early Nature Documentaries: Adventures in a New Medium**

The earliest examples of natural history films were black-and-white shorts released in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1895, cameraman Birt Acres, using a camera designed by R. W. Paul, filmed waves crashing against Admiralty Pier, Dover, and the swift-moving water of a river. The 39-second film, entitled *Rough Sea at Dover*, premiered in 1896 and is considered by some to be the first “natural history” film (“Rough Sea”). A year later, another short entitled *Elephants at the Zoo* (1897) shows a large elephant at the London Zoological Garden carrying a group of children down a path at the park. In 1898, British Mutoscope and Biograph Company produced *Pelicans at the Zoo*, which, like *Rough Sea at Dover* and *Elephants at the Zoo* was filmed by a single stationary camera. *Pelicans* shows a group of the large birds released from their cages to squabble over their food. Other notable very early shorts include *Fight Between Tarantula and Scorpion* and *Spiders on a Web*, both released in 1900. Both *Fight* and *Spiders* depict captive arachnids interacting in small containers and feature close-ups



that allow viewers to see the interactions between the animal subjects and details of their physiology.

Within just a few years of the advent of natural history films, pioneering filmmakers began incorporating practices that taint the genre with controversy to the present day: fakery and animal cruelty. In 1906, Norwegian filmmaker Ole Olsen hired actors, bought two old lions from a zoo in Germany, and modified an island off the Danish coast with palm fronds and artificial plants to resemble a savannah.<sup>2</sup> Olsen staged a ten-minute silent film, called *Løvejagten* (*The Lion Hunt*), in which the actors, playing hunters and their African guide, observe zebras, ostrich, and a hippo. Then, not content with merely observing animals, the hunters (one played by Viggo Larsen, who also directed the film) kill, gut, and skin the two old former zoo lions. The footage of the zebras, ostrich, and hippo was shot at the Copenhagen Zoo, with the camera carefully avoiding showing the enclosures; the slaughter of the lions is real. After members of the local humane society reported Olsen to the Minister of Justice, the film was banned in Denmark and was smuggled to Sweden; from there it was distributed worldwide and, largely because of its notoriety, was immensely successful (“The Lion Hunt”). Despite the protests, controversy, and the brief incarceration of one of the camera operators, *The Lion Hunt* marked merely the beginning of fakery and animal cruelty in natural history filmmaking. Unfortunately, these practices would increase in both scope and severity in the century to come.

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<sup>2</sup> Olsen founded the venerable Danish production company Nordisk Films Compagni in 1906; the U.S. distribution branch of the company was the Great Northern Film Company, with an office in New York (Neergaard 217; “Ole Olsen”).

Olsen's film underscores two basic tenets of visual rhetoric: first, that what is absent or excluded from the image is often as important as what is included—sometimes, even more so; and second, that there exists between the documentary filmmaker and his or her audience a good faith agreement that the filmmaker stand by the accuracy of the film's claim to truth. In *What Do Pictures Want?*, W. J. T. Mitchell urges readers of visual texts (which he refers to as "imagetexts") to ask:

What does this picture lack; what does it leave out? What is its area of erasure? Its blind spot? Its anamorphic blur? What does the frame or boundary exclude? What does the angle of representation prevent us from seeing, and prevent it from showing? What does it need or demand from the beholder to complete its work? (49-50)

Mitchell's questions are particularly applicable to nature photography. Since images of nature are frequently idealized and carefully framed to exclude any elements that might detract from the pleasure and enjoyment one gets from seeing them, anything that might spoil the illusion is outside the boundaries of the lens or finds its way to the cutting-room floor. Audiences watching *Løvejagten* believed they were witnessing footage of wild animals in their natural habitats; the illusion was created by carefully staging the shots to avoid including evidence of the zoo in which the animals resided. By deliberately misleading viewers, Olsen violated the good faith agreement between the filmmaker and his audience that is an essential element of documentary filmmaking.

Even though fakery and animal cruelty were not uncommon in natural history filmmaking, the genre's history is replete with filmmakers who acted ethically and

responsibly and encouraged others to do the same. In sharp contrast to Olsen's questionable practices, pioneering British filmmaker and wildlife photographer Oliver Pike was a committed conservationist whose groundbreaking cinematography influenced the development of natural history filmmaking. In 1900, he published his first book, *In Birdland with Field Glass and Camera*; in 1907, a year after *Løvejagten*'s release, Pike's innovative first film *In Birdland* became the first British wildlife film to have public screenings ("Oliver Pike"). Unlike Olsen, who went to great lengths to stage the scenes in *Løvejagten*, Pike and fellow photographer Armytage Sanders risked their lives to film birds in their natural habitats, documenting a host of behaviors never seen before. In many ways, Pike set the standard for natural history filmmakers by combining the adventurous spirit of an explorer with the scientific method of a naturalist and the inventiveness required of a genre pioneer. Faced with the challenge of photographing wildlife in such a way as to avoid disturbing them, Pike invented a cine-camera that could be camouflaged and triggered by passing animals (Dixon). Byrony Dixon lauds Pike not only for his immense body of work in the field of natural history programming but also for sharing his knowledge of photography and filmmaking with others through his twenty-five books, more than fifty films, and numerous lectures. While none of the estimated 100 copies of *In Birdland* have survived, many of Pike's other films survive and reveal fascinating insights into both wildlife and human culture and the interactions between them.

One of Pike's earliest films, *St. Kilda, Its People and Birds* (1908), is an example of a film in which the filmmakers examine the interconnections between people and their

environment and reject the premise of a separation between them. The isolated archipelago off the coast of Scotland supported a population of between 100-180 until 1930, when it was evacuated. In 1986, it was designated a World Heritage site and today hosts only visiting groups of conservationists and a small military base. At the time the film was made, however, the St. Kildans were part of an unusual biome. The islands are an important seabird breeding ground and the native people, in addition to keeping small herds of sheep, relied on fishing and catching young fulmar petrels for food (“St. Kilda”). The film shows islanders returning from fishing expeditions and sorting the catch, as well as the death-defying cliff rappelling needed to snare the young fulmar petrels that the intertitles describe as the St. Kildans’ staple food. In what might be one of the earliest examples of the kind of high-risk filmmaking techniques that would become a mainstay in natural history programming, Pike used ropes to hang partway down the cliff-side to film the islanders snaring the petrels above the crashing waves far below. The film points toward the idea that the people of St. Kilda maintained a sustainable relationship with their environment, marked by subsistence fishing, the snaring of petrels, the growing of small food crops, and the keeping of cattle and sheep—practices that dated back for millennia, at least to the Bronze Age. Pike’s approach to the film reflected the inseparability of the human culture and the nonhuman inhabitants of the islands and their environs.

In 1909, Pike made *Farne Islands*, a similar project to *St. Kilda*. Pike’s film was shot in black and white and hand-colored by the Pathé Frères Company using stencils to showcase the remarkable biodiversity of the islands (“*Farne Islands*”). According to

Palle B. Petterson, Pike was impressed with the results of the color work, saying later that “It was not color photography to be sure, but the results were remarkably true to nature” (qtd. in 49). Here, Pike reveals how important he felt authenticity to be in his filmmaking—an artistic value reflected throughout his longtime partnership with Pathé Frères, which resulted in a number of so-called “knowledge-imparting films,” which Petterson differentiates from director Paul Rotha’s concept of the “instructional film” (66). According to Rotha, “The instructional film does not dramatize but describes, not for the sake of creating emotional effect, but for the strict purpose of imparting knowledge. In most cases, the second aim does not require creative skill, but is well served by capable craftsmanship” (qtd. in Petterson 66). Petterson objects to Rotha’s definition because it explicitly excludes both creativity and drama, and instead proposes the term “knowledge-imparting films.” This descriptive but unwieldy term certainly describes the films made by Oliver Pike, including *Farne Islands*. The Farne Islands, which are a group of 15-20 tiny islands off the coast of Northumberland, England, have no permanent human residents and instead feature 23 species of seabirds—including approximately 37,000 pairs of puffins—and a large grey seal colony (“Farne Islands”). The Farne Islands are also notable as the site of one of the first bird protection laws in the world; proto-conservationist Saint Cuthbert, who was prior at Lindisfarne and a longtime resident, introduced special laws in 676 that protected the Eider ducks and other seabirds nesting there (“Farne Islands”). The islands’ remarkable ecological history, combined with their significance in the life of one of England’s most beloved saints, made them an ideal subject for Pike’s film.

Like Oliver Pike, James Williamson was an early pioneer of cinema. Williamson was also a prolific inventor of cinematic equipment. According to biographer Martin Sopocy, in addition to the Williamson camera, Williamson also invented a device that allowed film exhibitors to create their own intertitles. According to Pettersen, filmmakers began to use intertitles in so-called “educational” or “knowledge-imparting films” around 1907 to “create drama and provide information”; another common use was to anthropomorphize the animal subjects (67-8). Anthropomorphizing helps create identification between the film’s subjects and the viewer, as well as enhancing the narrative structure of the film. In 1909, Williamson turned his attention from commercial films to making “informational films on scientific and nature subjects,” a venture that failed but did produce his last film: *The History of a Butterfly: A Romance of Insect Life* (1910). The ten-minute silent film begins with a man running through a field with a butterfly net, successfully capturing a butterfly. The remainder of Williamson’s film offers a narrative of the life-cycle of the butterfly, including footage of each stage of life from pupa to juvenile caterpillar to adult caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly. The film offers detailed close-ups of pupae hatching, young caterpillars crawling along twigs, adult caterpillars interacting and eating, and finally the emergence of a peacock butterfly. The intertitles, which are in German, provide helpful information about each of the scenes and create a narrative. The intertitles include “Catching the Butterfly,” “The caught female lures the male butterfly,” “A cabbage butterfly laying eggs,” “A crawling caterpillar,” “A caterpillar eating,” “Different types of caterpillars,” “The peacock butterfly caterpillar,” and “Pupation of the peacock butterfly.” Other

intertitles label different types of moths, such as the sponge moth, the Lime Hawkmoth, and the Beech moth.<sup>3</sup>

Also in 1910, photographer and naturalist F. Percy Smith created the pioneering time-lapse photography film *The Birth of a Flower*, one of more than fifty short films he made for the *Urban Science* series. The black-and-white film shows close-ups of hyacinths, daffodils, and roses blooming; crocuses, tulips, and garden anemones opening in the sunlight; snowdrops and Neapolitan onions growing and blooming; and narcissi and Japanese lilies blossoming. The time-lapse photography method takes processes that took hours and even days to unfold and converts them into brief clips of fifteen to thirty seconds each. *The Birth of a Flower* is one of the earliest-known examples of this technique, which has become a staple of nature filmmaking and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter V. Demonstrating his prowess as both a master of photography and invention, Smith used “gramophone needles, candle wicks and other assorted objects to modify his equipment” so that he could film the flora even while he slept (“Urban Science”). As an inventor-filmmaker, the appeal of the project for Smith is evident: create new technology and new techniques to film natural processes in a way no one had done before.

For the audience, the appeal of *The Birth of a Flower* is a combination of the aesthetic and the scientific, as well as the novelty of a then-unheard-of technique. Previous early films such as *Rough Sea at Dover*, *Elephants at the Zoo*, *Pelicans at the Zoo*, *Spiders on a Web*, and so forth are observational, positioning the viewer as a

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by Dr. Robert Shandley, Texas A&M University

spectator to events that play out in “real time.” In contrast, *The Birth of a Flower* completely redefined the medium by depicting an altered reality. Audiences who had never before experienced the time-lapse technique would be drawn to the film to witness the almost magical transformations of flowers growing and blooming, magnified to fill a movie screen. Like the close-ups in *Spiders on a Web* and *Fight between Tarantula and Scorpion*, the intimacy of *Birth of a Flower* seeks to reveal nature’s secrets. In 1909, Smith released the film *To Demonstrate How Spiders Fly*. According to film historian Jenny Hammerton, Smith “believed that he could cure people of their fear of spiders by showing them blown up images of their eight legged foes on the cinema screen.” To that end, Smith used a model spider—the first of several animated animals to appear in films made by Smith—to demonstrate how spiders make webs and take flight using the wind. The sequence ends with footage of a live spider searching its lair for food.

The earliest nature films, from *Rough Sea at Dover* to *The Birth of a Flower* and *To Demonstrate How Spiders Fly*, show that filmmakers recognized the potential of the new medium of film to explore the natural world in new, exciting, informational, and profitable ways. As with any burgeoning trend, however, the movie industry became a focal point for the dominant cultural tensions of the day, including class conflict, gender anxiety, and concerns about immigration. Strangely enough, natural history programming would play a significant role in the discourse surrounding these clashes.

According to Mitman, documentary filmmaking in general and natural history programming in particular came along at a crucial time in film history, as “the middle and upper class of American society were struggling to assert control over the motion



picture industry” (7). In 1908, New York City mayor George B. McClellan closed down every movie theater in the city during the week of Christmas by revoking the licenses of 550 nickelodeons and movie houses located in tenement districts and immigrant neighborhoods. Mitman claims that McClellan’s extreme action was caused by several factors. First, nickelodeons and similar movie theaters paid a fraction of the license fees paid by vaudeville and stage theaters (\$25 versus \$500 each). Second—and perhaps most significantly—McClellan gave in to the demands of vocal groups of “Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans” who strenuously objected to the content of the “readily accessible, brief, and cheap . . . amusement” shown in these theaters, which tended toward “lewd, violent, and carnivalesque subjects” (Mitman 7). As many researchers have shown, however, the motivations of these groups were rarely as simple as they pretended to be.

In *Working-Class Hollywood*, Steven J. Ross characterizes early films and the venues in which they were shown as sources of considerable anxiety for the middle and upper classes, as well as politicians and employers. Many films “appealed directly and primarily to working-class audiences” and often “presented poignant stories of immigrants and workers suffering at the hands of employers, politicians, and hypocritical clergy and civic leaders”; even worse, the victims in the films frequently resisted their oppressors and won (Ross 12). In an era marked by violent and deadly strikes and riots, the films created consubstantiality among working-class people who were divided by ethnicity and language—a unification that terrified a wide range of people. In 1914, in “What to Do With the Motion Picture Show: Shall It be Censored?”

reformer Frederic C. Howe wrote that certain films “‘tended to excite class feelings’ and warned of the day when movies would become ‘the daily press of industrial groups, of classes, of Socialism, syndicalism, and radical opinion’” (qtd. in Ross 12). By the mid-nineteen-teens, labor union halls became a common location to screen movies, adding to the fears about films’ ability to unite and even incite class and labor conflict. Working-class individuals gathered in huge numbers to watch films and talk—a fact that caused great unease among both the upper class and government officials and revealed the subversive potential of the new medium.

At the same time, fears about immigration and immigrants manifested in several ways relating to the movie industry. Nickelodeons and movie theaters were popular diversions for many immigrants because they could enjoy the films without feeling excluded by language barriers, and because they were relatively inexpensive, even on low worker’s wages. There was some concern that the films that were shown in the nickelodeons and storefront theaters were not teaching “good Americanism” and encouraging these immigrants to assimilate. In Ben Singer’s extensive study of demographics and ethnographics of nickelodeon audiences and exhibitors in New York City, he describes the important role that early movies and movie venues played in the lives of immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Singer’s research, based on census data, counters revisionist attempts to redefine early cinema as driven more by the middle class than working-class patrons; it also clearly demonstrates that population density and class were significant factors in determining where early movie theaters were located (28). While a lack of data precludes Singer from making conclusions regarding particular

ethnic groups and the frequency of their attendance at movie theaters, it is clear that immigrants made up a significant percentage of theatergoers during this period.

The working class and immigrants were not the only sources of concern in regard to early cinema; Mitman notes that there was concern about young women and children frequenting theaters, especially unaccompanied. The fear that nickelodeons and theaters were little more than places where unmarried women and men could meet for illicit affairs in the anonymity of darkness coincided with anxieties about women working and advocating more visibly in the public sphere. In “What to Do with the Motion Picture Show,” Howe expresses concern about films’ effects on children and “delicate women,” and notes that this is one of the major concerns of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, which was founded in March 1909 (415, 413). Across the Atlantic, in London, the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women wrote a letter to the police alleging numerous “corrupting effects of the burgeoning shop front cinema culture on East End schoolgirls” (Burrows 182). In this way, calls for control of the industry were framed as attempts to “protect” the delicate and impressionable sensibilities of women and girls.

Nancy J. Rosenbloom states that Howe, a director of the National Board of Censorship, advocated “the necessity of a free exchange of ideas in a democratic society”; at the same time, however, the Board “identified itself with the moving picture audience and espoused the position that it tried to ‘reflect what the people of the United States would think about any given picture were they sitting en masses to view it’” (315). Howe’s support of free speech was in conflict with his position as director of the

Board; according to Rosenbloom, Howe supported “voluntary” censorship controlled by a board containing a wide range of members, and resisted official or “legal” censorship because it could too easily be controlled by a narrow group (316). Even so, the National Board of Censorship’s “standards of judgment” Howe lists in “What to Do with the Motion Picture Show” certainly reflect a very particular worldview, and bear a striking resemblance to the Production Code (415).

Various forces united against the burgeoning movie industry, seeking to control the content and distribution of films, and even to shut down theaters, as its power and influence became apparent. Robert A. Armour notes that

Movie theaters and store-fronts exhibiting movies took in \$3 million a week in 1909 and employed over 100,000 people. Some 45 million admissions a week passed through the doors of these shows. Even allowing for many people attending more than once a week, these figures suggest that a high percentage of the nearly 90 million Americans went to the movies. In Boston, theaters could accommodate 400,000 patrons each week in a city with a population of 625,000. In New York City, the average attendance was about a quarter of a million customers a day.

(113)

According to Armour, vaudeville, music halls, saloons, and even churches were concerned about the competition, and these unlikely bedfellows united in support of widespread movie censorship. New York was only one of many battlegrounds; across the country and internationally, cities and towns were grappling with the exponential

growth of the movie industry, serious questions about the contents of the films, and how best to censor movies and monitor the activities of those who gathered in theaters and other venues. J. A. Lindstrom argues that “the reform movement’s response to the rise of the nickelodeon [in Chicago] strongly influenced the subsequent development of the film industry” through reformers’ calls for “government intervention not to suppress this new entertainment but to foster and improve what they saw as the positive potential of the new medium,” despite misgivings about the “limited and often exploitative content in venues that were sometimes unhealthy and dangerous” (91).

Concerns about the content of films, their distribution, and their audiences were hardly limited to the United States. Jon Burrows contends that numerous groups attempted to use the Cinematograph Act of 1909 to suppress the film industry in England, as it could be used—through its clauses ostensibly designed for fire prevention—as a form of social control. In the wake of the passage of the Aliens Act in 1905, certain politicians, clergy, law enforcement officials, and citizens’ groups turned watchful eyes on immigrants in England and, as in America, on the places where immigrants and other members of the working class gathered. Burrows argues that these attempts at control and suppression occurred “in response to concerns about the social ‘miseducation’ of large groups of immigrant spectators who attended film shows in London’s East End” (173). The Cinematograph Act’s stated purpose of limiting the danger of fire permitted officials to enter any venue that showed films (or were suspected of showing films), ostensibly for safety checks, but these “safety checks” were hardly limited to fire safety issues. According to Burrows, a barrister noted in an article

published in 1909 in *The Bioscope* that these provisions seemed “more appropriate for an attempt to flush out ‘an abode of anarchists!’” (183).

In the midst of these tensions, the documentary feature seemed to be granted a moral high ground by activists, reformers, politicians, clergy, and many others, becoming the counterexample to the “lewd, violent, and carnivalesque” films that caused so much consternation. In “What to Do with the Motion Picture Show,” Howe observes that

The most inaccessible corners of the earth are being explored by the camera man, while the life of the insect and the plant, of the arctics and the tropics, of the Wild West and the city, are being portrayed to somewhere in the neighborhood of one-tenth of our population every day. Next to the daily press and the school the movie is probably the most influential educational and recreational agency in our daily life. (413)

Howe was hardly the only voice extolling the virtues of the documentary. Harry Downer, chairman of Davenport, Iowa’s motion picture review committee, claimed that “the motion pictures represented a ‘new social force which reaches more people annually’ than any other instrument for ‘social betterment,’” adding that “science [had] built a delightful means of recreation, a graphic influence in education, [and] a splendid force for moral and wholesome life” (qtd. in Mitman 8). It wasn’t long before documentary filmmaking gained even more legitimacy, with the endorsement of one of the most famous figures in the world. In 1910, former president Theodore Roosevelt praised the “scientific value” of the cinema at a meeting of the New York Press Club

(Mitman 9). Educational and religious leaders who were skittish about or even vocally opposed to movies embraced documentary features, particularly those they saw as reinforcing morals and norms.

However, documentary features can only perform their designated purpose of educating the public if they draw crowds, and even in the early days of moviemaking they had to compete with feature films. For this reason, as filmmaking became more sophisticated and technology continued to advance throughout the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, documentaries developed a series of motifs that appeal to the audience. First, the narrative structure attempts to create identification between the audience and the subjects onscreen while supplying drama. Second, the films emphasize science and discovery, with information delivered visually (via both the action onscreen and explanatory intertitles) and, with the advent of sound, through a narrator. Third, filmmakers highlight the exclusivity of their footage, framing the film as a rare or unique opportunity to experience a particular behavior, location, or animal. Fourth, new and better technology allows filmmakers to show more subjects in more detail, making documentary film a source of continual new experience and awe. And finally, as purveyors of knowledge, many natural history films attempt to occupy the position of moral high ground to which they have been elevated by skeptics and supporters of film alike. To do so, the films take on an all-knowing, almost god-like persona via the narrator (or narrative intertitles). By (mis)interpreting the actions, emotions, and motivations of the animals for the benefit of the audience, and selecting particular footage in specific sequences, the filmmakers can create scenes and storylines that

emulate cultural norms such as heterosexuality, monogamy, and gender roles. These depictions attempt to naturalize cultural norms.

### **Great White (Photo) Hunters and Their Prey: The Expedition Film**

One of the first major subgenres of early filmmaking was the travel or expedition film. In the early decades of the twentieth century, filmmakers and cinematographers such as Cherry Kearton, John C. Hemment, William “Colonel” Selig, Robert J. Flaherty, Ernest Schoedsack, Martin E. and Osa Johnson, and others traveled to a variety of locations that were largely unfamiliar to theatergoers, producing films that emphasize the “exoticism” of the locations, the animals, and the indigenous peoples’ traditions and history. Just as the Romans and other European imperialists had done before them, gathering specimens of humans and animals from around the empire, these privileged filmmakers took it upon themselves to “ransack all the globe,” empowered by the assumption that the secrets of the people and wildlife they encountered were theirs by right to take.<sup>4</sup> The camera was their supply line, the screen their Colosseum and menagerie, in which animals and people performed—and sometimes died—for the entertainment and pleasure of the audience. The expedition or hunting film, a subgenre of the nature film, employs many of the same narrative and filmmaking techniques that

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<sup>4</sup> In “Nature’s Voyeurs,” environmental writer Richard Mabey compares wildlife filmmakers to Enlightenment-era “knowledge vandals” such as William Derham. In 1711, Derham enjoined readers: “Let us ransack all the globe, let us with the greatest accuracy inspect every part thereof, search out the innermost secrets of any of the creatures [...] pry into them with all our microscopes and most exquisite instruments, till we find them to bear testimony of to their infinite workman” (qtd. in Welling 62).



characterize its predecessors, from voyeuristic and decontextualized scenes to exploitation and bloody spectacle.

The advent of the expedition film coincided with some significant events in nature writing and environmentalism. The years between 1892 and 1910 saw the founding of the Sierra Club, the incorporation of the National Audubon Society, numerous conservationist actions by President Theodore Roosevelt, the activism of John Muir, and a sharp rise in the popularity of realistic—but sentimental—nature novels and stories by authors such as Jack London and Ernest Thompson Seton. Exemplified by London's novels *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), as well as a host of popular short stories, the sentimental nature writing genre appealed particularly to the growing urban middle class with its increasing leisure time. Mitman argues that the “public fascination with nature was not based on nostalgia for a rural, agrarian past”; rather, he asserts that for the middle class, nature, particularly “untouched woodland or meadow,” represented a “place of regeneration and renewal” (11). This appeal, he argues, applied less to the wealthy, who had homes in the country, or the working farmer who relied on the land for his livelihood and thus had less appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of nature. In their quest to discover more about nature, readers devoured novels, stories, and nonfiction nature writing.

Sentimental nature writing was not popular with everyone, however. According to Mitman, in 1903, Catskill nature writer John Burroughs derided what he called “mock natural history” for its sentimentality and anthropomorphism and accused writers such as William J. Long, London, and Seton of crossing “the line between fact and fiction,”

projecting human motivations and emotions onto animal behaviors, and valuing places and animals “more for the literary effects we can get out of them than for themselves” (11). Burroughs’s accusation highlights an ongoing fundamental conflict in both nature writing and natural history filmmaking: the tension between scientific purpose and artistic impulse. Burroughs’s argument impressed Roosevelt so much that the president invited the writer to accompany him on a trip to Yellowstone in 1903. Roosevelt even spoke out against sentimental nature fiction and “nature fakers,” arguing in a 1907 issue of *Everybody’s Magazine* that “if the child mind is fed with stories that are false to nature . . . the children will go to the haunts of the animal only to meet with disappointment . . . disbelief, and the death of interest” (qtd. in Mitman 12). Roosevelt, not unreasonably, feared that sentimental nature writing would have a detrimental effect on both the study of nature and conservation efforts. While this theory has merit, Roosevelt’s overall attitude toward nature was that of a hunter. According to Mitman, Roosevelt privileged the hunter’s knowledge over those he referred to as “armchair naturalists”; he preferred to encounter “‘real’ nature through the touch of a steel trigger and the sight down a gun barrel, rather than through the poet’s pen” (12). Roosevelt demonstrated his preference for nature, red in tooth and claw, during his infamous safari to Africa in 1909, which was chronicled by wildlife photographer Kerton in the expedition film *Roosevelt in Africa* (1910).

Perhaps the best-known early example of the expedition film, *Roosevelt in Africa* documents Roosevelt’s safari through what is now Kenya and Uganda. The film focuses on detailing the Roosevelt party’s encounters with the indigenous Maasai, who are

incorrectly labeled in the film's intertitles under the catch-all classification of "Zulus." Despite the massive slaughter of animals during the expedition, *Roosevelt in Africa* does not include any hunting or killing scenes and was generally regarded at the time as being quite a dull film. Even with the limited footage of wildlife and natural surroundings, the film is significant to the study of early nature filmmaking. *Roosevelt in Africa* reveals the profound disconnect between Roosevelt's group and the environment they are visiting. In one scene, titled "Railway Trip from Kiu to Nakuro Made by Colonel Roosevelt," the camera is mounted near the front of a slow-moving train as it passes by groups of indigenous people and their livestock, wide expanses of rolling grassland, a busy train station, and a Westernized town complete with a conspicuous picket fence. The scene emphasizes the point of view of the interloping filmmaker and his audience as he travels through the unfamiliar land on an established and invasive track (literally). Simultaneously, the explorers, filmmakers, and the audience are separated from and situated above the film's subjects by the technologies of the camera and the train. The elevated perspective from atop the train also contributes to the film's voyeurism, as the audience literally looks down on the native people, animals, and land. The naming of Roosevelt as "Colonel Roosevelt" identifies him with his military background rather than his status as former president, diplomat, or conservationist; the title positions him as a conqueror, surveying his subjects and lands. In his celebrated account of the trip, *African Game Trails*, Roosevelt describes the journey as "a railroad through the Pleistocene," cutting through "the heart of the Dark Continent" and traversing the lands of "pure savages" (1, 2). Roosevelt's book, written during the safari, offers valuable

insight into his and his companions' perspectives on their surroundings. Read together, the book and the film are a multimedia time capsule through which modern readers and viewers can understand Roosevelt and company's ways of thinking about Africa.

The railway scene is hardly the only example of the disconnect between the audience and the film's subjects. In another scene, entitled "The Roosevelt Party Crossing a Stream," the camera, stationed on the opposing bank and facing the approaching group, records Roosevelt and company approaching a small, waist-deep river. Roosevelt is placed on the shoulders of an indigenous man, who ferries the former president across the stream so that he does not get wet. The camera remains stationary, recording the long procession of local men and women who are bearing Roosevelt's group's supplies on their heads as they ford the stream and parade past the camera. The natural surroundings are cast as obstacles to overcome; Roosevelt avoids getting even slightly damp, his safari clothing remaining untouched by the environment. The indigenous people, the scene implies, are part of the natural surroundings and are thus expected to ford the stream without complaint, bearing Roosevelt and his supplies on their shoulders and heads. Roosevelt, at the head of the long procession and by virtue of his race, is presented as the leader of this group, borne like royalty on the back of an "inferior" person. This scenario would no doubt appeal to the targeted audience's sense of superiority over the indigenous people in the film.

In another scene, the Roosevelt party sets up camp in a clearing surrounded by trees and open grassland. As indigenous people work to set up the camp, an oversized American flag flaps in the wind above the tents, in the center of the frame. Roosevelt,

resplendent in his safari jacket and pith helmet, supervises the activities in the camp from a throne-like camp chair. The framing of the scene positions the camp with its flag as an “oasis” of (American/white) civilization in the midst of the “untamed African wilderness.” Many of the intertitles, including “Making Camp at Bondoni” and “Camp Roosevelt,” emphasize the implied threat of the natural surroundings; the text is flanked by a pair of menacing vultures, suggesting that the threat of death surrounded the group.

The adversarial relationship between Roosevelt’s party and their surroundings characterized the entire expedition. Roosevelt, the former military leader, ran his safari with all the efficiency, single-mindedness, and ferocity of a military campaign; during the expedition he and his companions killed or trapped 11,400 animals, sending approximately five thousand skins and five thousand plant specimens back to the Smithsonian Institute to help stock the newly built National Museum (“Roosevelt African Expedition”). Responding to accusations of wholesale slaughter, Roosevelt was defiant regarding his actions and the scope of his group’s kills, declaring that “I can be condemned only if the existence of the National Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and all similar zoological institutions are to be condemned” (qtd. in O’Toole 67). Roosevelt attempted to justify his actions and appeal to both American sentiment and scientific inquiry by invoking the names of two prominent American museums and to the all-exonerating spirit of science, much as William Derham had done some centuries before by urging explorers to ransack all the globe for knowledge and specimens. In *African Game Trails*, Roosevelt provides a fascinating insight into the

often-disturbing gusto with which he hunted and killed with impunity throughout his safari:

Crack! the Winchester spoke; and as the soft-nosed bullet ploughed forward through his flank the lion swerved so that I missed him with the second shot; but my third bullet went through the spine and forward into his chest. Down he came, sixty yards off, his hind quarters dragging, his head up, his ears back, his jaws open and lips drawn up in a prodigious snarl, as he endeavored to turn to face us. (85)

In his Introduction to *African Game Trails*, editor and historian H. W. Brands defends Roosevelt's ethnocentrism, support of colonialism, and enthusiasm for big-game hunting as typical of the era; he characterizes Roosevelt's book as a "historical document as much as an adventure story," and Roosevelt himself as "a man of his times" (xiv).

While Brands may be quick to excuse Roosevelt's unenlightened views—perhaps *too* quick, as his own prose reveals a rather unenlightened perspective on indigenous people and their lands—the book and the film footage of Roosevelt's safari offer a useful starting point for an examination of early expedition films.

Roosevelt's world-famous expedition and its film record spawned several imitators who hoped to capitalize both on Roosevelt's fame and on the audiences who clamored for expedition and/or hunting films with more drama. Selig, a film entrepreneur from Chicago, filmed a fictional version of Roosevelt's trip in a movie studio in the Windy City and at a game preserve in California ("With Roosevelt in Africa"). Selig's *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (1909) used a Roosevelt lookalike and

faked a scene wherein the great white hunter stalked and killed a lion, which was borne away by “native” bearers. Selig’s film was extremely popular—far more so than Roosevelt’s original film—and it was lauded by *The Moving Picture World* for its “realistic” portrayal of a lion’s behavior in the wilderness (Mitman 9-10). Based on the success of *Hunting Big Game in Africa*, Selig established the Selig Zoo in 1913 in the Lincoln Heights section of Los Angeles. His zoo served as the location of several additional Selig films, and it also rented out animals to other filmmakers. After *Hunting*, Selig went on to make several other animal films, including *Alone in the Jungle*, *In Tune with the Wild*, and *The Leopard’s Foundling*, at the zoo, though he often claimed that the footage was filmed in Africa. Unfortunately, most of the films Selig made no longer exist.

Another adventurer who jumped on the expedition film bandwagon was Paul J. Rainey. Rainey, the scion of a wealthy family that made its fortune in coke and coal production in the 1800s, was in many ways the prototypical turn-of-the-century international playboy and “great white hunter.” He was also the sort of hypermasculine “man’s man” who would have appealed to Roosevelt’s sensibilities. According to biographer Mary A. Scobey, in 1898 Rainey purchased 11,000 acres in Tippah County in northeast Mississippi, later expanding his land holdings to 30,000 acres and building a massive home that would become known as Tippah Lodge. Fond of hunting, Rainey stocked his land with wolves, bears, foxes, and pheasants and frequently hosted lavish parties and English-style fox hunts; he also kept a black bear chained in front of the

house (Scobey). Rainey was well-known enough in Mississippi to merit several mentions in William Faulkner's 1962 novel *The Reivers*:

Paul Rainey . . . liked our country well enough—or anyway our bear and deer and panther enough—to use some of the Wall Street money to own enough Mississippi land for him and his friends to hunt them in: a hound man primarily, who took his pack of bear hounds to Africa to see what they would do on lion or vice versa. (163)

Likewise, the opulent hotel Rainey built to accommodate his many guests has a distinct presence in Faulkner's novel:

Some of [the town] has not changed: the big rambling multi-galleried multi-storeyed steamboat-gothic hotel where the overalled aficionados and the professionals who trained the fine bird dogs and the northern millionaires who owned them . . . gathered for two weeks each February. (162-3)

Faulkner's novel critiques the elitism of the rich northern interlopers who invaded the South like so many locusts, buying up huge sections of land, building massive estates, and killing game as they went. It would not be out of the question to think that Rainey and the other "hound men" mentioned in the novel are among the titular "reivers."

Faulkner was born in New Albany, where Rainey built his hotel (Hamilton qtd. in Dvorak). The author would have been intimately familiar with Rainey's influence on the region, as well as the feelings of the locals toward Rainey and his fellow wealthy



Northerners. But Rainey would not be content to limit his “reiving” to small game on his and his cronies’ land; he set his sights on much bigger trophies from faraway lands.

In 1910, Rainey traveled to the Arctic, ostensibly to obtain photographs of the wildlife for the New York Zoological Park. Mitman notes that by framing his Arctic adventure as a “collecting expedition” on behalf of the New York Zoological Society, Rainey “added an official, scientific, and hence authentic dimension to the voyage” (17-18). In September of that year, he returned with the two largest live polar bears ever captured, Silver King and Queenie, who went on display at the New York Zoological Park. Tales of his “bravery” and “fearlessness” in lassoing Silver King achieved near-mythic status thanks to the often-sycophantic popular press during and after his trip, who seemed determined to turn Rainey into a modern legend. In a September 1911 article in *Outing Magazine*, George Fortiss describes Rainey as “typical of the highest enthusiasm of sportsmanship,” adding that the young millionaire had “limitless energy, boundless enthusiasm, a physique capable of absorbing the hardest work and coming back for more, and an iron determination to get what he wants at any price” (747, 748-9). Fortiss lavishes Rainey with praise for his fearlessness, bravery, humor, and passion for hunting. The article includes a photograph of Rainey jumping a horse with a massive estate and a crowd of onlookers in the background. The photograph, taken by Jack Hemment, who was Rainey’s photographer for both the Arctic and African expeditions, further establishes Rainey as a gentleman sportsman.

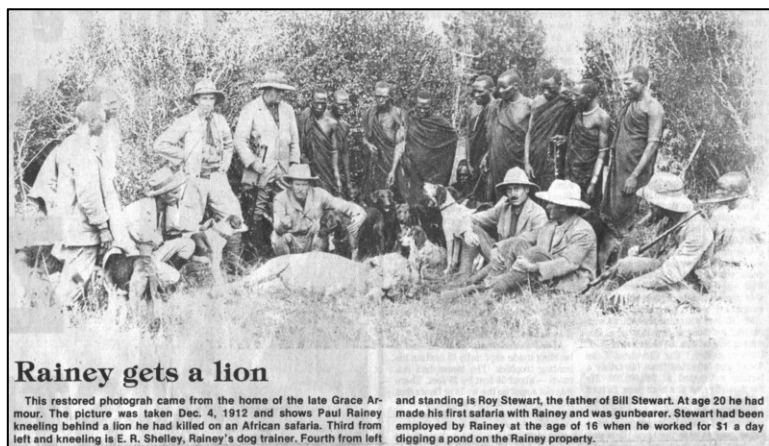
Rainey himself penned a long article entitled “The Royal Sport of Hounding Lions: A New Sport that Combines the Thrill of Fox Hunting with the Danger of Lion

Stalking” for *Outing Magazine* later that same year. Rainey provides a detailed and dramatic narrative of his bloody hunting exploits in Africa as his American bear hounds, re-trained to take on hyenas and lions, chased and brought down a variety of prey, including, to Rainey’s extreme satisfaction, nine lions in one day (152). Of his decision to bring fifteen of his best hounds to Africa to hunt lions, Rainey states emphatically that “It was the first time lions have been hunted with dogs and I have convinced myself at least that it is the finest sport in the world” (146). Rainey’s article is enhanced with twenty-four photographs, depicting his hunting party, his hounds, the local Maasai, various wildlife and landscapes, and some of his kills. The first photograph is of a group of Maasai women and is captioned “Native women trying to look pleasant”; this casual racism sets the tone for the rest of the article and photographs, which certainly represent Rainey and his party as superior to his native companions, whom he refers to as “boys” and not because they are male children (132). After the killing of three lions, Rainey describes the

triumphant march back to camp, the porters carrying the bodies of the three lions and singing their wild, savage songs about the great white master who killed the . . . bad lions. After that there was speech making in which they told me I was the great Master and I told them they were the most faithful of servants. (135)

Rainey’s attitude toward the indigenous people of the area is consistent with Roosevelt’s, as expressed in both the latter’s written account of his trip to Africa and the film. Likewise, the wealthy scion’s propensity toward shooting everything in sight and

gaining enormous satisfaction from doing so makes Rainey’s prose virtually indistinguishable from Roosevelt’s. The night after the aforementioned triumphant killing of two lions and the subsequent speech-making, Rainey recounts a dream in which, with the assistance of his well-trained hounds, he was killing “all the lions in the country” (135). This, and the apparent glee with which he describes his many kills, contradicts a claim Rainey made to a *New York Times* correspondent that his priorities as a gentleman-sportsman had evolved past the stage “‘where numbers of dead animals count most.’ Instead, he expressed what he clearly regarded as a more enlightened attitude . . . to ‘trap wild animals and bring them back alive’” (qtd. in Mitman 18). While Rainey certainly did bring some animals back to zoological parks in the United States and his photographer Hemment provided many photographs of wildlife and

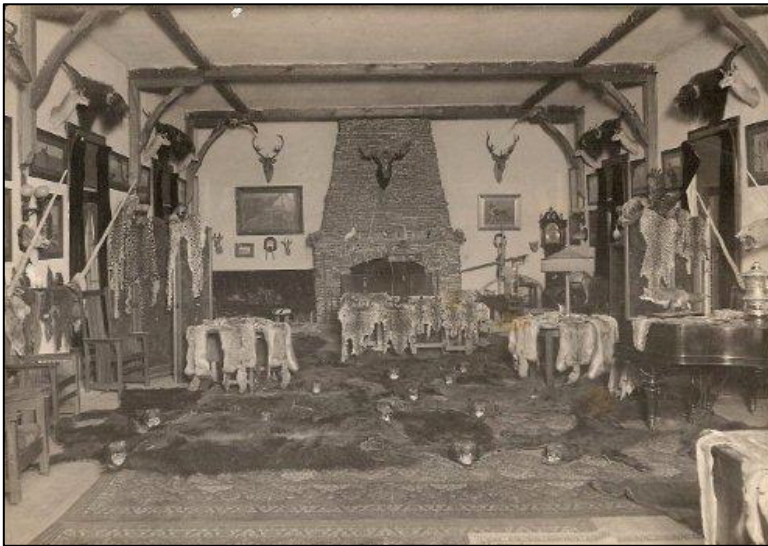


**Figure 1: Rainey's African hunting party and kill**

*Source: Paul J. Rainey Estate-Tippah Lodge  
Reprinted with permission*

landscapes, killing and collecting trophies was clearly Rainey's primary occupation (see Figure 1).

Perhaps inspired by the notoriety surrounding Roosevelt's trip to Africa, perhaps even out of the competitive spirit he demonstrated in his other pursuits—polo, car racing, steeplechase, and other activities appropriate for an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century man of leisure—Rainey set off for his own African adventure in 1911. He brought with him fifteen foxhounds and trained them to hunt lions (Mitman 18). Far from the capture-and-



**Figure 2: Rainey's Trophy Room at Tippah Lodge**

Source: *Paul J. Rainey Estate-Tippah Lodge*  
*Reprinted with permission*

photograph expedition he had described to the *New York Times*, Rainey's trip to Africa was merely a smaller-scale version of Roosevelt's earlier slaughter. While there are few reliable statistics on how many animals were captured or killed during Rainey's expedition, Mitman notes that Rainey and his party killed twenty-seven lions over thirty-

five days (18). Photographs of his “trophy room” at the Tippah Lodge show a room filled to bursting with the heads and pelts of his numerous exotic kills (see Figure 2). A *New York Times* editorial questioned Rainey’s actions, equating his hunting with “butcher work” (qtd. in Mitman 18). But where Roosevelt’s film of his travels in Africa bored audiences, Rainey’s would give them what they wanted: drama, the thrill of the chase, and gory battles to the death.

*Paul Rainey’s African Hunt* (1912) was an enormous success; many historians believe that its profits allowed distributor Carl Laemmle to establish Universal Pictures, a major entertainment corporation that still exists today (“Rainey African Hunt”). The multi-reel film contained numerous hunting scenes, including Rainey’s hounds chasing a leopard into a tree and then killing it, as well as a fight to the death between the hounds and a lioness and a “gruesome” struggle by a hyena trying to free itself from a leg trap (Mitman 18). Despite its gore, *African Hunt* was lauded by “prominent educational, religious, and business leaders . . . [as] simultaneously entertaining, educationally and morally uplifting, and . . . profitable” (Mitman 19). The marketing campaign surrounding *African Hunt* is probably one of the chief reasons for the film’s success. According to Mitman, *African Hunt* was particularly marketed toward the wealthy, with theaters often charging “top prices” for admission. One ad for *African Hunt* notes that ticket prices range from 25 cents to \$1.00 at a time when many shows were a nickel (Bowery Boys). The higher ticket prices made it difficult for many working-class people to attend showings, creating an allure of exclusivity around the film. Upper-class individuals could easily identify with the film’s star: wealthy, upper-class playboy Paul

J. Rainey, as he participated in familiar pursuits like hunting and working with hunting dogs. Even middle-class moviegoers could identify with Rainey. His family had achieved the “American Dream” of becoming wealthy by founding a successful company, enabling Rainey to enjoy the life of comfort and leisure that they believed hard work would achieve for themselves and their children. Rainey represented the capitalist ideal and as such was a perfect film subject by the standards of the moral watchdogs of the nineteen-teens.

The film was heavily marketed as morally sound family-friendly entertainment. Mitman describes one magazine ad for the film from 1913 that features a minister and a well-dressed businessman flanking the movie’s title (19). The inclusion of the minister appeals to potential moviegoers’ desire for wholesome entertainment, which is particularly timely in the context of the fierce nationwide debate over censorship and film content. The ad makes an overt connection between (organized) religion and nature. Nature was an acceptable subject for study for the religious or spiritually minded, a source of “real” or “pure” knowledge, a place to feel closer to God by proximity to his creation and get away from the corrupting influences of the man-made city. Nature films, especially expedition or hunting films, represent man in control or domination over his environment, a position that many might find consistent with the Biblical interpretation that God gave man dominion over the land and animals. The image of the man as gun-toting hunter and protector, at the center of the film and surrounded by the corpses of slain predators, similarly reflected conservative notions of gender roles. As one advertisement for the film gushed:

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin . . . in their absorbing interest in the domestic joys and sorrows of god's obscure four-footed kingdom, which, after all, are much the same as their own. There is something in it that appeals to every mother, that appeals to every father, and, best of all, it appeals to every child. (qtd. in Mitman 19)

The so-called “traditional” family structure of father-mother-child alluded to in the ad is part of the feedback loop that so frequently occurs between conservative/religious values and nature. The believer will see what he or she expects to see in nature (i.e., the nuclear, heteronormative family comprised of a mated male-female pair and their offspring, regardless of the accuracy of that portrayal) and thus argues that such a family structure bears the authenticity of being “natural” (read: ordained by God), therefore justifying the same family unit as the “natural” state for humans. As Aguayo has noted, this tendency is still visible in contemporary nature films.

The businessman also serves several purposes in the ad. Like the clergyman, he represents a fatherly or masculine authority figure, offering permission and even encouragement for people to attend the film. Second, the businessman reinforces the film's target audience: the middle- and upper-class urban moviegoer, for whom such films hold a particular appeal and who could afford the higher ticket prices. Third, as Mitman notes, *African Hunt* was lauded as both a moral and profitable film—characteristics that are symbolized by the conservatively well-dressed businessman. In contrast to the more questionable films shown in storefront theaters and nickelodeons, the nature film—even in the form of the expedition or hunting film, as exemplified by

*African Hunt*—was geared toward a “better class” of moviegoer (Mitman 19). The emphasis on attracting a more educated and upper-class audience would become one of the defining characteristics of the nature film.

Despite its emphasis on hunting and gore and high body count, Mitman credits *African Hunt* for its bucolic scenes of zebras, rhinos, gazelles, oryx, and water buffalo coexisting peacefully around a watering hole (18). These quiet scenes helped counter the popular concept of Africa as a dangerous and violent place teeming with savages and bloodthirsty predators. It was the hunting scenes and drama, however, that made it so popular; a follow-up release two years later, titled *Rainey’s African Hunt*, contained more scenes from the African continent but far less drama and killing, and as a result was far less well received. The second film was notable for its use of a live narrator during the New York premiere; actor Ernest Torrence provided background information and running commentary during the screening (“Rainey African Hunt”). *African Hunt* and its follow-up clearly demonstrated that if filmmakers and distributors wanted to make money with nature films, audiences wanted drama and blood. The expedition film had an enormous impact on the development of not only natural history filmmaking but the entire movie industry. The case studies of *Roosevelt in Africa* and *African Hunt* reveal not only the origins of some of the most common conventions in natural history filmmaking but also valuable insight into the zeitgeist of turn-of-the-century America.

Expedition films continued to be popular throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. Martin E. Johnson and his wife Osa Leighty Johnson produced a significant body of work during their travels through east and central Africa, the South Pacific, and



Borneo. Prior to their marriage in 1910, when Osa was only sixteen years old, Martin worked as cinematographer for Jack London's expedition to the South Sea Islands, which was released in 1913 as *Jack London's Adventures in the South Sea Islands* ("Jack London"). Inseparable and equally consumed with the desire to travel to as many exotic locales as their finances would allow, Martin and Osa's first overseas trip together was to Vanuata and the Solomon Islands in 1917, where Martin was determined to film cannibal rituals ("Martin E. Johnson," Enright 38). This trip, chronicled in the 1918 film *Among the Cannibal Isles of the South Pacific*, was followed quickly by *Jungle Adventures* (1921) and *Head Hunters of the South Seas* (1922). Posters for their films claimed that the footage had been obtained "at the risk of life," and their distributor played up the husband-and-wife team of adventurers in the advertising, promoting Martin and his "plucky little wife" as continuing the traditions of romantic adventure exemplified by Conrad, Stevenson, and London (qtd. in Enright 45).

The films made by the Johnsons reveal far more about the filmmakers and the dominant cultural attitudes of the era than the indigenous people they portray. In 1930, Martin and Osa released the film *Across the World with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson*. The film opens with a scene in which the Johnsons are hosting a viewing party for the footage they obtained on their most recent travels. As Martin sets up the projector, Osa is asked by a female guest how she got on with the natives. Osa replies, "I really like the African ladies; we've always found them very loyal." Osa makes a generalization by referring to "African ladies"—rather than differentiating between groups, she thinks of them as a homogenous Other. Her description of them as being "loyal" implies an unequal power

distribution in which the inferior Africans are expected to be “loyal” to their American “betters,” in the same way that subjects are expected to be loyal to their leaders or servants to their masters.

Martin’s narration of their film footage is consistent with the point of view of class privilege and ethnocentrism. Of the Solomon Islands, Martin comments: “I believe it will be at least 100 years before the Solomon Islands will be entirely civilized.” He adds that “Osa, having just come out of civilization, didn’t think much of these savages.” An older native man, with a painted face and piercings, peers into the camera as Martin narrates: “I knew that they were cannibals, and I knew that they were headhunters.” Indeed, filming supposed cannibals was a particular obsession of Martin’s; many of their early trips focused on obtaining footage of cannibal tribes. Martin describes the natives in the film as “childlike” and “happy at times,” despite being cannibals. He offers the following “insight” into their culture: “Some show that they’ve been in fights, though the cannibal is never really a hard fighter—he is really a coward.” Upon what evidence Martin bases this claim, it is not clear. Perhaps predictably, biographer Kelly Enright argues that Martin and Osa “did not mean to belittle Africans or their culture” when he described Africans as “cheery, happy children.” Enright contends that while Martin was “expressing contemporary racial stereotypes,” he was simultaneously attempting to “humanize” the indigenous people of the continent (107). While the Johnsons’ attitude toward the subjects of their films might be partly mitigated by the dominant attitudes of the time, it may be too generous to excuse them completely. After all, unlike the vast majority of Americans, the Johnsons actually traveled to these countries and had the

opportunity to meet and converse with the indigenous people. This advantage might have afforded them the opportunity to develop more enlightened attitudes about other cultures and educate their audiences, rather than merely perpetuating stereotypes and disseminating racist propaganda.

After reportedly receiving a cable from their financiers that read “Public tired of savages. Get some animal pictures,” the Johnsons shifted their focus to safari films that combined footage of animals, landscapes, and indigenous peoples (“Martin E. Johnson”). The most well-known of these films include *Simba: The King of the Beasts* (1928), *Congorilla* (1932), *Baboons* (1935), and *Borneo* (1937). *Congorilla* was significant in the history of documentary filmmaking in that it was the first film to include sound authentically recorded in Africa (“Martin E. Johnson”). These films were not just travelogues, however; they were also hunting films, showcasing both Martin and Osa’s prowess with rifles. Martin took great pride in his wife’s shooting ability, and she frequently posed with her gun and the party’s kills. Unlike Roosevelt and Rainey, who thrilled in the kill, however, Enright reveals that Martin and Osa were reluctant animal killers who hunted mainly for food and frequently expressed regret at their kills (84, 86). The films made by Martin and Osa were quite different than their predecessors in the expedition film genre. They represented an evolutionary step in natural history filmmaking, moving away from a focus on hunting and toward the type of nature documentary that modern audiences are more familiar with: one that concentrates on observing living creatures and indigenous people in their native habitats, rather than documenting shooting and trophy-hunting.

In 1910, a group of intrepid explorers led by Captain Robert Falcon Scott set off from Cardiff to reach the South Pole, accompanied by pioneering cinematographer Herbert Ponting and his hand-crank camera. While Scott's final push from the crew's base camp to the Pole was doomed, Ponting and his invaluable footage of the ill-fated expedition survived because the cinematographer stayed behind at the base camp (*Top Documentary Films*). Despite the infamous loss of Scott's group, the 108-minute silent documentary, *The Great White Silence*, was not released until 1924. Even so, audiences would have been very familiar with the tragic story. According to *Guardian* film reviewer Cath Clarke, Ponting was the first to capture the merciless beauty of the Antarctic on film, offering moviegoers what was very likely their first glimpses of killer whales, penguins, sheer ice cliffs, and the Antarctic landscape. The film, which was restored with a new score in 2011 and released on DVD in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Scott's death, contains footage of Scott's party working to acclimate themselves to the extreme conditions, setting up tents, and practicing skiing (Clarke). The camera silently observes Scott and his four companions departing for the South Pole from base camp, watching as they become black specks on the pure white horizon and then disappear, never to return. The scene is haunting. An excerpt from Ponting's diary, included in an intertitle near the end of the film, reveals his thoughts on their surroundings: "Great God, this is an awful place!"

Though the film contains surprisingly little footage of Scott himself, *The Great White Silence*, like so many expedition films before it and so many nature documentaries made after, frames the explorer/naturalist/filmmaker and nature as adversaries. Nature is

a thing to be conquered, whether it is a mountaintop, a pole, or an elusive species. The intrepid filmmaker is frequently shown “fighting” with nature or representatives of nature to get the desired footage, sometimes even to survive. Indigenous people, predatory species, adverse weather conditions—the very land, plants, and animals are often depicted as uniting against the filmmaker, who becomes a type of heroic figure. Bravely, selflessly, he (very rarely she) seeks knowledge from nature, who fiercely guards her secrets. The early expedition and hunting film, as exemplified by the case studies in this chapter, identified the cinematic explorer with the archetypical hero. The hero-explorer is forced to battle nature—sometimes to the death—in the quest for knowledge and to plant flags in strategic locations. Identifying the explorer with the hero archetype lends additional authenticity to the expedition/nature film by connecting him to the classic tradition of the epic adventure narrative. The tendency to frame the nature film as heroic adventure narrative remains a consistent motif well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Taking Flight: Natural History Films of the 1910s-1940s**

The decades from 1910 to 1940 saw enormous leaps forward in filmmaking technology, evolving from single-reel, silent, black-and-white short films to feature-length productions shot from the air and under the sea. In 1911, wildlife photographer and filmmaker Percy Smith, whose previous films *The Birth of a Flower* and *To Demonstrate How Spiders Fly* had captivated audiences in 1909 and 1910, released the groundbreaking silent film *The Strength and Agility of Insects*. The film presents a

variety of insects and arachnids in close-up, performing remarkable feats of power and dexterity with objects often much heavier than themselves. A suspended scorpion holds and twirls a matchbox, a lizard, and even a small snake. An ant holds a matchstick, a grasshopper “performs” on a tiny trapeze, a baby stick insect frees itself from its egg, a house fly “juggles” a cork and a ring many times heavier than itself, and a blue bottle fly twirls a stick, a ball, and a tiny dumbbell while laying on its back. Not to be outdone, a green bottle fly does the same while sitting in a tiny chair. A suspended flea holds a small stick, a brass pin, a seashell, and a playing card, and then displays his foot (greatly magnified). Next, the flea, now on its back, spins a ball of fluff with its feet. On its release, the film caused both a sensation and a fierce debate in the press over possibly trickery and animal cruelty. As a result, Smith had to reveal many of his innovative filmmaking techniques to put an end to the rumors (“Strength”). With *The Birth of a Flower*, *To Demonstrate How Spiders Fly*, and *The Strength and Agility of Insects*, Smith established himself as one of the foremost natural history filmmakers of the era; indeed, many modern nature films employ some of the same techniques used by Smith, especially use of the extreme close-up that reveals startling behaviors or abilities.

Natural history programming continued to evolve by leaps and bounds. In 1922, British Instructional Films (BIF) released *The Cuckoo’s Secret*, the first installment in what would become a celebrated series of single-reel educational films called *Secrets of Nature*. With photography by the legendary Oliver Pike, whose previous productions *In Birdland*, *St. Kilda*, and *Farne Islands* are discussed earlier in this chapter, *The Cuckoo’s Secret* explores the reproductive habits of the cuckoo, well-known as a herald of spring

and for laying their eggs in the nests of other birds. The film opens with an intertitle proclaiming that it was “Examined and Approved” by a representative of the Natural History Museum, London. That the filmmakers and/or distributors felt the need to authenticate the contents of the film indicates that there was some concern within the burgeoning field of natural history filmmaking about differentiating between “genuine” and fictionalized representations of nature. A second intertitle offers historical context for the film:

The Cuckoo has excited the attention of naturalists since Aristotle (BC 384). Various theories have been advanced as to its habits but it remained for [producer] Mr. Edgar Chance to obtain direct evidence on points which have baffled observers for thousands of years.

The next intertitle reveals that the female cuckoo, who returns to England every spring from Africa, “shirks the duties of a mother” by laying her eggs in the nests of other birds. The film shows Chance and his camera hiding in a blind—cleverly disguised as a large shrub—from which he could observe and photograph a nest of titlarks protesting furiously as a female cuckoo encroaches on their nest. The cuckoo swoops in, steals one of the titlark’s own eggs, replaces it with her own, and then flies off to a nearby tree to eat the stolen egg. An intertitle boasts that these are the only known images of a cuckoo laying her eggs. Pike, Chance, and the BIF recognized the importance of identifying their film as the first and/or only source for particular information or images. Doing so could virtually guarantee audience interest. Empowered by the exponential development of filmmaking technology and a growing network of financiers, production companies,

distributors, and screening venues, natural history filmmakers were competing with each other for financial backing and potential moviegoers. This jockeying for supremacy would become a common theme in nature documentaries, as filmmakers focused on obtaining footage of animals, places, behaviors, and events never before seen or photographed. The competition would provide strong impetus to “ransack all the globe” in search of knowledge and all the secrets nature has to offer.

The success of *The Cuckoo's Secret* paved the way for numerous other installments in the series. Documentary filmmaker and critic Paul Rotha referred to Secrets of Nature as “the sheet anchor of the British film industry”; British film historian Rachael Low states that “these outstanding films played a versatile role, as works of art and scientific record to their makers, entertainment to the cinemas, and teaching to the educational film enthusiasts” (both qtd. in “Unveiling”). Almost universally lauded for their educational value for both adults and children, the Secrets of Nature series included nineteen films between 1922 and 1933, including *The Cuckoo's Secret*, *The Battle of the Ants* (1922), *Fathoms Deep Beneath the Sea* (1922), *Skilled Insect Artisans* (1922), *The Sparrow-Hawk* (1922), *The White Owl* (1922), *An Aquarium in a Wineglass* (1926), *Floral Co-operative Societies* (1927), and *The Plants of the Pantry* (1927). In particular, the latter, which features time-lapse and micro-photography of the various types of molds that grow on cheese and other food, is considered top-quality, even by modern standards. *Total Film* draws comparisons between the Secrets of Nature films and the celebrated miniseries *Planet Earth*. The Secrets of Nature films were “little masterpieces,” according to film historian Stephen Tallents (18). They boasted an all-



star lineup of early British naturalist-filmmakers: F. Percy Smith, Oliver Pike, National History Museum curator W. P. Pycraft, ornithologist Edgar Chance, bird photographer Walter Higham, naturalist Charles Head, and chemist-turned-documentary-filmmaker H. M. Lomas (“Unveiling”). All but Lomas were naturalists first and filmmakers second, which perhaps has much to do with the fact that these films are still considered among the best of the genre some 80-90 years after they were made. In 2010, the BFI released a DVD of the original *Secrets of Nature* films, accompanied by a booklet of essays, film notes, photographs, and illustrations, designed to make the films more accessible to modern audiences.

Though immensely popular, the *Secrets of Nature* series was not the only source for images of and information about nature in the 1920s and 30s. Popular and pioneering wildlife photographer Cherry Kearton, who had photographed Roosevelt’s expedition to Africa in 1909, released *With Cherry Kearton in the Jungle* in 1926. The film is a compilation of footage from Kearton’s extensive explorations of Africa, celebrating the remarkable diversity of African wildlife. Silent vignettes featuring zebras, elephants, monkeys, giraffes, lions, and cheetahs are followed by scenes narrated by Kearton himself, in which he is shown filming a white rhino, bull elephant, male lion, waterfalls, and penguins. Kearton expresses his fear as the white rhino, having heard the whirring of the camera, turns to stare the filmmaker down: “Only by the greatest luck did I escape death.” He also articulates his trepidation when faced by a menacing bull elephant, who flapped his ears and stamped his feet while staring at Kearton, and the mixture of excitement and terror with which he filmed what he thought to be “the

greatest close-up ever taken” of a male lion drinking from a watering hole. The film includes a diverting scene in which he demonstrates sleight-of-hand tricks for an unidentified group of indigenous people, who laugh at his tricks and gaze directly into the camera. Kearton is shown filming at a breathtaking waterfall that he refers to as “Fourteen Falls.” In the final scene, Kearton films frolicking penguins and sea otters on a rocky beach, accompanied by whimsical music and his playful banter with the curious penguins. The film ends with a lounging sea otter appearing to wave goodbye to the audience. Despite the moments of tension with the rhino and elephant, the film is generally light-hearted and presents Africa, its wildlife, its scenery, and its people as beautiful and alluring. This charming representation of the continent stands in sharp contrast to many previous films, which presented Africa as a terrifying, untamed wilderness teeming with predators and “savages.”

In 1932, RKO Radio Pictures released *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, starring American movie actor, hunter, and animal collector Frank Buck. A predecessor of personalities such as Steve Irwin and Jeff Corwin, Buck, supported by his film crew, traveled throughout the Malaysian jungle in search of exotic reptiles, birds, and other animals. Buck captures a monitor lizard, black leopard, spotted leopard, and orangutan, and “adopts” a baby honey bear and baby elephant. The film also features fights between a black leopard and a giant python, as well as a python and a tiger. *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, while immensely popular, aroused suspicion that the fight scenes were staged (“Bring”). Buck produced two other documentaries: *Wild Cargo* (1934) and *Fang and Claw* (1935), in which he searches for wild animals to bring back to American zoos. Buck went on to

appear in the adventure film *Jungle Menace* (1937), as well as the compilation film *Frank Buck's Jungle Cavalcade* (1941), which featured choice footage from his three previous documentaries. He starred as himself in the war film *Tiger Fangs* (1943), in which he played a big-game hunter who travels to Malaysia to help stop the Nazis and the Japanese from destroying the rubber industry. He also appears in *Abbott and Costello in Africa Screams* (1949). Buck was more in the tradition of Roosevelt and Rainey than Kearton, Pike, Chance, or Smith; far more interested in dramatic encounters and hunting than with scientific exploration and artistic filmmaking.

London Film Productions released the groundbreaking film *The Private Life of the Gannets* in 1934, which included close-up, slow motion, and aerial shots of seabirds off the Welsh coast. Narrated and produced by renowned biologist Julian Huxley and filmed with the assistance of the Royal Navy, its “thorough and academic approach [is] a stark contrast to the expedition format of its predecessors” (“Private Life”). A *tour de force* of natural history filmmaking, *The Private Life of the Gannets* was the first wildlife film to win an Academy Award, receiving the Oscar for Best Short Subject in 1937. In the opening narration, Huxley observes that Grassholm, the island where the gannets live off the coast of a section of Wales, was so named by Norse raiders a thousand years before. An aerial shot shows Grassholm to be “an isolated 20 acres” of rich green grass surrounded by a rocky coast. The camera zooms in to reveal that what appears to be acres of white snow on the island is actual an enormous nursery for the gannets. In another scene, the gannets are shown building their nest with beakfuls of grass “like a young couple furnishing a new house.” Huxley describes how a mated pair express their

affection by clicking their beaks against each other for several minutes; previously, it was thought that this was courtship behavior, but Huxley reveals that it goes on throughout the breeding season, even after the chicks hatch. Huxley continues to anthropomorphize the gannets, attributing various seemingly odd behaviors to the birds becoming overcome with emotion. He narrates a series of battles over territory in which the gannets fight for the sanctity of their nests. The film also contains footage of the gannets diving dramatically into the ocean for their food. *The Private Life of Gannets* represents an enormous leap forward in natural history filmmaking; sophisticated, lively, and combining different types of shots instead of the standard single fixed angle that is the hallmark of most early films, Huxley's film proves itself worthy of its Oscar nod by standing up well to the test of time.

Another significant nature documentary of the 1930s was Austrian-German diver and documentarian Hans Hass's first underwater film, *Pirsch unter Wasser (Underwater Stalking)*. Though short and in black-and-white, the film showcases a remarkable array of tropical fish, sharks, and coral reefs around the island of Curacao. Hass's film was one of the first to allow audience members a peek into the underwater wonders of the Caribbean, including footage of a four-meter-long hammerhead shark. In the film, Hass refers to the reef as "alien" and a "totally different world," terms that are commonly used by naturalists and filmmakers to describe the underwater world. This language is part of the tendency to frame the naturalist as an intrepid explorer, set in opposition to his or her surroundings. In 1942, Hass released *Menschen unter Haien (Men among Sharks)*, his first feature-length film. Set in the Aegean, *Menschen unter Haien* was groundbreaking

in that Hass pioneered the use of self-contained diving equipment and flippers for filming, allowing him to explore underwater caves and other previously inaccessible environments. Modern underwater filmmakers owe much to Hass, who, liberated from the traditional form of “walk-diving,” glides soundlessly through the water surrounded by fish, sponges, and manta rays. In the film, Hass is shown putting on the self-contained diving equipment he developed and describes himself as becoming “an amphibious being” in order to film and move about freely underwater. After *Pirsch unter Wasser* and *Menschen unter Haien*, Hass went on to have a long career in documentary filmmaking and natural history, writing 28 books and making 105 films. Many of the underwater filmmaking techniques we take for granted today originated with Hass and his determination to share the wonders of the ocean with audiences around the world.

### **Closing**

If wilderness is indeed an artifact, as Mitman suggests, then one of the most significant manifestations of the construct is the nature film. The nature film, along with the many other visual representations of our environment, has a considerable effect on the way we as a visual culture conceptualize and understand the world we live in. The first fifty years of natural history filmmaking saw it grow from its infancy in the silent era to into a sophisticated genre more than capable of taking on its tasks of educating the public and documenting the natural world. Early silent black-and-white shorts like *Rough Sea at Dover*, *Elephants at the Zoo*, and *Pelicans at the Zoo* were simplistic

initial forays into a new technology, but even these films reveal our fascination with nature. And despite their relative lack of sophistication, many of the motifs and conventions that we see in today's nature films are visible in these early films, including the emphasis on spectacle and drama; the creation of false expectations; the use of fakery; the representation of the filmmaker/explorer as heroic figure; the implicit or explicit justification of racism, ethnocentrism, and colonialism; anthropomorphism; the manifestation of cultural trends; and the blending of information and entertainment into "edutainment." The next chapter continues the analysis of these conventions and motifs in the age of television, as the genre continues to evolve and anxieties about our endangered planet become increasingly evident in natural history filmmaking.

## CHAPTER III

### “TRUTHINESS” AND THE CULTURE OF LONGING:

#### NATURE FILMS OF THE 1940S-PRESENT

I hear so much of this nonsense about fighting against nature—you know, ‘Man versus the wild’ sort of thing. And it really is nonsense. The wilderness just *is*. It’s not against me, it’s not for me. It’s here, it’s benign, it just is what it is.

—Les Stroud, *Survivorman Ten Days*,  
episode “Mexican Desert Island Pt. 2” (2012)

Children growing up in urban and suburban environments during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century very likely learned about nature less from personal experience and more from *Zoo Parade*, Disney’s True Life Adventures, National Geographic specials, *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*, and *Wild America*. These shows remained on the air in reruns and syndication into the 1980s, where they were joined by new programs such as Sir David Attenborough’s Life series (*Life on Earth*, *The Trials of Life*, *Life in the Freezer*, etc.). In the 1990s, shows and miniseries such as *The Crocodile Hunter* (1992-2004) intrigued and captivated audiences around the world. Steve Irwin’s success spawned a host of competitors in the 1990s and early 2000s, including Jeff Corwin, Austin Stevens, Mark O’Shea, and Ruud Kleinpaste. At the same time, Irwin’s methods, showmanship, and cult of personality began attracting criticism long before his death by aquatic misadventure in 2006. The similarities between Irwin and his imitators and successors are hardly the only consistencies among nature films and series.

Karen D. Scott (2003) argues that natural history programs, despite their wide variety of subjects, “follow a similar format using a limited range of traditional codes and conventions” (30). Among these conventions, Scott contends, are the tendency to limit the ability of viewers to interpret the text for themselves; the use of didactic, paternalistic, and authoritative narration; and a musical score that influences the viewer’s emotional response to certain scenes. These conventions result in a “‘distancing’ from the text, as the viewer is encouraged to be a passive observer rather than an active participant” (Scott 30). Scott’s analysis echoes Jonathon Porritt’s concern from the epigraph that opens Chapter I of this dissertation, the claim that nature films turn viewers “into passive voyeurs of nature rather than engaged participants in cohabiting with nature,” an anxiety shared by many eco-critics and environmental writers. In their controversial essay “The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World” (2004), Shellenberger and Nordhaus note that “Environmentalism is today more about protecting a supposed ‘thing’ — ‘the environment’ — than advancing the worldview articulated by Sierra Club founder John Muir, who nearly a century ago observed, ‘When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.’” By perpetuating the perspective that humanity is separate from “the environment,” nature films enable the myth of “pure wilderness” to exist. Simultaneously, this disconnect seriously undermines environmental initiatives that emphasize the holistic nature of our planet and any connection viewers might feel with local “nature” and environmental issues that hit closer to home.



One of the ways humans attempt to maintain a connection with nature is through taxidermy. In her study of the practice, *The Breathless Zoo*, Rachel Poliquin describes the atmosphere of a 2004 gallery exhibition of stuffed and displayed polar bears as “marked by a sense of absence, an uneasy silence, a loneliness and longing” (2-3). Poliquin notes that the bears form a sort of narrative of global warming, endangerment, and habitat destruction, while at the same time representing both questionable collection practices and scientific knowledge. According to Poliquin, the practice of taxidermy has a variety of purposes:

To flaunt a hunter’s skill or virility, to contain nature, to immortalize a cherished pet, to collect an archive of the world, to commemorate an experience, to document an endangered species, to furnish evidence, to preserve knowledge, to decorate a wall, to amuse, to educate, to fascinate, to unsettle, to horrify, and even to deceive. (6)

Poliquin’s assessment of the rationales behind taxidermy is equally applicable to the genre of natural history filmmaking. This list could just as easily describe the motivations of wildlife filmmakers. While an extensive discussion of taxidermy and its attendant controversies is outside the scope of this project, Poliquin’s insights into the impulse to “preserve” nature can offer valuable understanding into natural history filmmaking, particularly in the era following World War II. She argues that taxidermy is comprised of eight “styles”: hunting trophies, natural history specimens, wonders of nature, extinct species, preserved pets, fraudulent creatures, anthropocentric taxidermy, and animal parts used in fashion and household décor (6). If, as Poliquin suggests,

taxidermy is a way to prolong life, postpone death and loss, and even stop time, so is natural history filmmaking. The earliest taxidermists sought to create repositories of wonders; so do filmmakers. Taxidermists make cultural artifacts of nature; so do filmmakers. But perhaps the most important of Poliquin's insights is that taxidermy is a sign of human longing: a longing to look, to see, to lay secrets bare; a longing for knowledge, for access, for exotic otherness, for spectacle, for understanding, for meaning, for order, for ownership, for defeat over death. Knighton compares nature photography to taxidermy as a way to trap "a sacred moment," make it permanent, and reproduce it (166). This is, of course, a desire based on delusion; taxidermy, like the nature photograph, preserves the *thing*, not the being. It can also reflect a desire to hoard, as if that view or moment could belong to a single person and become part of a personal collection. The "cultures of longing" that Poliquin analyzes are deeply inscribed in preserved animals—both in taxidermy and natural history filmmaking.

The attempt to "capture" nature on film mirrors the older tradition of taxidermy as we search for ways to understand and connect with the natural world. As more and more people moved from rural areas to urban centers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, our culture's connection with nature diminished even as our individual experiences shifted from personal encounters with wilderness to urban parks, gardens, and zoos and that most subordinated slice of nature: the suburban yard. At the same time, the search for meaning took on new urgency in the wake of World War II and its horrors. The 1940s were a time of both hurt and healing. Worldwide, the shared trauma of the war and the Holocaust, combined with the struggle on both individual and national levels to

“downshift” from wartime mindset to peacetime, left raw wounds, confusion, and even widespread depression in their wake. The actions of man were so horrifying as to be inexplicable, beyond understanding. Nature, as it had long been, at least since the era of Romanticism in the dawn of the industrial revolution and mega-urbanization, was a source of solace and even meaning during the traumatic aftermath of the war and the political and cultural repression of the 1950s. The wilderness was separate from man and his horrors, a place to find escape and comfort. Some looked to nature as a manifestation of God’s Creation, or even a place to feel closer to God; others looked for wisdom and guidance in nature’s cycles and balance. But because access to wilderness had become limited for many in urban areas, natural history films became a surrogate, a way for the average person to make a connection with the natural world.

The late 1940s marked a significant turning point in natural history filmmaking. Not only had technology made it possible to produce sophisticated feature-length nature documentaries from the air and the sea, but a brand-new medium—television—was poised to bring the nature documentary into the home. According to Marcel C. LaFollette, “The thoroughly commercial environment of U.S. network television in the 1940s and 1950s, where survival demanded that mass audiences be entertained to be retained, profoundly influenced the models for science presentation favored on television in the following decades” (35). LaFollette contends that public consumption of science—as well as the popularity of science shows—is a balancing act between the goals of educating, informing, and entertaining audiences. There seems to be little difference between the cutthroat atmosphere of early television that LaFollette describes

and the “survival of the most dramatic” competition that theatrical nature documentaries had always faced, as evidenced by the popularity of natural history films that included dramatic footage versus those that did not.

Competition for time slots and audience was not the only challenge facing televised nature history programs. Television was subject to many of the same anxieties that tend to arise in the wake of any new medium; individuals and organizations who feared its influence and content voiced similar objections to those raised about the film industry. Television was considered by some to be “irrelevant and frivolous, ‘a menace to education,’ or ‘wasteful and dangerous’ to intellectual standards and goals” (Heldenfels qtd. in LaFollette 39). However, just as natural history films had done for the movie industry, educational shows in general and nature shows in particular lent an air of respectability and value to television programming that recuperated it in the eyes of many skeptics. Some who were anxious about the declining of the home as the locus of family and values praised the television for bringing the family together again. Nature was an appropriate subject for family entertainment; it was educational, even when it portrayed violence, and it could easily be manipulated via anthropomorphizing the animals to reinforce the preferred values of the time.

LaFollette’s study of science content in U.S. television broadcasting in the 1940s and 50s shows that the new medium featured a host of science-based shows far too numerous to list here. Common subjects for early series included medicine, anthropology, astronomy, chemistry, and archaeology; some were sponsored by universities, others by corporations, museums, or zoos. Among these early science

shows were several that would become the vanguard of natural history programming on television, including favorites such as *Zoo Parade* (1950-57), *Sunday at the Bronx Zoo* (1950), *Meet Me at the Zoo* (1953), and *Adventure* (1953-56). The latter featured one of Jacques-Yves Cousteau's first television appearances and the "first live undersea broadcast in television history" (Mitman qtd. in LaFollette 44). With these and many other science shows, television proved to be a weapon of mass instruction.<sup>5</sup>

While some shows focused on education, others proved to be weapons of mass consumerism. One such series was *Disneyland* (1954-1958), the earliest incarnation of the long-running series (1954-1992) that would come to be called *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* (other titles include *Disney's Wonderful World*, *The Magical World of Disney*, *The Wonderful World of Disney*, and *Walt Disney Presents*). Though it offered some educational programming on various topics, including natural history, *Disneyland* and its subsequent incarnations were chiefly a publicity outlet for the Disney corporation. Many episodes consisted of abridged versions of Disney films and promotional materials for the Disneyland theme park and upcoming films, often blended with nature documentary footage. For example, the Emmy-winning episode "Operation Undersea" combined a shameless plug for the upcoming Disney live-action film *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), starring Kirk Douglas, James Mason, and Peter Lorre, with behind-the-scenes glimpses at the challenges of filming the movie, footage of ocean-dwelling wildlife, and an animated sequence depicting human efforts to explore

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<sup>5</sup> For additional analysis of *Zoo Parade*, *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, and selected other televised nature documentary series, see Mitman, "Domesticating Nature on the Television Set," in *Reel Nature* (1999)

the ocean depths. This “Disneyfication” of nature blended the real with the scripted and the completely artificial to create an amalgamated consumer product that proved to be irresistible to prime-time television audiences. Walt Disney personally hosted virtually every episode of *Disneyland*, regardless of its subject. From “Antarctica: Past and Present” to “At Home with Donald Duck,” Walt Disney was the voice of animals real and animated.

Disney’s influence on the public’s perception of nature and its inhabitants went far beyond the television set. In the midst of the emotional, physical, and psychological tumult of the post-war era, Disney’s fourteen True-Life Adventures—released between 1948 and 1960, during the childhood and adolescence of the baby-boomers—presented Disney’s version of nature to eager audiences both in theaters and on television. Like a salve, nature offered a place of healing and renewal; “benevolent and pure,” it was the antidote to the trauma of war and the “oppressive conformist trends of an affluent consumer society” (Mitman 110). While Disney’s first full-length animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938), had been a runaway success, the films that followed—*Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and *Bambi* (1942)—were commercial failures. *Bambi*’s central themes—namely, “natural innocence, the renewal of life, and the alienation of humans from pristine nature”—were the core of what Walt Disney hoped to promote in his True-Life Adventures (Mitman 111). Sugar-coated, sanitized, and rife with anthropomorphic conventions, the True-Life Adventures garnered a surprising amount of support from conservationists and likely had a significant role in

creating the cultural conditions that made passage of the environmental reforms of the late sixties and early seventies possible.

The first True-Life Adventure, *Seal Island*, was released in December 1948 and won the Oscar for best two-reel short subject. The film, which opens with an animated paintbrush revealing a cartoon version of the Alaskan landscape, makes overt connections between Disney's animated features and "real" nature. Indeed, editing and post-production enhancements make it difficult to distinguish between a "True-Life" Adventure and one of Disney's animated films. The "Filmmaker's Journals" that are included on the DVD release of the True-Life Adventures films reveal a startling amount how much manipulation went into the making of these popular movies. To create a dramatic storyline where none exists required filmmakers to obtain as much raw footage as possible, then edit it into a narrative. For example, in *Seal Island*, the sentimental story of a seal pup searching for its mother was created by cutting together unrelated scenes. Of the practice, photographer Lloyd Beebe discloses that

You have to go out and try to get it all in the wild . . . But you can't, because you haven't completed things. You've shot a few scenes, and they aren't connected. Somehow you've got to get the scenes in between to make it work . . . Eventually we'd have to go somewhere and get us a jaguar and finish up what we missed." (qtd. in Barrier)

When filmmakers wanted a particular shot, they had several options for how to obtain it. They could use tame animals in place of wild animals to demonstrate a particular behavior, as in the case of the film *The Vanishing Prairie* (1954) when a trained falcon

was used to reenact a hunting scene involving prairie dogs. In the same film, when photographers were unable to obtain footage of a duck sliding on ice, they “tossed a duck at some other ducks on a frozen pond” to get the result they wanted (Barrier). *Beaver Valley* included a scene with a coyote and beaver; unbeknownst to the viewer, the animals are separated by a glass partition (*fifth estate*). While some instances of fakery are relatively harmless to the animals involved, they still perpetuate misconceptions—and outright falsehoods—about the natural world. At worst, as Galloway et al. and others have noted, the True-Life Adventures filmmakers actually caused the deaths of numerous animals for the sake of entertainment. Most famously, by throwing lemmings off a cliff for a scene in *White Wilderness* (1958), Disney filmmakers made the myth of lemming mass suicides into an accepted fact.

Deceptive practices permeated every aspect of the filmmaking process for the True-Life Adventures films. According to Michael Barrier, Jimmy MacDonald, who was the voice of Mickey Mouse beginning in the 1940s, provided the sounds for many of the animals in the True-Life Adventures films: “That growling bear, that squawking penguin—their voices are MacDonald's, and if he didn't know what kind of sound a particular creature makes, he'd invent a plausible-sounding screech.” The film was edited to remove anything that might “offend ‘the feelings of women,’” such as footage of baby seals trampled to death by large males, and “careful editing and narration” softened the film’s climactic battle between a young male and an old bull (Mitman 111). Sanitizing the films reframes nature in Disney’s image; harsh realities are replaced by



whimsy and romance. In the wake of World War II, this kinder, gentler version of the world holds obvious appeal.

Compounding the sins of filmmaking shenanigans was the films' claims of authenticity. A title card for *Seal Island* trumpets: "These films are photographed in their natural settings and are completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed." The claim is somewhere between overstatement and outright lie, hinging on how one defines "authentic." *Water Birds* (1952) had a much different title card: "In the making of these films, nature is the dramatist. There are no fictitious situations or characters." Despite the fact that the latter statement is far less assertive in its claim of authenticity, the implications are similar. The title cards suggest that these films offer some sort of direct access to nature, equal to (or not so far removed) from an actual encounter. They claim spontaneity and artlessness in that the films are supposedly "unstaged" and "unrehearsed," and that the True-Life Adventures films are less mediated than feature films. And yet from what we know of the heavy-handed manipulations of the filmmakers, any claim of spontaneity is overstatement at best. By naming "nature" as the "dramatist," the title cards urge viewers to accept that narrative is inherent in nature and willfully ignore the fact that it is the filmmakers themselves who are providing the story; pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. This misdirection is echoed in the title card to *Water Birds*, which claims that the film contains "no fictitious situations or characters." Yes and no; it's not *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, but it's not really nature either.

Jacques Lacan has argued that the “real,” the material world, is inaccessible except through language, and that we construct a fantasy we call “reality” in order to understand the world we perceive around us. Therefore, we access the materiality of nature only through language, either textual, visual, or scripto-visual—the nature film being an example of the latter. “Nature” as we perceive it is made up of narratives and discourses; as such, a claim of authenticity made by a nature film is an assertion that its particular narrative is authoritative, the closest to the “real” that one can get. As an appeal to authority, a claim of authenticity is always a rhetorical act. Within the context of the nature film, which is rhetorical in that it is created and constructed for the purpose of eliciting a particular response from the audience, the appeal to authority is essential to establish the ethos that the film will rely upon to be persuasive. However, if to be “authentic” is to be “in accordance with fact, as being true in substance” or “being what it professes in origin or authorship, as being genuine; genuineness,” as the Oxford English Dictionary defines the term, the claim of authenticity made by the Disney True-Life Adventures films is dishonest and unsubstantiated by the contents of the films. The heavily manipulated narrative of nature that the films offer is fraught with fabricated scenes and extensive editing. The gap between the film’s narrative and the “real” is exacerbated by the false claim that the scenes are “completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed.” While I concede the argument that staged encounters may still have some claim to authenticity if they reenact natural behaviors, it is not always clear how much manipulation has gone into producing a given scene. We as viewers are rarely privy to the secrets of a film’s production; information about staging and other manipulations

may or may not be revealed after the film's release. It is far more common today, thanks in large part to the proliferation of technology, for secrets about the filmmaking process to be revealed. Insights into the production of the True-Life Adventures films had to be revealed voluntarily, as in the case of the "Filmmaker's Journals," or ferreted out by later investigative journalists and researchers.<sup>6</sup> The fact remains that natural history films more often than not make a far greater claim to authenticity and truth—either by omission, outright lie, or use of vague language—than they can ethically substantiate with their actual contents or filmmaking practices.

Visual rhetoric studies tell us that "as readers of image texts, we must always be aware that the photograph does not reveal the truth" (Hill and Helmers 13). And yet, in our visual culture, we frequently turn to images to access truth and understand the world around us. The case study of Disney's True-Life Adventures series demonstrates quite clearly that relying on nature films for truth about the natural world is likely to leave one misinformed. As a rhetorical device, a claim of fact is an appeal to authority, but such a claim is only as effective as the reliability of the evidence that supports it. All too often, claims of fact go unchallenged. Barrier uses "Truthiness" to describe the way the filmmakers tried to claim authenticity for the contents of True-Life Adventures, despite their questionable filmmaking practices. The word "truthiness" was coined by comedian Stephen Colbert. According to Colbert, "Truthiness" refers to a cultural phenomenon in which "it doesn't seem to matter what facts are. It used to be, everyone was entitled to

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<sup>6</sup> See Galloway et al., *The Fifth Estate*; Suzanne Charle, "Hunting Wildlife with a Movie Camera"; John Corry, "'Cruel Camera,' About Animal Abuse"; Tom Burnam, *More Misinformation*; William Poundstone, *Bigger Secrets*; and Douglas Sagi, "Scientists Demolish Lemming Legends"

their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything" (qtd. in Rabin). Disney claimed authenticity for their True-Life Adventures films, despite knowing how much manipulation had gone into making them, urging viewers to perceive them as factual and true.

To create a commercially successful nature fantasy, Disney filmmakers distorted viewers' perceptions with careful editing, narration, anthropomorphic conventions, staging, and claims of authenticity. Music also became a significant tool for manipulating the audience and setting the tone of the films. Walt Disney believed that "animal behavior revealed the 'instinctive beginnings of the deepest, most basic human emotions'" and that eliciting these emotions was essential for creating identification between the viewer and the animals onscreen (Mitman 119). Musical cues help viewers interpret the onscreen action, and themes that remain consistent from one film to the next create continuity. In the True-Life Adventures films, the musical score functions in precisely the same way it would in a feature film. In *Seal Island*, as female seals arrive on the island, the footage is accompanied by variations on "Here Comes the Bride." In *Beaver Valley* (1950), the "beaver theme" reflected the industriousness of the titular animals. Individual animals sometimes had their own themes, a technique borrowed from animated features that increased identification and emotional involvement. However, a scene wherein a beaver appears to "dance" to samba music highlights how music can be used to frame animals in ways that are detrimental. Wildlife is presented as performing for humans and existing for entertainment purposes rather than having

inherent value. The fact that beavers obviously do not dance to music is lost in the whimsy of the moment as our expectations for encounters with nature are changed.

As Mitman notes, the True-Life Adventure films—especially *Nature's Half-Acre* (1951)—were carefully engineered to conform to the ways that 1950s suburbanites encountered nature. Much as the plate-glass windows and sliding-glass doors of the typical ranch-style suburban house established its inhabitants as spectators of nature, so did the True-Life Adventures films. *Nature's Half Acre*, set in familiar locations—a country field, abandoned orchard, and backyard garden—signified a very deliberate attempt by Walt Disney and his company to use the films as “family values” propaganda with a decidedly Judeo-Christian slant. The film praises “traditional” family structure—father, mother, children—and presents this as the “natural” state by including footage of animals whose behavior patterns conform to this model. The film also venerates “proper” motherhood: “In nature’s half-acre . . . mother love is expressed in patience and devotion. Be it fair weather or foul, mother always stands by” (qtd. in Mitman 127). In the rare case that any other paradigm of family structure or reproductive pattern made it into the film, the narrator—underscored by ominous music—heaps criticism on animals whose behaviors do not conform to the accepted “traditional” family model. One such example is the humble cowbird, who lays her eggs in other birds’ nests and then departs. The narrator passes harsh ethical judgment on the cowbird, describing her as a “heartless creature” who is “one of Nature’s worst bums and free loaders” who refused to follow the “natural” pattern for child-rearing that was supposedly the “norm” throughout the animal kingdom (qtd. in Mitman 127).

According to Mitman, the True-Life Adventures films reflect the religious conservatism that permeated the 1950s. The concept of evolution never appears in any True-Life Adventures film; in fact, the films—particularly *Nature's Half-Acre*—strongly imply a divine order to nature. That is no accident; Walt Disney hired Tilden W. Roberts as a biologist-consultant for the film. Roberts was also a consultant for the Moody Institute of Science, which was part of the Moody Bible Institute, and as Mitman notes, there are strong resemblances between *Nature's Half-Acre* and *God of Creation* (1946), the first film produced by the Moody Institute of Science. Nature is presented as part of a grand design, and by filming it, as Walt Disney put it, one is “initiated into a sphere where God’s master plan for the existence of this planet is dramatically enacted every second of the day” (qtd. in Mitman 128). Walt Disney, who believed that communist agitators were the driving force of the 1941 strike at his studio, became “an FBI informant and vice president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a conservative organization devoted to ‘combat the film industry’s domination by Communists, radicals, and crackpots’” (Mitman 129). Walt Disney produced the True-Life Adventures films to contest what he saw as a serious threat to traditional family values, individualism, and religious morality, and to “prove” that what he and his ilk saw as the foundations of American life were the “natural” state of being. Like so many natural history films before them, the True-Life Adventures films created a feedback loop between nature and culture.

When it came to selling his nature fantasies to prospective audiences, Walt Disney faced many of the same challenges natural history filmmakers always had—

though the Disney name certainly held quite a bit of cultural cache by that time. The marketing strategies the Disney studio implemented were similar to those used to sell the films of Paul J. Rainey, Martin and Osa Johnson, and others. Because *Seal Island* lacked big-name stars, it could not be marketed like a typical film. Instead, the studio capitalized on *Seal Island's* gentleness, Creationist philosophy, and educational value (as based on its “authenticity”) in its marketing of the film. Disney chose to package it as one-half of a double feature with other quality Disney films, thus avoiding *Seal Island* ending sharing a bill with lesser-quality films from other studios. For additional publicity, the Disney studio sent out mailings to grade-school and high-school teachers across the country, announcing the upcoming release of the film and providing information about where it would be shown locally. The studio also provided pamphlets to teachers for classroom use (Mitman 113). *Seal Island*, with its carefully edited version of nature, had been given the stamp of approval by school officials, guaranteeing parents of its educational value.

Though Disney faced some criticism from naturalists and biologists for his sugar-coated version of nature, many conservationists embraced the True-Life Adventures films because they saw in these popular family films a chance to improve the affinity between humans and their environment, thus increasing the chance that meaningful conservation legislation might be passed. Mitman notes that “conservation organizations such as the Wilderness Society and the Audubon Society fully supported Disney”; Wilderness Society publications lauded Walt Disney as “an ally of conservation” and referred to him as “a sun ripening the grain for wilderness advocates

to harvest!” (qtd. in 123). In 1955, the Audubon Society awarded Walt Disney the Audubon Medal. The True-Life Adventures films are not without merit; as Mitman argues, “the wilderness experience Disney provided to the masses dispelled accusations that preservation of nature benefitted only those with the money, leisure, and physical stamina to experience nature for themselves,” adding that

In the hands of Disney, wilderness appealed not just to biologists interested in the preservation of pristine areas for field research. Disney extended the reach of wilderness . . . to include many middle-class Americans who perhaps never would have the resources or interest to venture to the last remnants of nature free from the influences of modern life. (124)

Baby-boomers who grew up watching Disney’s True-Life Adventures were among those who pushed so hard to pass the major environmental and conservation laws of the late sixties and early seventies. While it is impossible to measure precisely how much influence the films had, their popularity would indicate that their role was not minor.

Regardless of the accolades some conservation organizations heaped upon Walt Disney, his company, and the True-Life Adventures films, the ways that the films commodified nature and the mass consumer culture that the enormous Disney corporation participated in are at odds with the very ideologies that many conservationists were working to disrupt. Out of touch with the emerging environmentalism of the era, Disney was helping the conservation effort with one hand while helping break it down with the other. The True-Life Adventures, like so many



other natural history films and television series, were a double-edged sword. They provided a soothing escape from post-World War II trauma, offered glimpses at nature that the average American suburbanite would not otherwise experience, and helped raise awareness of the value of nature to help smooth the path for meaningful environmental reform. However, the True-Life Adventures are built on fakery and manipulative filmmaking practices that rendered those glimpses highly suspect. Their claims of authenticity and artlessness ring false, and their dissemination of conservative and Creationist ideals contributed to the oppressive, reactionary, heteronormative, anti-progressive zeitgeist of the 1950s that contributed to the countercultural movements of the 1960s. But perhaps most insidiously, the True-Life Adventures “Disneyfied” nature by creating both explicit and implicit connections between real animals and the animated creatures that appear in Disney’s animated features. The films were celluloid precursors of Disney’s modern wildlife theme parks, such as Animal Kingdom, which opened in 1998. Nature is a commodity to Disney—a thing to be packaged and sold, whether onscreen or in the souvenir shop at Disney World.

### **A Golden Age for Natural History Filmmaking**

While Disney’s True-Life Adventures were among the best-known nature films of the era, natural history filmmaking grew prolific in the 1950s. As with any other genre of film, the quality and subjects varied widely. A survey of the films catalogued on the Wildscreen-Wild Film History website indicates that the most common subjects for natural history films in the 1950s were birds and “exotic” locales. The latter tend to

follow in the tradition of the films of Martin and Osa Johnson by emphasizing the Otherness of the indigenous peoples of the area and the threats posed by the wilderness. One such short, *Africa Untamed* (1953), which was probably designed to run newsreel-style before a feature film, is typical of the period. As the film opens, an authoritative male narrator intones:

All over the globe, man has slowly tamed the wilderness, pushing deeper into the unknown, pitting his knowledge against the ruthless . . . terror of the jungle. In a few scattered places, over the Earth's surface, the brutal primeval struggle for survival goes on just as it did untold ages ago. In the heart of equatorial Africa, the jungle resists man. Only 5 million people live in this vast area, cut off from the rest of us by miles of jungle, swamp, grassland, and mountains.

The narration is accompanied by “native” singing, images of unidentified indigenous people dancing in local dress, and waterfalls, silhouetted against a map of the African continent. The language used to preface the film is so very telling about how the filmmakers view their subjects, how American audiences perceived Africa and its inhabitants, and the (sub)urban impulse to “tame” and domesticate nature. *Africa Untamed* also continues the tradition of framing the filmmakers as heroic representatives of civilization, pitted against the constant dangers of “untamed” wilderness and “savage” inhabitants.

In contrast with the fantasy of the 1950s suburban ideal—a ranch-style home on a perfectly landscaped quarter-acre lot, with whatever nature the homeowner permits

thoroughly subjugated and made to serve as manicured lawn, privacy hedge, shade tree, or colorful flowerbed tended by a housewife or gardener—the idea of “untamed” wilderness holds both terror and fascination. The intrepid filmmakers, representatives of civilization, venture into a faraway land characterized as frozen in time, unchanging, for “untold ages.” This casual dismissal of the ongoing development of a variety of cultures reflects both ethnocentric and racist views of Africans and even African-Americans—the very attitudes that fostered white flight to the suburbs to begin with. By claiming that these places and cultures are frozen in time while “modern” (white) civilization has developed, the filmmakers reassure the audience of American superiority. The voiceover refers to “the rest of us,” establishing the supposed 5 million inhabitants of “equatorial Africa” as completely Other. “Equatorial Africa” might as well be the surface of Mars for all we know of it, the narration implies. On the other side of the “miles of jungle, swamp, grassland, and mountains” is a whole different world, and its mysteries are terrifying.

There is no attempt to identify the exact location of filming or the specific group or groups of indigenous people featured in the film; they are simply “Africans” from a vaguely defined area designated “equatorial Africa”—dark-skinned, “savage,” not important enough to be permitted to give themselves a proper name. They dance, faceless silhouettes in native dress, as the narrator informs us that they are part of a “brutal primeval struggle for survival.” The narration alternates between condescending and dismissive of the indigenous people. As a child in a “pygmy village” (an offensive catch-all term for any given African settlement) demonstrates his prowess with a bow

and arrow, the narrator says, “Look at Little Robin Hood—45 shots a minute!” The narrator uses an analogy to a legendary English figure to create meaning for the young African boy. As for their culture, the only information offered is that the people are faced with a “never-ending search for food,” implying that every waking hour must be devoted to finding food in this “cruel” land. A hunting party sets out after a leopard. In a poorly edited shot, the hunter chases the leopard, spears a tiger, which falls to the ground as a tiger, then turns back into a leopard. Returning to the village with the slain leopard, the “tribe celebrates with dances.” Meanwhile, the terrors are everywhere. The river, which serves as a “highway” for the crew, is the site of battles with “rapids, waterfalls, and crocodiles.” Tsetse flies carry “sleeping sickness”; elephants can trample an unwary person, and even shooting one is not enough to kill it.

To fill its quotient of wildlife footage, *Untamed Africa* offers glimpses of zebras, giraffes (“nature’s skyscraper”), rhinos, hippos, and elephants. The film ends with the narrator’s final pronouncement, emphasized with a dramatic rise of music: “This is Africa as it has been for 1,000 generations: savage, cruel, exalted. This is *Africa Untamed*.” Again, the film claims that Africa (as one single, undifferentiated, monolithic culture) has not evolved for thousands of years, reinforcing it as inferior to modern American culture. There is unfortunately nothing new about using the word “savage” to describe cultures other than our own; “cruel” and “exalted,” however, are notable. The implication is that everything about “equatorial Africa” is cruel: the animals, the people, the terrain. “Cruel” is an ethical judgment; it implies inclination to inflict harm or suffering. Neither the land nor the animals could really be said to be

cruel. Characterizing the indigenous people as “cruel” with no more than the evidence of highly selective and crudely edited images to support that claim is as unethical as claiming that “equatorial Africa” has remained unchanged for 1,000 generations. The use of the word “exalted” is rhetorically fascinating; the entire short has repeatedly emphasized the supposed brutal, primeval, terror-filled savagery of Africa. How, then, is it “exalted”? Nils Lindahl Elliot argues that

At the historical juncture when the last ‘untouched’ natures were colonized and photographed, and when air pollution produced by the industrial North began to make its way around the entire globe . . . steps were taken to classify by juridico-geographical means a land that might now be classified *as* ‘nature’: in effect, as a *sublime* nature. (135)

Both Otherness and a myriad of unknown terrors elevate Africa to the sublime; it is so different, so great, that it is unknowable. Rather than elevating it by praise or in estimation, *Africa Untamed* and films like it declare Africa both ineffable and inspiring of fear and attraction.

During the 1960s and 1970s, series such as *Untamed World* (1967), *Animal World* (1968-1976), and *The Wild, Wild World of Animals* (1973-1978), as well as a host of stand-alone documentary specials from National Geographic and others, brought nature into the home via television. However, none of these shows would attain the popularity of the most-watched nature documentary television series of all time: *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*. After the immensely popular *Zoo Parade* was canceled in 1957, its host, Marlin Perkins, returned to television in 1963 to cement himself as

“television’s greatest nature showman” (LaFollette 47). *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom* ran on NBC from 1963 until 1971, then in syndication from 1971 to 1988. The show’s popularity even allowed it to outlive Perkins by two years. Mitman notes that Perkins’ flair for showmanship and emphasizing the excitement and risks was a major component of *Wild Kingdom*, and the thrill of adventure that permeated the series had an enormous impact on the way that adolescent baby boomers viewed the natural world (150). A significant factor in this “thrill of adventure” is the implication that the host or hosts are in some kind of danger from animals and/or the environment. Part of *Zoo Parade*’s appeal was that it was broadcasted live. The show was infused with a sense that anything could happen at any time; a barely domesticated wild zoo animal could lash out at a trainer or keeper or even Perkins himself. Two such incidents occurred on April 1, 1951, when a timber rattlesnake bit Perkins during a rehearsal and an elephant tossed assistant director J. Lear Grimmer across the floor; the latter was aired, the former was not (Mitman 150). Because *Wild Kingdom* was prerecorded, it lacked the same atmosphere of spontaneity that helped *Zoo Parade* attract 11 million viewers a week during its peak in 1952. To recapture some of that excitement and frame the series as an adventure narrative, *Wild Kingdom* included footage of apparent misadventures and close calls, such as an incensed bull seal charging Perkins, and an encounter between Perkins and a 22-foot anaconda (Mitman 151). While the actual danger level involved in these interactions is debatable, they perpetuate the conventions of presenting the host as a hero pitted against nature and wilderness as a place of adventure, danger, and dramatic encounters. Despite the popular acclaim heaped upon the series, some biologists sharply

criticized Perkins for his “excessive showmanship” and the “staged danger” that had become a hallmark of the show (Mitman 152). A Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) program revealed that Perkins had placed a tame bear in a Florida swamp, then staged a “heroic” rescue of the bear using a helicopter, boat, and lasso (Whiteman). Perkins, like many natural history filmmakers before him, had to navigate the narrow strait between entertainment and its requisite drama and scientific accuracy.

In Mitman’s study of the series, he notes that the “educational qualities of *Wild Kingdom* appealed to the sense of family responsibility that Mutual of Omaha wished to promote as part of its corporate image” (152). By titling the series *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom* and involving itself in the production and development of the series, the company went to great lengths to use the series to greenwash itself. Many insurance companies face an ongoing PR battle due to the industry’s reputation for being exceptionally profit-driven and cutthroat. Perkins’s emphasis on wildlife conservation and the “All-American” sidekicks who accompany him on his adventures—including “man’s-man” former baseball player and falconer Jim Fowler—reflect not-so-subtle attempts on the part of Mutual of Omaha to identify itself with the heroic explorer persona. In the wake of important environmental legislation, such as the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the Endangered Species Act (1973), which ushered in the so-called “Environmental Decade” of the 1970s, aligning oneself with the movement was a smart political move by Mutual of Omaha. The baby-boomer generation, who had grown up with the nature programs of the 1950s and 1960s, became the environmental activists of the 1970s. And, as Mitman notes, there are some

interesting connections between insurance and conservation. As Perkins himself informed Mutual's policyholders:

We teach the need for conservation . . . Mutual teaches the need for adequate health insurance. And there is a parallel between the two. Disregard for our natural resources can do great harm to our environmental security. Lack of concern for the financial consequences of inevitable illness, injury and death can ruin our financial security. (qtd. in Mitman 153)

Thus, Mutual—using Perkins as a spokesperson—framed insurance as an ethical necessity and an individual responsibility equal to that of conservation. As Mitman observes, through its sponsorship of *Wild Kingdom* and implicit support of conservation, Mutual “assured viewers . . . that the company protected future generations from the risks faced in a troubled world” (153).

For many who lived in urban or even suburban areas and for whom wilderness was largely inaccessible, television nature programs such as *Wild Kingdom* held an enormous amount of influence, for good or ill. LaFollette contends that “Television was ideally suited to visualizing nature,” adding that “television nature programs proffered powerful intellectual frameworks for interpreting the relationship between humans and other species or between humans and the land; they created unnaturally tidy perspectives of nature; all too often, they implied authenticity where it did not exist” (47). Perkins and the producers of *Wild Kingdom* figured out sooner rather than later that they had to do everything in their power to minimize any hint of artificiality and protect the illusion



of pristine wilderness. According to Mitman, one-third of *Wild Kingdom*'s episodes were designated as "ecology shows," meaning that they "told the story of wildlife in a particular habitat without any visible evidence of people" (155). In search of "untouched wilderness," the show traveled to Africa, India, Nepal, and the South Pacific. Success in selling the illusion of "pristine wilderness" requires a kind of *folie à deux* or *folie à plusieurs*, a shared psychosis in which all parties take part in a delusional belief—in this case, the delusion is that there is such a thing as "pristine" or "untouched" wilderness, when in fact even in areas with little or no human encroachment, the effects of human actions, such as pollution, habitat destruction, and global warming, are still visible. But in the wake of the most significant environmental legislation our country has ever passed and the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 and Paul R. and Anne Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968, "ecology shows" like those offered by *Wild Kingdom* served a number of important purposes. More than mere infotainment, they assuaged fears about our endangered planet and offered an escape to a fantasy world where human actions had limited rather than global effects.

Mitman also exposes *Wild Kingdom*'s attempt to identify itself as apolitical as a sham. The series claimed not to include any "vestige of political, ideological, or governmental conflict or controversy" (qtd. in Mitman 155-6). This depolitization would appeal to viewers who might be weary of politics or preferred their nature without a side of guilt. Politics spoils the illusion that one is peeking through a window at nature when watching a nature show; even if it is possible to ignore that what we think of as nature is narrated and mediated, the bitter taste of worry or accusation disturbs the

palate, making digestion of pretty images more difficult. As many filmmakers add drama to make shows more appealing, so do they subtract politics. But, as Mitman notes, “the very image of an innocent nature set apart from humans, reinforced through an aesthetic vision championed by Western conservationists and television programs like *Wild Kingdom*, carried an immense amount of political baggage.” The “untouched” and “pristine” wildernesses of Africa, India, Nepal, and the South Pacific presented by these series are not ours for the taking—nor are they “innocent playgrounds” filled with wildlife that belong to all (Mitman 156). Presenting them as untouched wilderness denies the existence of the indigenous people who live there, rendering them voiceless and powerless against the camera’s colonizing gaze, while simultaneously negating the political and economic realities that have an enormous effect on the environmental health of the region.

Another immensely popular television series was *Wild America* (1982-1994). Hosted by conservationist Marty Stouffer, the series, which focused on the wildlife and wild lands of North America, was one of the most highly rated in PBS history. According to biographer C. L. Bledsoe, after graduating from the University of Arkansas in 1970, Stouffer traveled to Alaska independently and filmed wildlife, then used his film to help get a job with Oryx Safaris, a safari company in Africa, for whom he made a promotional film. While in Africa, he developed both a strong dislike for trophy hunters and a deep commitment to conservation. Upon returning to the United States, Stouffer turned his attention to educating the public about conservation, and after several unsuccessful documentaries, he sold PBS on his idea for *Wild America* (Bledsoe). The

series featured Stouffer's patent earnestness, as well as filmmaking techniques such as close-ups, slow-motion, and time-lapse photography that made the series particularly palatable for television audiences. After thirteen successful seasons, PBS pulled the plug on *Wild America* amid raging controversy about Stouffer's filmmaking practices. In addition to illegally building a trail near an elk migration route in a Canadian national park, which resulted in a \$300,000 fine, Stouffer was accused of cruelty to animals and staging scenes. Several past crew members claimed that Stouffer used tame and restrained animals as bait to attract predators; according to Lily Whiteman, "former associates provided eyewitness accounts of how the . . . naturalist allegedly staged sensational kill scenes, including the attack of a tethered rabbit by a raccoon, and a fatal fight between a mountain lion and a lynx—animals that would rarely even cross paths in the wild." Stouffer vehemently denied the accusations of animal cruelty, dismissing them as "character assassination," but did admit to taking tame animals into the wild and filming them (Bledsoe). Stouffer's direct-to-video special *Wild America: Dangerous Encounters* (1998) contains footage that seems to depict a mountain lion attacking a cross-country skier, as Stouffer's voice-over narration warns viewers about a recent spike in lion attacks. What Stouffer fails to reveal is that the scene is actually "playful roughhousing between a tame lion and its veterinarian owner" (Whiteman). An internal PBS investigation found similar—or worse—problems in fifteen of the 110 episodes of *Wild America*, and Stouffer's unethical and deceptive filmmaking practices led to the abrupt cancellation of the series. Even so, Stouffer remains an icon of natural history programming. In 1997, Jonathan Taylor Thomas starred in *Wild America*, a kid-oriented

action-adventure movie based on Stouffer's childhood adventures in rural Arkansas with his brothers Mark and Marshall.

Another long-running and highly successful PBS series is *Nature* (1982-present). With more than four hundred episodes to date, *Nature* is the most watched documentary film series on public television. According to its website, *Nature* "has brought the beauty and wonder of the natural world into American homes, becoming in the process the benchmark of natural history programs on American television." With more than 600 honors from the television industry, including ten Emmy Awards, three Peabody Awards, and the first honor ever given to a program by the Sierra Club, *Nature* may well be the most successful natural history television series in history. The show's producers characterize it as "a key component of PBS [and] a notable part of America's largest classroom" ("Nature: About the Series"). The website offers an enormous amount of supplemental materials for educators, including lesson plans and "enhanced video resources" that combine video clips from the series with discussion questions, contextual and background information, and student learning outcomes for each age group that demonstrably meet National Science Education Standards.

*Nature* (and other PBS nature documentary series) are selling a much different product than the films and television specials produced by corporations like Disney. Disney and Mutual of Omaha had—and have—a vested interest in "greenwashing" their corporate images, and Disney never met a self-promotional opportunity it didn't like. For these companies, nature is a salesperson, a marketing tool, a voiceless resource that can be put to work for a variety of purposes, and a convenient source of "evidence" to

support particular worldviews. Nature can be used to sell feature films, quasi-documentary films, television shows, theme-park tickets, and even insurance. Nature—and indigenous people who are depicted as “belonging” to nature rather than modern civilization—are here to be consumed by us, by right, in much the same way as any other consumer product. Education, conservation, and environmental awareness are hardly the priority; profit is, and unabashedly so. This is not to say, of course, that making money is of no concern to PBS and the producers of *Nature* and similar shows. While funding for public broadcasting comes from a variety of sources, including endowments, various organizations, and government support, a series will not last long if it does not draw and maintain an adequately sized audience. While some of the pressure is alleviated by funding, the show must still be “sold” to viewers.

To sell *Nature*—and nature—the producers and distributors rely on many of the same types of appeals that natural history filmmakers have used throughout the genre’s history: the rarity of the images, the thrill of discovery, innovative filmmaking techniques, and the educational value of the show’s contents. This salesmanship still differs significantly from the practices favored by Mutual of Omaha, Disney, and the like. *Nature*, in particular, emphasizes educational value with a wealth of supplemental materials for instructors, expanding its potential viewership to include students in the classroom, not just viewers at home. The internet makes it possible to use *Nature*, as the website states, as part of “America’s largest classroom,” framing the series as one node in an immense exchange of ideas that could only be dreamed of in the early days of natural history filmmaking. Unfortunately, despite its noble intentions, *Nature* was not

immune to the lengths some filmmakers will go to “sell” their product. According to Whiteman, a cameraman for *Nature* was found to have tied down a fawn in order to film a bear killing and eating it, an action that series producer and narrator George Page describes as a “terrible incident” that justifiably ended the cameraman’s career. Other than that incident, *Nature*’s reputation for ethical treatment of its animal subjects is generally quite good.

One organization whose reputation for producing high-quality nature documentaries is National Geographic. In 1965, National Geographic produced its first film, *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees*. This was also the first film to feature Cambridge-educated ethologist Jane Goodall and her research into the chimpanzees of Tanzania. Narrated by Orson Welles, *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees* provides a detailed account of Goodall’s research practices and close connection with her chimpanzee subjects. The film chronicles the chimpanzees’ daily lives and behaviors, including playing and eating meat, which proved Goodall’s then-controversial claim that chimpanzees are carnivores. Goodall’s research is widely credited with redefining our concept of our closest primate relative, and the film documents the early days of her lifelong project of proving how alike humans and chimpanzees are and fighting for their protection and conservation. Her revelation that chimpanzees make and use tools disproved the widely held belief that such behavior was unique to humans, leading famed archaeologist and paleontologist Louis Leakey to comment that “Now we must redefine tool, redefine Man, or accept chimpanzees as humans” (qtd. in Goodall 2184). As the first in what would be a long list of films produced by the National Geographic

Society (NGS), *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees* represents a major step by the NGS to begin widely disseminating the vast amount of information that the Society had been collecting since its incorporation in 1888. The film and its human star were not without controversy, however; Goodall's practice of assigning names rather than numbers to her subjects and emphasis on discussing chimpanzee "behavior in terms of motivation or purpose" led to accusations of anthropomorphism (Goodall 2184). At a time when ethologists were making a conscious effort to dismiss chimpanzee individuality, Goodall resisted thinking, speaking, and writing of them as things, preferring instead to recognize each chimpanzee as an individual being, with thoughts, emotions, and motivations beyond mere instinct and reaction. In the name of conservation of both the animals and their rapidly shrinking habitat, Goodall strives to create identification between the chimpanzees and humans. *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees* established Jane Goodall as one of the most well-known naturalists and conservationists of the modern era.

In the years following Goodall's film, other filmmakers picked up the mantle of demonstrating the close connections between primates and humans. A decade after *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees*, award-winning wildlife cameraman Götz Dieter Plage took up a similar cause: fighting the negative perception of the mountain gorilla. In the immensely popular *Gorilla* (1974), Plage, accompanied by Belgian conservationist Adrien Deschryver, documents a six-month stay with the gorillas in their small protected area of Zaire's Kahuzi-Biega National Park. While the dramatic footage of a male silverback's demonstration of power and dominance is perhaps the film's best-

known scene, it is the scenes of everyday life among the gorillas that makes the film so compelling. In addition to footage of the gorillas interacting in the wild, the film includes a now-familiar motif: the plight of an orphan gorilla. Deschryver attempts to reintroduce him to the wild and find a place for the youngster within this troop of gorillas. The film combines the narrative of a young gorilla's struggle to find a place with his own kind with rare footage of gorillas in their natural (albeit rapidly shrinking) habitat. The appeal of narrative, as well as the information about gorillas' behavior, is essential to the film's purpose of persuading viewers that not only are gorillas far from the mindless monsters of popular belief, but they are intriguing animals with emotions, relationships, and needs not unlike our own. However, in their zeal to create identification between the audience and gorillas and chimpanzees, the filmmakers of both *Gorilla* and *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees* fall prey to the temptation to use a normative discourse, one that projects particular aspects of human culture and motives onto animals. This tendency is a common motif in natural history filmmaking, as the Disney True-Life Adventures and other films demonstrate.

Both *Miss Goodall and the Wild Chimpanzees* and *Gorilla* seek to replace ignorance with knowledge and create identification—and hopefully empathy—between the gorillas and the film's human viewers, for the purpose of encouraging conservation. Unlike other films that emphasize the Otherness of animals, people, and places to facilitate disconnection, this type of film makes connections. Films that focus on spectacle, danger, and portraying the unfamiliar as unknowable and therefore both fascinating and frightening are profoundly disruptive to conservation efforts, as are those



that sell nature as a commodity. A ecologically based land ethic such as Leopold and Wendell Berry advocate is predicated upon the notion that nonhuman animals and the land itself have both intrinsic value and value as part of an ecology that suffers in their absence. Humans are far more likely to extend ethical considerations to living things—including the land and even our planet as a whole—if they recognize both the similarity and the interconnectedness of ecological systems and their components.

### **Sir David Attenborough: Ambassador for Nature**

When it comes to reputation, among the pantheon of great natural history filmmakers, few names are as well-known or well-respected as Sir David Attenborough. Since 1955, Attenborough has been synonymous with quality nature documentaries. With more than 130 film and television credits to his name, Attenborough has been the undisputed and trusted interpreter of nature for almost sixty years. According to his official BBC biography, a Cambridge-educated naturalist, Attenborough served in the Royal Navy briefly before he became an editor for children's science textbooks. In 1952, he became a television producer for the BBC, and in 1956 he hosted *Zoo Quest*, a documentary series that followed a group of people who were locating animals for a zoo. That short-lived series launched Attenborough's career as the voice and face of the BBC's acclaimed Natural History Unit (NHU).

In 1979, Attenborough released *Life on Earth*, the first entry in his magnum opus. The nine series that make up Attenborough's Life project are iconic natural history films. In the thirteen-episode *Life on Earth* series, Attenborough travels around

the globe to tell the story of how life evolved on our planet. While he stops short of explicitly discrediting the Creationist perspective altogether, Attenborough's emphasis on scientific method and his common-sense approach to explaining the process of evolution leave little room for Creationist ideology. In the opening episode, "Infinite Variety," Attenborough traces the footsteps of Charles Darwin as he made his historic visit to the Galapagos and developed the concept of natural selection. Gently and methodically, Attenborough walks the viewer through the reasoning for natural selection and evolution, providing evidence for each claim. At the time of Darwin's voyage, Attenborough says, the accepted viewpoint was that each species was "individually created by God . . . and Darwin was no atheist." However, as he observed the differences between species in the Galapagos and their closely related cousins from the South American mainland, Darwin came to understand the scientific explanation for the existence of birds whose wings had become so stunted that they could no longer fly and iguanas who had developed longer talons so they could grip rocks better. Attenborough's patient, non-confrontational explanation is palatable to a skeptical Creationist viewer and his evidence is plentiful. The story of Darwin's personal evolution from creationist to evolutionist is an appeal to narrative, allowing the viewer to follow in his footsteps and, perhaps, to find themselves similarly moved. Attenborough offers this perspective on natural phenomena that remain unexplained: "Some religious people will claim that it is all the work of God, and that is all that need be said. Some scientists will claim that it will only be a matter of time before we can provide a much

more detailed explanation than that.” In other words, simply because it has yet to be explained by science does not necessarily mean that it should be attributed to a divinity.

Having presented the case for natural selection and evolution, Attenborough further employs the appeal of narrative to include viewers in the story of the Earth, identifying the animals he has featured thus far in the episode as “elements in a long continuing story that began a thousand million years ago.” The remainder of the episodes tell the story, beginning with the earliest days of the Earth’s existence. Using an analogy that compares the Earth’s lifetime to a single year, in which humans first make their appearance late in the afternoon of December 31<sup>st</sup>, Attenborough describes how life originated and how single-celled and then multi-celled organisms developed and evolved over hundreds of millions of years. For each point in the grand narrative of life’s evolution, Attenborough provides evidence from dozens of locations around the globe: fossilized plants and animals, layers of sediment and rock, seashells two miles up in the Himalayas and newborn land formed where tectonic plates diverge. The narrative has several purposes in the context of the series. First, it provides a familiar structure for the series to follow. Second, from a rhetorical perspective, it frames the logic of Attenborough’s argument about the origins and develop of life on Earth: if you accept Step 1, then you should accept Step 2, Step 3, and so forth. Third, also from a rhetorical perspective, it offers a “replacement” narrative for the Creationist ideology, one of epic grandeur and expansiveness that challenges the notion that a scientific, evolutionary view of the origins of life on Earth lacks wonder and meaning.

The final episode, “The Compulsive Communicators,” focuses on human evolution, from our origins in Africa 10 million years ago through primitive man’s shift to bipedal locomotion, use of tools, development of language, formation of communities, spread from Africa to Europe, life in caves, discovery of fire, and creation of cave paintings to represent the world around them through pictographs. The advent of fully formed brains and written language heralded the arrival of *homo sapiens*. Lest we become too full of ourselves as a result of our relatively quick development, Attenborough warns that humanity’s success so far is no guarantee of future longevity. We could fall victim to a massive extinction similar to the K-Pg extinction that ended the existence of an estimated 75 percent of all life on Earth approximately 66 million years ago, including the dinosaurs. Threats to humanity can come from space, as in the case of the asteroid that is thought to have caused the K-Pg extinction event, from our own (in)actions, or from any number of natural or biological disasters. Human life is fragile, though our hubris often leads us to think otherwise.

*Life on Earth* is also one the earliest examples of the tendency in nature documentary series to isolate humanity from the rest of nature by separating humans from other living creatures into different episodes. There may be a variety of reasons for this trend; in the case of *Life on Earth*, each episode focuses on a “type” of living things and their evolution, from invertebrates to insects, plants, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and finally mammals. Five of the thirteen episodes of *Life on Earth* focus on mammals: “The Rise of Mammals” looks at the first mammals to evolve; “Theme and Variations” focuses on mammals whose young gestate inside their bodies; “The Hunters and the

Hunted” studies herbivores and their carnivorous predators; “Life in the Trees” considers primates and includes Attenborough’s well-known encounter with mountain gorillas; and “The Compulsive Communicators” reveals the story of how humans came to be the dominant species on planet Earth. Humans could have been included in any of the latter four “mammal” episodes; we gestate within our mothers, are part of the food chain, and are descended from tree-dwelling apes. And yet the series presents humans as different, special, unique, separate.

Separating humans from the rest of animal life on Earth reinforces the notion that we are somehow distinct from our environment. This supposed division is what many conservationists and environmentalists seek to disrupt because it can have a variety of detrimental effects on conservation efforts and environmental reforms. If humans feel disconnected from their environment, they may believe that their actions will have limited effects. They may feel less responsible for the negative effects human activity has on the environment. A lack of connection can combine with a sense of superiority to reinforce the viewpoint that humans have a “right” to do with their environment as they please—a perspective that arises in no small part from the Creationist notion that man was “given” dominion over the Earth. Disconnection can also interfere with conservationists’ and environmentalists’ ethical appeals for meaningful reform by interrupting the creation of identification and consubstantiality between humans and their fellow living things. The nature documentary has the potential to either undermine or reinforce the interconnectedness of humans and our environment; relegating humans to separate episodes within a series that purports to be a portrait of life on Earth is likely

to have negative consequences for conservation.

The other entries in Attenborough's Life documentaries follow a similar structure of six to twelve episodes, each devoted to particular topic within a broad general subject. *The Living Planet* (1984) examines the flora and fauna of Earth's most significant biomes on all seven continents and is a clear precursor to *Planet Earth*. Each episode of *The Trials of Life* (1990) focuses on a particular type of animal behavior and the major stages of life, such as "Arriving" (birth), "Growing Up," "Finding Food," "Hunting and Escaping," "Fighting," "Courting," and "Continuing the Line" (reproduction). Three years later, Attenborough released *Life in the Freezer* (1993), a more narrowly focused documentary series on Antarctica. The first five 30-minute episodes focus on the seasonal changes of the continent and how life adapts to such extreme conditions. The last episode, "Footsteps in the Snow," describes human exploration of Antarctica, including Captain Robert Falcon Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole that had been documented in *The Great White Silence*. Attenborough visits one of the huts Scott's party used and compares it to the modern methods of exploring Antarctica, an endeavor that remains extremely challenging despite advances in technology. Like *Life on Earth*, *Life in the Freezer* limits discussion of humans to the final episode and focuses on the difficulty of surviving in a completely inhospitable terrain. As such, it continues both the documentary tradition of portraying naturalists and explorers as heroic visionaries and the separation between humans and their environment, despite the fact that Antarctica, regardless of its isolation, is profoundly affected by the effects of global warming.

*The Private Life of Plants* (1995) is another more specialized six-episode series, focusing on the ways that plants reproduce, grow, move, compete for resources, ally themselves with animals for survival, and adapt to hostile environments. The final episode, “Surviving,” concludes with a brief but earnest plea from Attenborough for the conservation of plants:

Ever since we arrived on this planet as a species, we’ve cut them down, dug them up, burnt them and poisoned them. Today we’re doing so on a greater scale than ever . . . We destroy plants at our peril. Neither we nor any other animal can survive without them. The time has now come for us to cherish our green inheritance, not to pillage it—for without it, we will surely perish.

The Peabody and Emmy Award-winning series appeals to the viewer to conserve plant life in a variety of ways. The outstanding camera work emphasizes the beauty and diversity of plants and the richness that is to be gained from seeing them. By discussing plants’ ability to adapt and survive even in the most inhospitable parts of the world, the series attempts to present them as living things with inherent value. Attenborough also provides a more urgent appeal to human health and well-being, emphasizing the interconnectedness of our environment and that plant health is directly linked to our own. The series presents an effective three-pronged appeal for conservation, using logic, ethics, and emotion to sway the viewer.

Attenborough followed *The Private Life of Plants* with *The Life of Birds* (1998) and *The Life of Mammals* (2002). Both series contain ten episodes on a variety of topics.

*The Life of Mammals*, like *Life on Earth* and *Life in the Freezer*, isolates discussion of man to the last episode, entitled “Food for Thought.” In this episode, Attenborough analyzes the similarities between man and his ape cousins and tackles the subject of overpopulation:

Three and a half million years separate the individual who left these footprints in the sands of Africa from the one who left them on the moon—a mere blink in the eye of evolution. Using his burgeoning intelligence, this most successful of all mammals has exploited the environment to produce food for an ever-increasing population . . .

Perhaps the time has now come to put that process into reverse. Instead of controlling the environment for the benefit of the population, perhaps it's time we control the population to allow the survival of the environment.

To illustrate the point, Attenborough travels to Tikal, once the capital of the great Mayan civilization, which scholars believe collapsed because their population outgrew their available resources. As he did in *The Secret Life of Plants*, Attenborough, a staunch conservationist, uses the opportunity to issue a dire warning about the effects humans have on their environment.

The final two parts of the Life series, *Life in the Undergrowth* (2005) and *Life in Cold Blood* (2008) focus on invertebrates and amphibians and reptiles, respectively. Both series include appeals for conservation of plants, animals, and natural resources, and emphasize establishing an equilibrium within the environment as key to the survival



of any species, including humans. Each episode is followed by a ten-minute segment entitled “Under the Skin,” in which Attenborough interviews researchers and crew members. The “Under the Skin” featurettes give Attenborough the opportunity to explain some of the methodologies that researchers use to obtain the knowledge featured in the series. They also raise the veil on the natural history filmmaking process, allowing viewers to see how footage is acquired. By doing so, the filmmakers can accomplish three goals: first, they prove that the footage was obtained ethically, without harm to the animals; second, by demonstrating how little manipulation has gone into the process, the featurettes establish the authenticity of the images; and third, by revealing the challenges that crew members faced during filming, they continue the tradition of framing filmmakers as heroic explorers.

“Under the Skin” also includes further discussion of conservation issues, including the decline of amphibians as harbinger of significant environmental imbalance, the effects of the illegal global exotic-pet trade on reptiles and amphibians, and the ever-increasing consequences of climate change and habitat destruction. Separating the most pointed discussion of climate change from the main episode can have two possible effects. Some viewers may not watch the featurettes, rendering the warnings useless. This may be a conscious choice by the producers, who wish to “soften” the political message of the series to avoid alienating some viewers. If that is the case, the willingness to downplay the very real threat of climate change and habitat destruction reveals some disturbing trends in both natural history filmmaking and our culture of denial. The second—and more optimistic—possible effect is that rather than risk the

conservation message becoming lost within the wealth of information contained in the larger episode, it can be emphasized in the featurettes.

Attenborough is a vocal and committed conservationist; in addition to his *Life* series and the host of other similar documentaries he has written, produced, and narrated for the BBC, he has produced numerous documentaries on climate change, habitat destruction, and endangered animals. In 2006, Attenborough released a two-part special, *Are We Changing Planet Earth?* and *Can We Save Planet Earth?*, that were part of the BBC's season-long campaign on global warming called "Climate Chaos."

Attenborough, who confessed to once being skeptical about the scope of humanity's effect on climate change, presents extensive evidence in *Are We Changing Planet Earth?* to support the argument that "our planet is being transformed—not by natural events, but by the actions of one species: mankind." While the first part presents the case for climate change, the second focuses on ways to slow the process, from individual and small-scale changes to local, national, and international policy-making. *Can We Save Planet Earth?* emphasizes how climate change will effect everyone on the planet and urgently appeals to viewers to modify their behavior sooner rather than later to help avert impending disaster. However, as the issue of climate change remains hotly debated (pun intended), no single documentary will have the power to sway the skeptics. Now in his late eighties, Attenborough's commitment to conservation remains unwavering, though his age now restricts his ability to travel and his participation in natural history filmmaking will be limited to writing, narration, and producing.

## The Nature Film as We Know It Today

The last two decades have seen a wide variety of televised nature series. Some, like *Before It's Too Late* (1993-present) and *Last Chance to See* (2009-2010), focus specifically on endangered animals, climate change, and habitat destruction, with a decided urgency. Others, such as *Nightmares of Nature* (1995) and *The Most Extreme* (2002-2007) present nature as a source of spectacle. *Raging Planet* (1997-1998, 2008) and *Life After People* (2008-2010) have a decidedly apocalyptic feel, focusing on natural disasters and even speculating what would happen to Earth if humans were to suddenly go extinct. Some series focus exclusively on the aesthetic wealth offered by nature. *Sunrise Earth* (2004-2009), which aired on the Discovery HD Theater channel—which was rebranded HD Theater in 2007 and then Velocity in 2011—features hour-long episodes comprised of languid, real-time shots of the sun rising in various locations around the world, accompanied by the sounds of nature. Series creator David Conover described the meditative style as “experiential television,” designed specifically to make the viewer feel as if he or she has been transported to the location and immersed in its sights and sounds. During the early years of its run, *Sunrise Earth* was one of the few HD programs on television, and the show’s producers created an intense experience in which nature was as its most perfect and most purified. The show has no narration other than the simple labels that appear onscreen to identify the location where the scene was filmed. Nature is stripped of its context and its meaning save for being a source of aesthetic pleasure. Also, because the show was only available on Discovery HD Theater, which at the time had to be ordered as part of an “HD” tier for most cable and

satellite subscribers, *Sunrise Earth*'s wealth of natural beauty was, if only for a short period of time, a privilege limited to those who owned HD televisions. Discovery HD Theater and HD Theater featured a lineup of similar shows that emphasized natural beauty while simultaneously capitalizing on the newness of HD technology. Series like *Destination HD*, *HD Getaways*, and *HD Traveler* are more in the traditional documentary style, with voice-over narration and musical scores, but all of these shows demonstrate the filmmakers' emphasis on visual consumption of landscapes, wildlife, and "exotic" locations.

The type of programming featured on Discovery HD Theater and its other incarnations was and is a popular choice for demonstrating the features of the newest, largest, and most advanced televisions in "big-box" stores like Best Buy, Wal-Mart, and Sears. Nature was put to work selling televisions, and it remains employed as such in virtually any electronics store one might enter. Shoppers stop and stare, mesmerized, as brightly colored poison dart frogs sit on bright green leaves and brilliant sunrises provide breathtaking backdrops as waves crash on white-sand beaches. Nature becomes part of the package deal: buy the television, the cables you need, possibly a Blu-ray player and home theater sound system, and you get to take "nature" home too. If the rain forest and perfect beaches are physically inaccessible, they are available for purchase two aisles over in the Blu-rays. There may be nothing new about the phenomenon of selling nature as a consumer product—after all, filmmakers have been doing it since the earliest silent, black-and-white shorts—but the widespread availability and superiority of HD and Blu-

ray technology make it possible for viewers to believe that they get to experience nature in the same way that the camera crews did: in lifelike color and clarity.

Other than so-called “experiential” programs like *Sunrise Earth* and *Destination HD*, three other major subgenres of natural history programming have become particularly popular, especially among American television audiences: the CGI-enhanced film, the nature showman, and nature-based reality shows. While shows comprised partly or entirely of computer-generated images are a recent product of both improved technology and viewers’ increasing comfort with the concept, both the nature showman and the nature-based reality show have extensive roots throughout natural history filmmaking. It is the proliferation of these shows that make them significant to the study of nature documentaries, even if their formats stretch the boundaries of what constitutes a “documentary.”

Modern audiences are well accustomed to CGI, thanks to its extensive use in films. From subtle enhancement to the creation of completely digital spaces, animals, and even people, CGI is a staple of modern filmmaking. As of March 2013, nearly all of the top 50 highest-grossing films of all time are either heavily CGI-enhanced or entirely CGI.<sup>7</sup> As audiences, we have become increasingly accustomed to digital effects, while filmmakers continually push the boundaries of what is possible in an unending battle of one-upmanship. It should come as no surprise, then, that CGI has made its mark on nature films. Popular uses include reenactments of events that took place prior to the advent of filmmaking and demonstrations of scientific phenomena that the camera

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<sup>7</sup> According to the “All Time Box Office” chart on [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com)

cannot capture. As CGI technology has become increasingly advanced, however, it has enabled some filmmakers to create entire “documentaries” that consist of nothing but digital images, with the occasional animatronic sequence thrown in. In “‘Screen natures’: Special Effects and Edutainment in ‘New’ Hybrid Wildlife Documentary,” Phil Bagust analyzes the strange liminal space that these CGI-enhanced or CGI films inhabit between documentary and fictional film, where issues of authenticity, fact, and truth are very much at issue. If, as Bagust suggests, “the history of documentary film has been one of a long tension between the objectivist and subjectivist positions,” the CGI film is just the latest in a long procession of technological advancements that call into question just how much “authenticity” or “truth” a film can claim (215). There may be less of a difference between live-action documentary and a CGI-enhanced film than we would like to think. After all, a study of documentary filmmaking demonstrates the level of fakery, misrepresentation, and lies of omission that go into many documentaries; if all film is mediated and their subjects redefined as cultural objects, then the animals on screen are often already artifacts. As such, I do not believe that one can claim that CGI-enhanced films are inherently less “authentic” or “true” than live-action films.

Bagust offers an analysis of what he calls “virtual ecosystems,” including the *Walking with . . .* series, which is composed almost entirely of CGI animation and animatronics. According to Bagust, the “scientific spectacle” of CGI-enhanced nature documentary films demands that we answer the question of “what we want or expect a documentary *to do*” (225, emphasis in original). This is hardly a new question; after all, the documentary has been used and co-opted for a variety of purposes during its century

of existence. If the documentary's purpose is to simultaneously inform and entertain, the CGI-enhanced nature film fits that need as well as its live-action counterparts. In the era of blockbuster films and viewers' sophisticated expectations, the CGI-enhanced nature documentary may have a better chance of attracting audiences and thus perhaps disseminating knowledge about conservation and the environment.

One obvious concern regarding CGI-enhanced films is that they can have a considerable effect on viewers' expectations about how the world around us looks, as well as how we understand it. Because digital images of animals are created, we can create them to look however we want. We can enhance certain traits or behaviors; this ability goes beyond the standard live-action documentary's ability to edit film to achieve a desired effect. We can, in short, remake nature as we see fit, and to a much-farther extent than non-CGI films. This is not to say that the same thing does not happen in unenhanced films—it most certainly does, as this and many other studies have shown. In fact, the practice of remaking nature to fit our expectations and desires may be far easier to get away with in unenhanced films; after all, when we watch CGI-enhanced films, we are aware that they are enhanced. Technology is not yet at the point that CGI is indistinguishable from real animals; until it is, viewers are aware that they are watching CGI, and CGI is a representation, not “real,” even if it is “realistic.” But live-action documentary can easily be mistaken for “real,” and as documentary history has shown, it is easy for unscrupulous filmmakers to dupe viewers.

The “nature showman” is prone to misrepresentations and falsehoods because of his or her emphasis on excitement and drama. The nature showman on film dates back

at least to Theodore Roosevelt, whose bigger-than-life presence is central to *Roosevelt in Africa*, and is visible in the films of Martin and Osa Johnson and Paul J. Rainey as well. On television, both Marlin Perkins and Marty Stouffer were showmen; the level to which they prized showmanship is directly proportional to the amount of controversy that surrounded their shows. Their approach contrasts sharply with Attenborough, whose preference for a more straightforward scientific method is reflected in his reputation for quality programs. Since Perkins and Stouffer, a handful of men have had some success in filling their boots: Jeff Corwin, Austin Stevens, Mark O’Shea, Ruud Kleinpaste, adventurers Bear Grylls and Les Stroud, and self-described “extreme angler” Jeremy Wade all host shows wherein they travel to a variety of locations around the world and “encounter” wildlife—though many of their encounters seem anything but spontaneous. Stevens in particular is prone to exaggerated drama; in one episode of his short-lived series *Austin Stevens: Snakemaster* (2004), the herpetologist and wildlife photographer dives from the upper deck of a riverboat in the Amazon to manhandle a large anaconda he spots swimming in the water. He also roughly handles an enormous python before arranging it on the ground and taking close-up photographs. Stevens’ over-the-top antics define him as showman first and naturalist second.

Perhaps the most well-known—or infamous—modern nature showman is Steve “Croc Hunter” Irwin, who is as famous for his signature exhortations “Crikey!” and “Danger! Danger! Danger!” as his controversial handling of the wildlife he and his wife Terri encounter on their adventures. Irwin’s habits of grabbing any dangerous or venomous creature he could find and wrestling crocodiles, sometimes single-handedly,



resulted in considerable criticism from conservationists and naturalists, who found his style more consistent with “old alligator-wrestling mumbo jumbo” and more like “a carnival act than nature” (Vivanco 6). Irwin’s show, which was seen by an estimated 200 million viewers in 60 countries, combined nature-as-spectacle with what Peter Stark refers to as “virtuous adventures”; according to Stark, Steve and Terri Irwin “are virtuous both because of their self-conscious moral piety, and even more so in terms of their . . . potent virility” (8). Irwin’s claim that he is motivated by the desire to disseminate knowledge with the purpose of encouraging conservation positions him as morally superior. At the same time, comparisons between him and Tarzan (by his wife and in the media) combine his identification with the animals and his masculine superiority to construct a bigger-than-life personality that acts as both a kind of mediator and an obstruction. Phil Bagust contends that Irwin’s style “deliberately interposes a human adventurer/protagonist between the viewer and ‘nature’” (219). Much of the interference arises from Irwin’s emphasis on danger. Vivanco argues that in the so-called “‘dangerized world’ . . . where communal spaces . . . are redefined as risky and fear-provoking” by televised eco-adventures, Irwin’s show “juxtapose[es] the ongoing redefinition of certain spaces and types of people as dangerous, with a more familiar, even nostalgic, version of danger—nature as a dangerous and exotic Other, as a site where humans can experience true, unmediated, and politically unproblematic adventure” (9). As such, *The Crocodile Hunter* and shows like it commodify both nature *and* risk and sell nature *as* risk while simultaneously perpetuating the concept of nature as a place for “true adventure.” If, as Michalis Lianos and Mary Douglas suggest,

“sensitivity to threat is built by cultural means,” the adventures of Irwin and his ilk are participating in “a circular process of amplification [in which] the consciousness of a dangerous society enhances that of a dangerous material world” (261). Irwin’s cry of “Danger! Danger! Danger!” privileges the danger, decontextualizes the encounter, and collapses the potential outcomes into a single ontological fact.

The other significant subgenre of natural history television programming that is popular on American television is the (sometimes *very* loosely) nature-based “reality” show. Animal Planet’s current programming lineup includes a long list of reality shows, including *Hillbilly Handfishin’*, *Pit Bulls and Parolees*, *Pit Boss*, *Gator Boys*, *Swamp Wars*, *Snake Man of Appalachia*, *Tanked*, *Whale Wars*, *Bad Dog!*, *Louisiana Lockdown*, *Dog Park*, *Rattlesnake Republic*, *It’s Me or the Dog*, *My Extreme Animal Phobia*, *American Stuffers*, *Law on the Border*, and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*. Other series like *Infested!*, *Killer Outbreaks*, *I’m Alive*, *I Shouldn’t Be Alive*, *Fatal Attractions*, and *Monsters Inside Me* offer horror stories of people who narrowly survived—or didn’t—close encounters of the critter kind. Animal Planet’s prime-time lineup leaves little room for traditional nature documentaries; instead, in the wake of its rebranding under the slogan “Surprisingly Human” in 2010, the network shifted to its focus to selling spectacle. From the excessive melodrama of reality shows to the gross-out footage of *Monsters Inside Me* to the life-and-death stories of victims and survivors, Animal Planet has completely changed its focus to capitalize on popular television trends. The National Geographic Channel, or Nat Geo, made a similar decision, which is reflected in their current program offerings: *Wicked Tuna*, *Doomsday Preppers*, *Diggers*, *Lords of*

*War, Mudcats, Inside Combat Rescue, Alaska State Troopers, and Border Wars*. Even Nat Geo Wild, the spinoff channel that focuses on animal-related shows, offers a wide range of reality shows that make up at least 50 percent of their total offerings, including *Alpha Dogs, Animal Intervention, Dog Whisperer, Fish Tank Kings, Outback Wrangler, The Incredible Dr. Pol, Swamp Men, and Animal Underworld*. These shows tend to take up most of the network's prime-time time slots, while more standard documentary fare runs earlier in the day. The shows that *do* feature animals tend to emphasize spectacle and danger by focusing on unique behaviors, predation, predators, and animals who pose a danger to humans because of their venom or other hazards.

One show that combines the allure of charismatic animals with the drama of reality television is Animal Planet's enormously successful *Meerkat Manor* (2005-2008), which chronicles a meerkat clan's struggle for survival in the Kalahari desert. The series, narrated by Bill Nighy in the UK and Sean Astin and Stockard Channing in the U.S., features Flower, the matriarch of a large clan, and her extended family, the Whiskers. Beyond the appeal of the meerkats' cuteness—after all, the filmmakers chose to follow a clan of meerkats rather than the less charismatic warthog or hyena—the show pulls no punches when it comes to emotional manipulation of viewers, using a combination of music, narration, and close-ups of big, expressive meerkat eyes to create emotional connections. The series relies on extensive anthropomorphism; each member of the clan is given a name, and their activities and motivations are explained to the viewer as if the meerkats are human. The goal is to create an emotional connection between viewers and the Whiskers clan; to do so, the filmmakers create identification

between the meerkats and human viewers by establishing consubstantiality. The meerkats' behavior, emotions, and motivations are familiar to the audience; however, how much of the narrator's "insights" and explanations are accurate and how much is fictionalized is unclear. Everyday activities like grooming and foraging are generally left out, and the series focuses on rivalries within the clan, dramatic encounters with other clans, and harrowing encounters with various predators. As a result, the Whiskers clan's existence seems to be an unending succession of drama, adventure, in-fighting, and narrow escapes. This unrealistic representation is consistent with how natural history programming tends to depict nature as a place of unceasing imminent danger and nonstop thrills. *Meerkat Manor* is, in many ways, the epitome of the modern natural history television series: highly anthropomorphized, overly dramatic, and more than willing to sacrifice any semblance of realism in favor of pathos.

### **Closing**

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the new millennium, nature films grew into maturity, becoming increasingly sophisticated as filmmaking in general evolved. Driven by the desire to prolong life, postpone death and loss, and stop time, modern natural history filmmaking sought to enable viewers to look, see, access knowledge, and find meaning in the wake of the shared trauma of World War II. In the early years of television, science shows in general and nature documentaries in particular did for television what nature films had done for films fifty years prior: lending television an air of respectability in the face of anxiety about the emergent technology's

potential for negative effects. Nature films made during the Cold-War era, particularly those distributed by Disney, emphasized “family values” and sought to find justification for particular worldviews in the patterns of nature. Suburban families saw their lives reflected in *Nature’s Half-Acre*, and Marlin Perkins, Marty Stouffer, and Sir David Attenborough, in turn, took up the mantle of being nature’s ambassador, interpreter, and spokesperson. Modern nature films encourage conservation while simultaneously being called upon to sell the fanciest televisions. CGI enhancements, nature showmen, and the strange and dramatic unreality of “reality” television are the hallmarks of the nature documentary as we know it today.

## CHAPTER IV

### ‘ART WITH WORK TO DO’:

#### AN X-RATED RHETORIC OF ECOPORNOGRAPHY

For ecosee . . . the environmental dilemma is not just a political/ecological crisis about the protection of the environment but a dilemma of representation, a dilemma of rhetorical and visual-rhetorical choice.

—Sidney I. Dobrin and Sean Morey, *Ecosee*

On one hand, we screen moving images to lose ourselves vicariously in the bigger, more glamorous, more vivid world we see and hear on the screen; on the other hand, we screen moving images to reencounter our own immediate sensuality in that more vivid world.

—Linda Williams, *Screening Sex*

On computer desktops, on walls, in calendars, and on television, images of nature serve a variety of functions in a culture plagued with anxieties about climate change, habitat destruction, and species loss. Such images can assuage some of these fears, provide visual evidence of threatened landscapes and animals, offer an escape from the urban jungle or the endless maze of the subdivision, and even campaign for conservation and environmentalism by reminding us of what we stand to lose. And yet, for all their positive aspects, images of nature are the sharpest of double-edged swords. Often stripped of all context and PhotoShopped or edited into a form designed to offer the most appeal, visual representations of nature frequently mislead viewers and offer nothing more than placebos. While they may ease fears about the various ways we are damaging our environment, they can reduce the perceived urgency of change by implying that conditions are less dire than they really are. Thanks to digital manipulation, many

images are pure simulacra, “copies” of an original that does not exist. Even when the images *are* minimally manipulated representations of “real” places or animals, they are still mediated, and can easily mask the very imminent danger that threatens the landscapes or animals. Nature photographs, as ecocritic Joy Williams argues, have become something of a problem.

When we speak or write about visual representations of nature and the ways audiences consume these images, we often find ourselves speaking in terms of power, objectification, politics, decontextualization, commodification, and simulation. These are familiar concerns for theorists who analyze pornography. While it may seem that pornography studies would have little to offer ecocriticism and environmental visual rhetoric, a few critics have noted that these apparently disparate fields share not only many of the same concerns but also similar ethical concerns, methodologies, and discourses. Beyond former ad exec-turned-deep ecologist Jerry Mander’s felicitous coining of the phrase “ecopornography” in 1972, ecocritics such as Bill McKibben, Richard Mabey, Knighton, Millet, and Welling have analyzed the ways in which our understanding of how nature is represented in our visual culture can be informed by pornography studies. Their arguments synthesize a variety of related fields: ecocriticism and nature writing; feminist theory; rhetoric and visual rhetoric; postcolonialism; and studies in film, culture, media, and pornography. At the intersection of these discourses lies important answers to the pressing questions of just *how much* of a problem nature photographs have become and why those involved in environmentalism and

conservation need to understand the part ecoporn plays in how our culture conceptualizes its role in the environment.

This chapter argues that ecopornography is a rhetorical process of decontextualization and recontextualization that results in the objectification of its subjects and a profound disconnection between the viewer and the real-world referents that the film claims to represent. Ecoporn also tends to reduce viewers' contact with nature to its most sensational and thrilling moments. Like human pornography, ecoporn creates idealized replications of these moments that are designed to arouse good feelings in the viewer and substitute for true engagement. Despite its ability to educate audiences about the wonders of the natural world, ecoporn's propensity to create identifications between viewers and decontextualized images rather than real animals or habitats, as well as its tendency to mask urgent environmental and conservation concerns with sentimentality and spectacle, set it in opposition to environmentalism and conservation.

### **Mander and the Origins of Ecopornography**

Though we may be only now beginning to understand the extent of the overlapping discourses between human pornography and images of nature, the term "ecopornography" dates back at least forty years to Mander's use of it to describe visual representations of nature in advertising circa 1972. Mander, a neo-Luddite, left his career as a successful San Francisco advertising executive to become an activist and found the Public Media Center, a non-profit advertising agency that works only for other non-profits, such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Planned Parenthood, and the



Sierra Club (Kubiak). In “EcoPornography: One Year and Nearly a Billion Dollars Later Advertising Owns Ecology,” Mander analyzes the Jekyll-and-Hyde-style fractured identities of manufacturing corporations and utility companies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He argues that recognizing the difference between a company’s “image” and its “identity”—the former being the public’s perception, and the latter referring to the reality behind it—is a matter of “life and death.” Advertising has an enormous effect on the way consumers perceive a company, often obscuring questionable and even unethical practices. Mander’s disillusionment with his own complicity in the duplicity of the advertising industry led to his resignation.

Power companies, in particular, were—and are still—guilty of “greenwashing” their corporate images with half-truths and claiming that industry will “save” the environment. Mander notes that “during 1969, public utilities spent nearly \$300 million on advertising, *more than eight times* what they spend on research, all the while proclaiming *in the ads* their feats of anti-pollution research” (47, emphasis in original). These ads encourage consumers to use *more* power, rather than less, and combine slogans such as “We Put a Smile on Mother Nature’s Face” (used by Pacific Gas & Electric) with bucolic scenes of families playing near a crystal-clear lake. The ads imply that not only are there no negative consequences to unconstrained energy usage (despite the burgeoning energy crisis that had begun to make headlines at the time), but that consumers’ power usage would have a *positive* effect on the environment by helping to fund “environmental research.” Other ads, such as those run by the Westinghouse Corporation, tout the benefits of the “reliable, low-cost . . . neat, clean, safe” nuclear

power plant (Mander 47, ellipsis in original). Mander describes one ad that features “a beautiful girl sunbathing upon a lake which has one of those dome-shaped neo-modernistic nuclear plants in view. ‘Nuclear power plants are good neighbors,’ says the ad” (47). Another ad from a power company shows a class photo of high school students in front of their school, alongside the headline “Going to school exposes these kids to more radiation than they get from the nuclear power plant.” The ad is predicated upon the pro-nuclear power argument that since the sun is a form of nuclear power, nuclear power is natural and safe—and power plants emit less radiation than the sun. While this may be true of everyday operations, the ad does not address the potential threat of a so-called “nuclear excursion”—the consequences of which became all too evident after the 1979 Three-Mile Island disaster and Chernobyl in 1986.

Concerns about safety are the subject of a third—and much different—ad for the Crouse Group of Companies-Nuclear Energy Services Division. It asks, “Why is a beautiful woman like a nuclear power plant?” The ad features a line drawing of a slim woman wearing a diaphanous negligee and bedroom slippers, her eyes cast demurely downward. The ad answers the question by stating that the “beautiful woman” gets plenty of regular rest, visits her doctor when she is unwell, and keeps herself fit. The odd analogy between the woman and a nuclear power plant is that the Crouse Group maintains strict adherence to codes and specifications for their plant and provides routine maintenance, therefore keeping the plant at its peak performance. Feminist critic Jane Caputi notes that “The beautiful kept woman in the ad is presented as a source of sexual and reproductive power, which is likened to cosmic power, that men can control and put

to work for them,” adding that the ad is evidence of “patriarchal culture’s efforts to dominate and control nature” (qtd. in Fire Ant). The woman’s submissive look and passive body language present her as subjugated to the male gaze; likewise, the potentially volatile power plant—by virtue of the analogy drawn between them—is also subjugated in the service of (hu)mankind. The pro-nuclear power ads of the 1970s emphasize the supposed “safety” and “superiority” of the plants and encourage consumers to use more power, all while tiptoeing around consumers’ fears about accidents and ignoring the possible damage to the environment.

In addition to his assertion that utility companies are greenwashing their corporate images, Mander has two other main arguments in his article. First, he argues that “advertising is destroying the word ‘ecology’ and perhaps all understanding of the concept” (48). As an example, Mander cites an advertisement by Pacific Gas & Electric that advocates “a balance between ecology and energy”; as Mander notes, however, “ecology” refers not to a single *thing* but a “science of the interrelatedness of *everything*” (48, emphasis in original). PG&E’s advertising campaign attempts to separate humans (including our power needs and sources) from ecology, leading consumers to think of humans as unconnected to our environment. At the same time, Mander contends that the near-billion dollars that power, oil, chemical, and auto companies, industrial associations, and anti-pollution industries spent on advertising in 1969 alone, combined with conflicting government rhetoric, effectively drown out the voices of environmentalists and conservationists whose appeals are largely predicated upon humans feeling as though we are a part of, not separate from, our environment.

This sense of division leads to Mander's other claim: that what he refers to as "human chauvinism"—the belief that humans have natural superiority and dominion over the Earth—enables us to believe we must "manage" our planet and its resources, rather than acting as though we are a part of the fabric of ecology. Mander attempts to discredit the concept of "managing the environment" by arguing that man cannot be divided from his environment, despite the near-billion dollars of advertising that try to claim the contrary. As long as humans believe they have (and deserve) power over their environment, this attitude can seriously undermine conservation programs.

In our contemporary visual culture, the concept of ecopornography has expanded far beyond Mander's original use of the term to refer to the greenwashed corporate images of utility companies. "Ecoporn" has been used by modern ecocritics to characterize the types of overly idealized images of nonhuman animals and landscapes that we encounter on a daily basis. While greenwashing continues to be a common practice in advertising, it is only one aspect of the much-larger challenge that ecoporn presents to environmental and conservation programs.

### **Decontextualization and the Commodification of Desire**

Many critics in both environmental visual rhetoric and pornography studies have considered the motives behind decontextualization of images of nature and humans and the consequences (both intentional and unintentional) of removing context from these visual representations. Decontextualization is a rhetorical act; to decontextualize something is to attempt to separate it from its inherent political, ideological, and

historical contexts for specific rhetorical purposes. An author intent on persuading his or her audience appeals to a particular value or set of values that the author deems most effective at “moving” the audience and aligning author, audience, and value. To enhance the likelihood of those appeals being successful, the author may simultaneously frame the argument in such a way as to control the parameters of the discourse. By doing so, the author acts as a gatekeeper or filter, limiting access to the rhetorical exchange to enhance his or her own position. Decontextualization is a part of this gatekeeping. By filtering out contradictory or potentially distracting contexts, the author increases the probability of his or her argument successfully moving the audience. Having separated the thing from its contexts, the author can *re*-contextualize it by identifying it with a particular set of discourses.

Decontextualization and recontextualization are rhetorical acts that every rhetor engages in to varying degrees. While these moves perform the cultural work of interpreting events and images, they also necessarily create “blind spots” even when the author or speaker has the best of intentions. In *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric*, M. Jimmie Killingsworth offers the example of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Douglass begins his autobiography by recounting his separation from his mother and his subsequent lack of emotion at her death. In order to appeal “to the humanity of his primarily white, northern audience,” Douglass emphasizes the inhumanity of slavery through “great pathos and powerful irony” in his narrative (30, 31). As an author intent on moving his audience to oppose the South and slavery, Douglass contextualized his testimony in terms of lack and absence, filtering out other

discourses that might distract from his argument. Killingsworth calls attention to African-American feminist critic bell hooks's contention that even as he "intended to impress upon the consciousness of white readers the cruelty of that system of racial domination which separated black families, black mothers from their children," Douglass "devalued" black womanhood and black motherhood by excluding from his argument any recognition of how much his mother valued his life, as evidenced by her determination to travel twelve miles to see her son, under cover of darkness and threat of death if caught (qtd. in Killingsworth 31). The exigence for Douglass's narrative was not to call attention to black motherhood, but to its absence as part of the cruelty of slavery. Acknowledging his mother's sacrifice was, therefore, removed from the context of the autobiography.

An analysis of Douglass's rhetorical choices about how to ground the arguments in his autobiography is illustrative of the many ways decontextualization functions in public discourse. Public debate over highly contentious and emotionally charged subjects like slavery, abortion, the death penalty, censorship, and gun ownership are frequently battles not only over ideology but also who controls the parameters of the discourse.<sup>8</sup> These gatekeepers can then recontextualize the debate with discourses that

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<sup>8</sup> A notable recent example of an attempt to control the parameters of public and political discourse is the furor over PPACA's requirement that health insurance provided by employers cover birth control expenses. Who could testify before Congress on the subject became as contentious and public as the dispute over birth control itself. Many were incensed when congressional committees and lists of those who would be allowed to testify before them excluded women almost entirely, while they welcomed testimony from men representing conservative religious organizations and companies who objected to the requirement. The purpose of the decontextualization was to reframe the debate as a dispute over religious freedom; as such, the "religious freedom" rhetoric largely overwhelmed the concerns being raised about women's body sovereignty and the importance of including women's issues in health care reform.

are most advantageous to their purposes.<sup>9</sup> The nebulous and subjective concepts of “pornography” and “obscenity” are no exception. Any attempt to define pornography and make “clarity out of ambiguity” is, perforce, an attempt to control the discourse surrounding the term (Berger et al. 14). Because pornography is comprised of competing discourses and is—as feminist critic Catharine A. MacKinnon argues—an action, or a variety of actions, rather than an object or series of objects, it is far more useful to consider what pornography *does* rather than what it is or isn’t.

Most critics agree that pornography tends to decontextualize its subjects, but it is evident from a study of the history of pornography that the rhetorical act of decontextualization also takes place in the public debate surrounding it. Ronald J. Berger et al. argue that “issues of gender are generally absent or excluded from the traditional anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions that continue to dominate popular opinion and political debate” (31). In their study of feminist perspectives on pornography, Berger et al. note that morality and censorship, rather than gender, tend to be at the center of public and political discourse. Perhaps one significant reason for this exclusion is that government commissions on pornography (such as the 1970 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography and the 1985 Meese Commission) were

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<sup>9</sup> Another example is the public debate over fast-food chain Chik-fil-A’s vocal opposition to equal rights for LGBTQ individuals. When some called for a boycott of the chain because its profits are used to fund anti-gay rights organizations and ultraconservative political candidates, many who support Chik-fil-A sought to ground the debate as being about freedom of speech and religion, attempting to muddy the waters and separate the controversy from the thornier question of human rights. As with the discourse surrounding birth control coverage, by framing the debate in terms of freedom of speech and religion garners more support than engaging in a debate over human rights, as most recent polls—as well as the passage of legalization of same-sex marriage in a number of states—show a definite shift in public support for equal rights for the LGBTQ community.

staffed and led almost entirely by men who listened to testimony given almost exclusively by men. Likewise, public discourse about pornography is often controlled by religious and civic leaders, the majority of whom are male. As a result, issues relating to gender are simply not a significant part of the conversation. The 1970 commission concluded that “(1) there was no empirical evidence that [explicit sexual materials] played any role in causing sex crimes or other criminal behavior, (2) that established patterns of sexual behavior were not altered by exposure to such materials, and (3) that fears about negative effects were unwarranted” (Berger et al. 23). Though the commission’s conclusions were based upon questionable evidence and methodology, its findings—and laws based on them—stood for more than a decade.

Lynne Segal argues that “it is now customary to identify three distinct positions on pornography: *liberal*, *moral right* and *feminist*” (6, emphasis in original). While the 1970 commission heavily favored the liberal viewpoint, the Meese Commission, established by President Ronald Reagan with the express purpose of overturning the 1970 commission’s report, was representative of the moral right. The Meese Commission was the vanguard of a concerted nationwide effort to find “more effective ways in which the spread of pornography could be constrained” (qtd. in Berger et al. 25). The commission, whose members were hand-picked by the Attorney General, were strongly opposed to the production, distribution, and use of pornography. According to Susan Stewart, the commission was comprised of twelve public officials, including a Commonwealth Attorney, a female doctor and professor of medicine specializing in the field of sex aggression, a city councilperson who was “active in scouting,” a



psychologist/radio host from Focus on the Family, the editor of *Women's Day* magazine, a priest, a law professor, and a child-abuse specialist, among others (171). The commission held hearings around the country on preselected topics and welcomed testimony from a variety of anti-pornography organizations and individuals, while those who testified in support of pornography (or against censorship) were met with enmity, discourtesy, and censure.

While the commission included four women, their official biographies reveal some insight on the commission's perspective on gender. Other than the woman who was a doctor and professor of medicine, the other three women on the commission are described in terms of their marital and procreative statuses: "Mrs. Cusack and her husband, Joseph, a Senior Engineer with Motorola, have three grown children and remain active members of their church and community" (qtd. in Stewart 171). As Stewart notes, none of the male members' biographies include information about their families. The inclusion of the female members of the commission is legitimized by their participation in the "ideal" nuclear family structure and their acceptance of the patriarchal order. Cusack demonstrates why she was included in the commission with her contributions to the Report, including the following bit of imaginative fiction:

For 2500 years of western civilization, human sexuality and its expressions have been cherished as a private act between a loving couple committed to each other. This has created the strongest unit of society- the family. If our families become less wholesome, weaker, and less

committed to the fidelity that is their core, our entire society will weaken as well. (qtd. in Stewart 173)

According to Stewart, the commission was wholly committed to upholding the conservative belief that pornography represents “perversions” of a “natural” sexual practice that belongs “to married heterosexual couples engaging in sex for procreation.” To do so, the commission took upon itself the task of creating a “continuous and marginalized history for pornography” from Pompeii to the present, and positing “a naturalized sexuality at pornography's unrepresentable center” (Stewart 165).

Of the few women who testified before the commission, most were, as Stewart notes, former performers who renounced their participation in pornography, described themselves as “victims” of the industry, and now identified themselves as wives and mothers; their testimony, like the participation of the female members of the commission, deemed credible because of their adherence to the patriarchal system. For example, Linda Marchiano (billed as Linda Lovelace in the well-known film *Deep Throat*) testified to the “sexual coercion and moral decadence in the pornography industry.” Marchiano justified the commission’s crusade with her testimony that “pornography had harmed her relationship with her children and affected her ability to teach them proper moral values” (Berger et al. 26). On the other hand, Dottie Meyer, a *Penthouse* executive and former centerfold model, testified that she was “*not* a victim of so-called pornography” and that she had both a “traditional upbringing” and a “happy seventeen-year marriage” (qtd. in Berger et al. 26). Meyer, despite her defense of the pornography industry, framed her testimony in terms of the traditional feminine roles of

dutiful daughter and suburban wife and mother. Both Marchiano and Meyer grounded their arguments in their ability or inability to fulfill these roles, and as such were participants in a particular discourse about “proper” womanhood.

The single representative of the feminist anti-pornography movement at the New York hearings, Andrea Dworkin, who was—and is—one of pornography’s most vocal detractors, was sharply criticized by the commission, despite her anti-pornography stance. Unlike Marchiano and Meyer, Dworkin framed her testimony in terms of pornography’s role in the victimization of *all* women, rather than criticizing it “in terms of its impact on ‘family’ or ‘marriage’ or some other approved institution” (Berger et al. 27). The Meese commission co-opted feminist discourse about violence against women because these concerns were useful in its crusade against pornography, but its resistance to Dworkin’s testimony—because it was in defense of all women rather than those whose concerns were validated by marriage and family—belies a clear disingenuousness.

Both the 1970 commission and the Meese commission decontextualized pornography for specific rhetorical purposes. The former chose to exclude concerns about women’s issues in the interest of civil liberty; the latter dismissed those same concerns as being inconsequential to their anti-pornography agenda, except when they could be conveniently co-opted to support their moral crusade. At the same time, the Meese commission sought to define the discourse of pornography as a “moral” issue in which the private expression and exploration of sexuality was a public concern—and therefore subject to public debate; as Berger et al. note, many religious-conservatives

feel that “each of us is ‘his brother’s keeper’ and that ‘we do no one a service by taking the attitude that what others do is their own concern and not that of their neighbor’” (18). Meese Commission member Park Elliott Dietz wrote in the Report that all of the members of the commission had the strongest moral objections to “nearly every specimen of pornography,” adding that “these materials are themselves immoral, and to the extent that they encourage immoral behavior they exert a corrupting influence on the family and on the moral fabric of society” (qtd. in Stewart 176). Stewart notes that the commission’s recommendation that pornography be repressed is grounded “within the discourse not of ‘freedom,’ but of the law,” thereby circumventing the counterargument that censoring pornography violates the First Amendment (166). Understanding that many who had reservations about pornography would be reluctant to accept any position that so much as hinted at restricting freedom of speech, the commission sought to control the discourse. Stewart also notes that the commission disregarded reports of labor exploitation in the pornography industry in their zeal to condemn the immorality of “pleasure for its own sake”; the commission’s only labor-related concern was that pornography’s ostensible “message . . . that sexual pleasure and self-gratification are paramount . . . have the ability to seriously undermine our social fabric” by distracting people from proper “moral” work and family (175). The commission censored and censored those who resisted the commission’s attempts to decontextualize the debate and ground its discourse in “morality” rather than as an issue of free speech, individual autonomy, or even labor exploitation.

Public discourse about the environment, climate change, and conservation often follows a similar pattern of competing rhetorics. As with the anti-pornography and anti-censorship perspectives, the various environmentalist and anti-environmentalist positions are deeply invested in controlling the parameters of the debate. Climate-change deniers fight to frame the issue as questionable science and/or a liberal conspiracy theory in an effort to undermine the mounting evidence of humanity's negative impact on our environment. Others structure the discussion in terms of economics, setting up "environmentalism"—a term they use as both an overgeneralization and a pejorative—in opposition to "progress" and jobs. Under this model, you can have either jobs *or* responsible environmental laws, but not both, and anything that supposedly interferes with economic progress is tantamount to heresy. By establishing their pro-progress ethos as diametrically opposed to environmentalism, anti-environmentalists have created a kind of impasse during which not only are no new environmental protections passed but harmful programs, such as the recent Keystone XL pipeline project, are enacted despite widespread concerns. All of these rhetorical strategies, commonly utilized by energy companies and the politicians whose campaigns are financed by them, deliberately interfere with meaningful environmental reforms as environmentalists and developmentalists talk past each other.

Despite its frequent depiction as a monolithic entity, environmentalism is a diverse continuum that includes deep ecology, social ecology and eco-humanism, wilderness preservationists, eco-anarchists, and other groups. In *Ecospeak*, Killingsworth and Palmer contend that

As much as the environmental dilemma is a problem of ethics and epistemology, it is also a problem of discourse. Various proposals to resolve the crisis are put forth by different social groups with different sources and kinds of information, groups with divergent goals, methods, values, and epistemologies. All groups have a particular perspective and use a specialized language developed specifically to describe and stimulate the practices characteristic of their particular outlook on the world. (6)

Killingsworth and Palmer further argue that “for the rhetorical analyst, the intractability of social problems like the environmental dilemma is due to the inability of concerned discourse communities to form adequate identifications through effective appeals” (7). The seeming impotence of environmentalism in its inability to either agree on an approach or establish meaningful consubstantiality with the general public is one of the reasons Shellenberger and Nordhaus declared the movement dead. Like the anti-pornography feminists and the anti-pornography moralists who all want pornography suppressed or banned, the various schools of thought within environmentalism disagree on both the process and what the final result might look like. The atrophied language of the environmental debate—what Killingsworth and Palmer have felicitously termed *ecospeak* after the *Newspeak* vocabulary featured in Orwell’s *1984*—functions as “a way of framing arguments that stops thinking and inhibits social cooperation rather than extending thinking and promoting cooperation through communication” (9). Ecospeak,

combined with developmentalists' successful influence over the parameters of environmental discourse, have resulted in a rhetorical quagmire.

Anti-pornography activists tend to frame their rhetoric as a series of ethically based binaries comprised of characteristic terminology that, like ecospeak, disables meaningful dialogue and reduces complex social, political, ethical, and historical discourses into a simplistic “good vs. evil” model. The typical anti-pornography argument invokes terms such as “moral” and “natural” versus “immoral,” “unnatural,” “deviant,” and “obscene.” Those who use these highly subjective terms do so without regard to their subjectivity; as noted previously, the frequent (mis)use of the term “natural” in regard to sex requires a fictionalized and imaginative historical premise that naturalizes the culturally constructed narrative of human sexuality. As with ecospeak, the way in which these terms are used fails to either interrogate them critically or create identification with discourse communities that do not share the ideologies on which the naturalizations and binaries are based. As Killingsworth and Palmer note, the use of “‘stark alignment’ is rarely a matter of historical necessity . . . but rather a device of discourse used by one side or the other (often both) to mobilize forces against a palpable villain” (10). The “white hat/black hat” rhetorical strategy is rarely conducive to the “cooperation through communication” that Killingsworth and Palmer see as one of the desirable outcomes of rhetoric.

The complexities of the feminist critique of pornography are a more useful model for an analysis of ecopornography than the myopic prudery and revisionist history of the moral right and the “consenting-adults” leniency of liberalism. Feminists have long

been divided about the production and consumption of pornography. Many feminists condemn it *in toto* as perpetuating the victimization and oppression of women, male domination, male-centered sex, and compulsory heterosexuality. The feminist anti-pornography position argues that pornography institutionalizes masculine dominance and feminine passivity, as well as “sexual scripts that promote sexual coercion as normal behavior and as a source of sexual pleasure for men and women” (Berger et al. 35). Pornography tends to represent women as perpetually aroused and ready for sex; for anti-pornography feminists, this misrepresentation is a key part of rape culture.<sup>10</sup> Anti-pornography feminists see a direct causal relationship between this type of portrayal of women and the myth that “women secretly want to be raped, that women eventually relax and enjoy rape, and that men have urgent sexual needs which prevent them from controlling their behavior” (Berger et al. 36). The supposed link between pornography and violence is a foundational precept in anti-pornography feminism. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin argues that pornography “lies not only behind all forms of female oppression, but behind exploitation, murder and brutality throughout human history” (qtd. in Segal 8). Attempting to control discourse through definition, Dworkin and MacKinnon famously defined pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words” in their unsuccessful attempt to draft feminist anti-pornography legislation (qtd. in Segal 8). Had it been successfully passed, the so-called Minneapolis Ordinance would have established

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<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all references to “pornography” in this dissertation are to legally produced heterosexual pornography that complies with the federal laws of the United States. Other types of pornography, such as lesbian, gay, group-sex, and some illegal forms of pornography, will be discussed later in this chapter and will be specifically indicated as such.



pornography as inherently harmful and made it possible for individuals to seek financial compensation from the producers and distributors of pornography if they could prove it had caused them harm. As Segal notes, “the question of proof of harm . . . lies at the heart of feminist anti-pornography campaigning” (8).

More liberal feminists, on the other hand, tend to oppose censorship or suppression of pornography and argue that pornography can be educational and liberating, especially for sexually repressed women and sexual minorities. They also contend that the anti-pornography feminist position is based largely upon overgeneralizations, oversimplifications, and lack of persuasive evidence that pornography is a causative factor in violence against women. According to Berger et al., anti-censorship feminists deny that pornography is universally victimizing to women—a viewpoint that seems to have grown out of the radical contention that *all* sex is rape, “even if it feels nice because every man has power and privilege over women, whether he uses it blatantly or subtly” (41). Dworkin asserts that “intercourse becomes a means by which men dominate women ‘inside’ their bodies,” adding that “women are inevitably exploited and vulnerable because the act inherently involves entry, penetration, and occupation” (Berger et al. 41).

Anti-censorship feminists counter that anti-pornography feminists have taken a critique of a violent subset of pornography, expanded it to conflate sex with violence, and overgeneralized it to the point that “all pornographic representation [is] both metaphorically and literally violent” in their assessment (Berger et al. 41). Despite Dworkin’s claim that pornography is the cause of all forms of female oppression,

exploitation, murder and brutality throughout human history, supporting evidence is questionable at best. Segal notes that numerous studies “reported *no* antisocial changes in sexual behaviour after short or long exposure to sexually explicit material” (9, emphasis in original). In fact, in more nuanced studies that differentiated between types of sexually explicit materials, results indicated that “exposure to non-violent pornography lowers aggression levels and increases subjects’ sociability,” and had no effect on subjects’ attitudes toward rape (Segal 12). These findings undermine Dworkin and MacKinnon’s claims that pornography is always harmful and causes violence against women. In another study, which specifically measured subjects’ responses to depictions of violence against women, the researchers concluded that “the calloused attitudes to rape, which may in certain cases follow exposure to violent pornography, may not so much be *caused* by the exposure to pornography as strengthened by it”; the researchers further suggest that “it is the violence, rather than the sexual explicitness, which is mainly responsible for any increase in aggressiveness” (Segal 13). As with many studies, there remains a great deal of controversy over these and other findings based on concerns over the methodology, the limitations of the study, the differences between laboratory conditions and the world at large, and the complexities of accounting for the relationship between reality and fantasy. Meanwhile, the relative value of the personal testimony of individuals who claim to have been coerced into participating in or watching pornography is also very much up for debate. While the former could result in criminal charges against individuals and the latter indicate an abusive relationship in

which being forced to watch pornography is a symptom rather than a cause, anecdotal evidence is insufficient grounds to pass judgment on pornography as a whole.

What might be more telling, according to Segal, is that the most conservative states, where pornography is most restricted and/or deemed socially unacceptable, are also the same states where women are most disadvantaged in terms of social, political, and economic equality—which seems to undermine the claim that pornography is a major (if not *the* major) cause of discrimination against women (18). The positive correlation between states with more liberal attitudes and social tolerance and equal opportunities for women would seem to suggest that the oppression of women has far more to do with systemic sexism and religious conservatism than the proliferation and availability of pornographic materials.

According to Frances Ferguson, both Dworkin and MacKinnon argue that it is more worthwhile to consider what pornography *does* rather than what it *is* (“Pornography,” 670). After all, as Angela Carter contends, pornography “can never be art for art’s sake” because “it is always art with work to do” (12). If the “work” of pornography is to a) educate the inexperienced and b) to arouse the audience, perhaps the more intellectually fruitful question for a rhetorician is, how does pornography do what it does? Pornography creates a fantasy built around *Schaulust*—the powerful pleasure of looking. To perpetuate the fantasy, in which the actors’ *raison d’être* is to have sex “as frequently and as ingeniously as possible,” as Carter notes, decontextualization (and recontextualization) are essential rhetorical moves by the filmmakers (13). Pornography is mythic; it deals in false universals and unrealistic

expectations. Carter contends that “pornography, like marriage and the fictions of romantic love, assists the process of false universalising. Its excesses belong to that timeless, locationless area outside history, outside geography” (12). In the world, expressions of sexuality are infused with a wide range of political, ideological, and historical contexts. The fantasy world of pornography, on the other hand, comes close to achieving self-containment. Issues of class, politics, religion, race, and even gender are excluded from most mainstream commercial pornography. The decontextualized pornographic body is a blank canvas upon which the producers can map a different set of contexts and discourses that serves the rhetorical purpose of creating myth and fantasy.

In the fantasy of pornography, the contexts are basic, the scenarios simplistic. Both men and women are always ready and willing to engage in sex, anytime, in any place. The plot—if there is one—is centered around one objective: getting the actors to have sex, because that is what consumers of pornography want. Everything else is superfluous and can only interfere with the desired end result. As Carter contends, “Pornography reinforces the false universals of sexual archetypes because it denies, or doesn’t have time for, or can’t find room for, or, because of its underlying ideology, ignores, the social context in which sexual activity takes place” (16). These “false universals”—and the fantasy they inhabit—are achieved through decontextualization and recontextualization, which in turn enable objectification, exploitation, dehumanization, and voyeurism.

One of the few ecocritics who have theorized about the similarities between pornography and visual representations of nature is contemporary novelist Lydia Millet.

Her short stories, essays, and novels, such as *How the Dead Dream* (2008) and her young adult-oriented eco-fantasy series *The Dissenters*, often explore the materialism of modern human culture and our feelings of disconnection from our environment. Millet, who has a master's degree in environmental policy from Duke University, has the unusual qualifications of being both a former copy editor at *Hustler* magazine and employee of the Natural Resources Defense Council. Millet argues in her essay "Die, Baby Harp Seal!" that the calendars and coffee-table books produced by environmental and conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, and the Audubon Society bear a striking resemblance to the photo spreads she used to help produce for *Hustler*. Millet describes glossy photographs of "tarted up" landscapes and "cute" animals who look "straight at the camera with big, dark, inviting pools of eyes" (146). These images of grizzly cubs, two albatrosses with interlocked beaks, a polar bear, and mother-and-baby baboons and koalas evoke in Millet memories of *Hustler* models "named Tammi and Lynda, buck naked and intertwined, long tresses artfully arranged to frame obscenely augmented breasts, who also hugged each other—though not so cutely—and looked straight at the camera with big, dark, inviting pools of eyes" (146). Millet argues that the landscapes, the animals, and the models are equally objects of desire for the viewer: submissive, subjugated, gratifying—a voyeur's delight.

Though she does not use rhetoric terms like "context," "decontextualization," and "recontextualization," Millet's description of how, as copy editor, she used to write "girl tags" for the models in the magazine is an example of how recontextualization works in pornography. According to Millet, girl tags are "lines of loopy, babyish script,

ostensibly the models' own, scrawled over their Coppertone-silicone bodies in a vacuous and beckoning voice" (146-7). These "girl tags" enhance the viewer's experience by recontextualizing the image and making the model as idealized and ready to be possessed by the viewer as possible. As an example of real "girl tag," Millet offers one she wrote for a jungle-themed photo spread: "*Prrr . . . yours to maul. Luv xxx Tammi*" (147). Millet does not offer an example of an analog to the "girl tag" from the nature calendars and coffee-table books she decries, but it is a simple exercise to find an example of one such "nature tag" and draw some conclusions about the rhetorical move of excluding real context and substitute faux context in these tags.

Take, for example, the brief "bio" of a blonde, blue-eyed *Playboy* model: "Jenny likes long walks on the beach, tequila shots, and dancing all night!" Like the "girl tags" Millet once penned, the *Playboy* bio is a rhetorical move that helps transform the real model into the fantasy object. Jenny's "hobbies" are designed to appeal to the average *Playboy* consumer. She does not, of course, like campaigning for the Paycheck Fairness Act, working as a personal-safety escort for women going into Planned Parenthood, or marching with sexual assault victims in a "Take Back the Night" rally. Absent is the politics, history, and ideologies of the real world, replaced by a simple and gratifying description "without social cost [that satiates] by providing objects for fantasy without making uncomfortable demands on the subject" (Millet 147).

Compare the girl tag or *Playboy* bio to this photo caption from a nature calendar: "This female osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) makes her home in the safety of Yellowstone National Park." Both the *Playboy* bio and the caption replace the complex political and

cultural contexts of an image with a reductive and simplified version that serves a specific rhetorical purpose. In the case of the female model, the substituted context is carefully crafted to appeal to the audience's expectations and desires; in order for the model to serve (in every sense of the word) her function as the "ideal" woman, she must be decontextualized and remade. She is photographed intimately, as if by a lover, her secrets revealed for his or her eyes only—but her "secrets" are an illusion. Both human pornography and ecoporn conceal what they purport to reveal.

In the second example, the female osprey pictured in a "North American Birds of Prey" calendar has undergone a similar transformation. The photograph of the osprey, taken in close-up so that the details of her markings may be enjoyed, is equally intimate; like the female model, her secrets are supposedly revealed by the camera and the caption. The "secret" revealed in the caption is her genus and species, as if taxonomy was the key to knowing this bird and her mysteries. Though the caption may assure the audience that the osprey finds safe harbor in Yellowstone, that substituted context is meant to serve the same purpose as the description of the aforementioned model. The images in the calendar are intended to give pleasure and enjoyment to the audience. To do so, they must be decontextualized. The osprey may be technically "protected" within the boundaries of Yellowstone, but the species' dwindling numbers reveal unpleasant truths about the long-term effects of pesticide use and how their location within the borders of the park is no guarantee of security, as the effects of climate change, habitat destruction, and pesticides hardly stop at the park's borders. The introduction of lake trout to Yellowstone Lake and the resulting decline in the population of cutthroat trout

has caused osprey nesting near the lake to be “generally unsuccessful” at reproducing (National Park Service). Bird populations, nesting patterns, and reproduction are frequently indicators of an area’s environmental health—but that crucial context is excluded from the calendar picture of the female osprey. The osprey in the picture is the “ideal” raptor that consumers of the calendar expect, with a six-foot wingspan, talons, sharp beak, and the piercing eyes of a predator. There is no room on the page for invasive species, declining trout populations, or nesting seasons that come and go without hatchlings. McKibben argues that

How can there really be a shortage of whooping cranes when you’ve seen a thousand images of them, seen ten times more images than there are actually whooping cranes left in the wild? We’re rarely shown a photograph of the empty trees where there are no baboons anymore; whatever few baboons remain are dutifully pursued until they’re captured on film, and even if all the captions are about their horrid plight, the essential message of the picture remains: baboons. (“Curbing” 20)

Some ecologists and photographers have suggested that a new ethic for nature photography is required—one in which photographs include evidence of habitat destruction or climate change, or perhaps a drastic rethinking of the process by which editors and producers obtain nature photographs or film footage.

Millet is not the only critic to draw comparisons between human pornography and visual representations of nature. In “Ecoporn and the Manipulation of Desire,” Knighton’s focus is still photographs of nature. Both Millet and Knighton use the term



“pinup” to describe nature photographs that appear in calendars and glossy magazines. Though his essay is noticeably undertheorized and oversimplified—and he seems to imply that he originated the term “ecoporn”—Knighton offers some insights into the ways in which consumerism affects images of nature. According to Knighton, pornography “manipulates desire, taints it with consumerism, and misdirects passion away from reality toward an inanimate object. Worst of all, it mutates a living, breathing human being into an inanimate object in the eye of the beholder” (167). That manipulation includes the decontextualization and recontextualization of the original model or landscape or animal. Our responses to particular images become disciplined. Knighton contends that “the intention of most landscape photography is to appeal to, even seduce, the beholder with an image removed from its physical context, amplified into a commodity by technique” (168). Our consumer culture permits—even encourages—us to think of both models and nature as objects and commodities rather than living beings and ecosystems. Through decontextualization and objectification, they become dehumanized and devalued, and as such are easily exploitable.

MacKinnon’s anti-pornography argument is centered around her contention that “pornography is a systematic practice of exploitation and subordination based on sex which differentially harms women” (qtd. in Ferguson, *Pornography* 34). In this context, exploitation, as (mis)use for one’s own advantage, is enabled by the objectification and dehumanization or devaluing of the model or actor. Through the rhetorical moves of decontextualization and recontextualization, the model or actor is often denied his or her inherent value as a human being and assigned a use-value based on utility. Even more

insidiously, this devaluation denies the intrinsic worth of a whole person and instead reduces the model or actor to a collection of “valuable,” commodified parts that can be bought and sold in the literal or metaphorical marketplace: breasts, genitals, buttocks, mouth, face (as well as other body parts that appeal to various kinds of fetishists). Pornography forms a limited context in which these commodified parts have assigned value because of the amount of appeal they have been judged to have. One of the major arguments of those who oppose the production and distribution of pornography is that this tendency to assign “market” or use-value to body parts and reduce actors or models to those parts is not restricted to pornography but pervades our entire culture. Ferguson, who consistently advances the arguments of MacKinnon and Dworkin, contends that “when feminism has occupied itself with pornography, it has done so because pornography, in its appeal to viewers, clearly emphasizes the issue of evaluation,” adding that

the visibility of pornography is thus important not because it involves a tacit claim that visual imagery has an unusual immediacy by comparison with other representational media, but rather because of its obvious orientation toward viewers and their evaluations. (37)

I would argue that in our visual culture, visual imagery *does* have an unusual immediacy compared to other representational media, and, as both visual rhetoric *and* a consumer product, pornography is necessarily oriented toward viewers and their evaluations.

It may be more useful to theorize the ways in which rhetoric—through decontextualization and recontextualization—enables the buying and selling of the

objectified and commodified body on the pornographic market, and consider these rhetorics more broadly not as separate or causal but as components of deeply sexist, capitalistic, and utilitarian cultural discourses that emphasize use- and market value over intrinsic value. In many ways, visual representations of nature are part of these same discourses. It is possible that capitalism, utilitarianism, and “human chauvinism,” to borrow Mander’s term, are the most significant obstacles to meaningful change in environmental and conservation programs because they play such a significant role in the exploitation of the land. Capitalism and utilitarianism decree that our planet has use-value rather than intrinsic value; human chauvinism assures us both that it is our right to take what we want and that our almighty science and technology will take care of whatever mess we make. These are some of the larger discourses that enable exploitation of Earth and its resources, and visual representations of nature are a part of these discourses.

In “Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company,” Jennifer Price offers a “brief meditation” on some central questions about the buying and selling of nature:

What is the Nature Company selling us, exactly? Why has the Nature Company sited most of its stores in upscale malls, within bowling distance of shops like Emporio Armani and the Banana Republic? Why do people say ‘wow’ [upon entering]? Why do I harbor such deep suspicions, yet make the Nature Company my first stop for holiday

shopping? . . . But most of all, why have many of us been looking for nature at the mall? (187)

The Nature Company, a now-defunct chain of retail stores founded in Berkeley in 1972, is only one example of countless stores that specialize in buying and selling “images of nature, pieces of nature, and tools for going out into nature” (Price 188). It is less likely to encounter such a store in a stand-alone retail space; the “natural habitat,” as it were, of the “nature store” is a mall or a shopping center, where casual shoppers can wander in and pick up odd impulse-buy items like hand-carved elephants or a didgeridoo. Many such stores have a decidedly “New Age” vibe, often featuring Enya or some form of indigenous music on the speakers, hemp or organic-cotton clothing, incense and a variety of burners, rocks sold by the bag, geode bookends, and kitschy jewelry like mood rings. Such stores typically feature imported, ostensibly handmade products from around the world—the more “exotic” their origin, the better—as well as an almost flea market-esque mishmash of seemingly random doodads, posters, novelty items, and collectibles.

Some stores, like the Nature Company and the Discovery Channel Store, decline to carry ephemera and kitschy items and instead define themselves as purveyors of higher-quality “authentic” natural, educational, and scientific products. In describing the merchandise for sale at the Nature Company, Price observes that “it is easier to begin with what the company does *not* sell”: no “trophy” items, no dead animals, nothing that anthropomorphizes animals, little to no domestic animals, nothing cheap (188).

Everything must be scientifically accurate, from the bat puppets to the dinosaur figurines

and inflatable penguins. As Price notes, “The company markets real rocks and plastic grasshoppers, but not real grasshoppers or plastic rocks. Dolphin keychains and stone bird sculptures, but no I [heart] dolphins bumper stickers or plastic pink flamingos” (188). The items on the boundaries of what the Nature Company sold were Native American crafts, CDs of indigenous music, and Amish wooden rocking chairs—products of “natural” or perhaps “less modern” cultures that conform to our idea of what defines “nature” or “natural.” In keeping with its image as a step or two above the more eclectic New Age-style shops, the Nature Company’s stores featured a stone façade, customized water feature, and intricate custom cabinets to showcase its fossils, gems, geodes, and other products. The Discovery Channel Store and the National Geographic Store affect a similar class-conscious aesthetic, offering higher-end items like handmade clothing and jewelry, coffee-table books, atlases, and scientific equipment like microscopes, telescopes, binoculars, globes, high-end wall maps, and weather instruments. National Geographic’s line of Kontiki luggage and travel bags “reflects the golden age of travel, but is made for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” according to the company’s retail website. “Kontiki,” of course, alludes to the *Kon-Tiki*, the raft used by Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl to sail from South America to Polynesia in 1947, thus demonstrating the plausibility of his theory that people from South America could have settled the Polynesian Islands in pre-Columbian times. By naming their line of luggage after an intrepid explorer, National Geographic can appeal to the modern-day traveler who identifies with Heyerdahl’s bold sense of adventure. Both stores emphasize two main product categories: educational products and merchandise based on its shows.

Price argues that the Nature Store’s “emphasis on children certainly plugs into longtime, distinctly middle-class traditions of using nature to educate children’s emotional lives” (189). At the same time, children are raised to think of nature as accessible through these stores and their products, thus continuing the cycle of thinking of nature as a consumer product. This notion is further advanced by the sale of nature DVDs and CDs, one of the most popular items for sale at these and other stores (both physical and online).<sup>11</sup> The one thing that all of these items have in common is that they have been decontextualized—some completely—and recontextualized as items on a shelf (or a webpage), available for purchase and ownership. Some stores may provide some replacement context—a leaflet or a few paragraphs describing the origin of the item and perhaps assuring the purchaser that the item has been obtained ethically, with the profits from its sale going to benefit either the artisan directly or an organization. But it should be noted that the replacement context is in service of the sale—and as such it is very carefully composed to maximize the appeal of the item.

Regardless of which type of “nature store” one visits, it is apparent that what is for sale is less images and pieces of nature than our ideas of what nature is—and what it isn’t; as Price observes, “To shop at the Nature Company is to experience familiar ideas tumbling from the shelves” (190). The dominant idea for sale is good feelings: good feelings about buying an item that supports an artisan from a distant country; good feelings about the adorable stuffed animal you just bought; good feelings that arise from

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<sup>11</sup> The Discovery Channel Online Store’s main page prominently advertises the Blu-rays of *Life* and *Planet Earth* with the tagline “Own Life & Planet Earth Today!”—a claim I will analyze in the next chapter.

watching a DVD of sunrises and waves crashing on a pristine beach; good feelings caused by the trickling water of a tabletop Zen fountain; good feelings about buying organic clothing made from sustainable materials; good feelings about purchasing educational toys for your children; good feelings about the pristine images of untouched wilderness that fill coffee table books and frames ready to hang on the wall. Though the Nature Company's stated mission was to connect people to nature, it may be more accurate to say that the nature store connects us to a particular *idea* of nature—a distinctly middle-to-upper-class concept of nature as a source of stress relief, inspiration, solace, and escape from suburban workaday pressures. Price suggests that in a store such as this, "the boundaries we've drawn around nature begin to look visible," and it is awareness of this that makes conscientious shoppers like her uncomfortable despite the store's feel-good atmosphere (191). The merchandise on the shelves in a nature store is plainly *not* nature—and yet the ways in which we trade in images and pieces of nature, and the values we assign to them, is revealing about how nature is decontextualized, recontextualized, devalued, revalued, objectified, and exploited in our consumer culture.

When we go looking for nature at the mall, we are buying and selling nature not as it is, but as we desire it to be; the same is often true of the sex we find in pornography. If the nature store sells images of nature, pieces of nature, and tools for going out in nature, most mainstream pornography sells images of sex, pieces of sex (that is, moments and individual scenes, rather than entire sexual experiences), and tools for, well, sex. These images, pieces, and tools are decontextualized, recontextualized, assigned use-values based on their relative worth on the market, and sold in a kind of

grand bazaar. Pornography, like the nature store, also trades in good feelings—pleasure without the complications inherent to encounters with either our degraded environment or the complexities of a relationship. For many, these are guilty pleasures for a variety of reasons—perhaps because we know on some level, like Price, that these are not authentic experiences; perhaps because we wish to avoid the judgment of others; or perhaps because we fear what these pleasures and good feelings reveal about us and the commodification of our desires.

### **Replication: More Nature than Nature/More Sex than Sex**

J. P. Telotte suggests that the study of replications offers insight into the “simple yet ever more pressing question: what does it mean to be human in the modern world?” (20). Replication allows us to imitate, shape, and understand the world around us, but when we create, we create in our own image—either literally, as in the case of humanoid robots and other artificial human analogs, about which Telotte has theorized extensively, or figuratively, by expressing our anxieties, desires, and even our human chauvinism through our creations. The artifacts that limn the edges of human civilization—our attempts to replicate our environment in a form that we find particularly appealing and in accordance with our expectations—reveal these fears and longings. We do the same with sex, sexual expression, and sexuality through the various types of pornography. While the previous section focuses on the process by which various agents of production construct these replications of environment and sexuality, this section analyzes various perspectives on and the possible consequences of their proliferation in our visual culture.



The billions of visual representations of “nature” one can find using Google Images, in addition to the more than a century of natural history filmmaking analyzed in Chapters II and III, constitute a significant percentage of our daily encounters with the natural world. These images are replications of our environment; they are designed and manufactured to exacting specifications to fulfill a set of particular purposes—most importantly, to appeal to (please) the viewer. Urbanization and reliance on technology make it challenging to recognize and understand humanity’s complex interconnectedness with—not exclusion from or mastery over—our environment. However, the ways in which we not only construct images of nature but nature itself in our own image, while simultaneously regarding “nature” as something separate from ourselves, indicate that to be human in the modern world is to feel a profound disconnection from our environment and a tendency to see it only in terms of the self.

In “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” William Cronon suggests that historically we have tended to see the wilderness in terms of what we needed it to be at that moment. When we look at the wilderness, he contends that “As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires” (69). The King James Version of the Bible offers both the idea of nature as paradise (as in the Garden of Eden) and as a place of distance or separation, either from man or God. Cain’s punishments for the murder of his brother include wandering the wilderness while being unable to farm the land. The narrative of this punishment reveals two perspectives on man’s concept of his environment: first, that to be cast into the

wilderness was a punishment so great as to be appropriate for killing one's brother; and second, that the land was the source of sustenance necessary to establish a home, which Cain would be denied. On the other hand, the wilderness became a purifying experience for the Israelites during the Exodus, and many saints and other believers are believed to have retreated into the wilderness for contemplation and illumination.

In more superstitious times, the wilderness was a place “where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface”; one was liable to either lose one's soul to the forces of evil or meet God (Cronon 73). On the one hand, the wilderness was where one might encounter evil, or even Satan himself. This paranoia extended to those who had knowledge of natural remedies for common ailments—knowledge that could easily result in one being labeled as having made a pact with the devil. As knowledge was supposed to be rooted in the church, wisdom that came from anywhere else was immediately suspect. If the practitioner was female—the supposedly weaker sex who bore the stigma of Eve's original sin—having knowledge about nature and natural remedies was likely to attract accusations of devil worship and/or witchcraft. However, just as Jesus was supposed to have gone into the desert, many devout Christians thought of the wilderness as a place one might go to test their spirituality and be closer to God by escaping the confines and corrupting influences of civilization. Many risked death and endured extreme survival situations, going without food and/or water for days or longer, in hopes of experiencing an encounter with the divine.

Cronon argues that “by the eighteenth century this sense of the wilderness . . . was expressed in the doctrine of the *sublime*” (73, emphasis in original). The sublime

landscape—canyons, mountains, waterfalls, vast chasms—is where one feels most insignificant, most mortal, and most moved. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, these places became the first national parks: Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Mt. Rainier, Zion, Grand Teton, Denali, and Glacier. Also in the nineteenth century, our sense of the wilderness shifted to a kind of romantic sentimentality that, in the United States, manifested itself in the concept of the wilderness as a frontier. As discussed in Chapter II, the expeditions, films, and writings of Theodore Roosevelt and Paul J. Rainey, among others, perpetuated the sentimental vision of nature as frontier partially as resistance to modernity, partially from a colonialist/imperialist/racist point of view, and partially as longing for the mythic hypermasculine “frontier individualist” (Cronon 78). The nostalgia for an “uninhabited wilderness” that never existed denies the presence of the Native American tribes who were often brutally displaced from their homelands and forced onto reservations. This nostalgia helped rewrite the history of the United States as a wild, virgin territory that did not exist until the arrival of white Europeans, who tamed the savage land. In the twentieth century, urbanization, the advent of the suburban development, and the collective trauma of World War II led to the recasting of nature as a place of solace (a shift which is analyzed in Chapter III). Increasing awareness of climate change, overpopulation, habitat loss, and extinction in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first century have caused many to turn to wilderness for reassurance and escape. Yet, as the final section of Chapter III demonstrates, vestiges of earlier constructs of wilderness remain: wilderness is still

portrayed as both Edenic and savage, as the last frontier for the modern rugged individualist-explorer, and as a place to find meaning and awe.

In each era, the concept (and construct) of “wilderness” takes the form our culture demands of it. Cronon argues that “it is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny” (79). The same is true of images of nature. Visual representations of wilderness seek to replicate nature, but these images inevitably reflect the needs of contemporary culture. Nature is represented as the original garden, the liminal space where our world and the metaphysical intersect, the frontier, the “sacred sublime,” the “untouched” wilderness, the place to which we can escape when needed (Cronon 79). At the same time, thinking of encounters with nature as transcendent—even sublime—experiences limited to extraordinary locations denies the real, everyday experience of living in the natural world. But most damaging of all, according to Cronon, is how these ways of thinking perpetuate the sense that we are separate from nature, that human civilization is a temporary place for us and nature is our true home. For Cronon, this perspective leads to “environmentally irresponsible behavior” (87). Decontextualized images of nature contribute to this sense of separation.

As consumer products, images of nature are often idealized: at best, they are carefully framed to exclude anything that would interfere with the eliciting of good feelings (e.g., human encroachment, habitat destruction, pollution, etc.); at worst, they are PhotoShopped beyond all semblance of reality. Taken in the most complimentary light and using filters that soften lines and deepen shadows and colors, nature photographs purport to reveal intimate details and expose secrets to a consumer audience

that remains largely oblivious to the amount of manipulation in the photographs. In this state, these images cross the line from simulation to simulacra; they are copies without an original. To use an analogy from popular culture, in *Blade Runner* (1982), the motto of the Tyrell Corporation (the makers of the android “replicants”) is “More Human than Human.” This is less a slogan than a central theme of the film as a whole; the emotion and *joie de vivre* of the replicants makes them far more recognizably human than the dispassionate, robotic humans in the film. The replicants are stronger, faster, and smarter than their creators; they are, as the very imperfect geneticist J. F. Sebastian says in the movie, “perfect.” Similarly, visual representations of nature are often “more nature than nature”; enhanced and manipulated, they create unrealistic expectations and stand in for real understanding and knowledge. In *Reel Nature*, Mitman describes witnessing a sharp-shinned hawk attack a European starling near his home. As he watches the predator attack its prey, Mitman imagines how the scene would have been represented in a nature documentary:

In the sentimental nature films of the 1950s, the violence would have been tempered by reference to the harmonious web of life . . . as each species helped keep nature in balance, testimony to the wonder of nature’s grand design. In the animal snuff films of the 1990s, the choice shot would be a close-up of the hawk tearing the flesh of the starling, with an amplified audio-track of the starling’s shrieks. The scene would be made more intense than my actual experience could be. (208)

The “animal snuff films” Mitman refers to continue to be a common convention of modern natural history films well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Violent encounters between predators and prey or intraspecies competitors account for a significant percentage of natural history films’ runtime, perpetuating the notion that nature is a savage and dangerous place.

Perhaps the most apparent overlap between human pornography and ecopornography is the inclusion of explicit sexual encounters in nature films. Once wholly prohibited for their ability to upset the delicate sensibilities of women and children (as discussed in the “Golden Age for Natural History Filmmaking” section of Chapter III), frank depictions of animal sexual intercourse are now ubiquitous in nature films. Like portrayals of violent death, explicit animal sexuality is now deemed acceptable prime-time television fodder under the heading of “educational materials.” But how pornographic are depictions of nonhuman animals copulating? Most viewers would rate them as far less obscene than voyeuristic representations of humans engaging in sexual activity (or even human nudity or partial nudity). There may be several reasons for this. First, animal sex is often viewed as more “natural” and therefore less objectionable, in the same way that “indigenous nudity” is acceptable in prime-time programming but non-indigenous nudity is not. Second, our sense of a hierarchy within the natural order—a sense that is perpetuated both explicitly and implicitly by many natural history films—suggests that people have certain rights that we do not grant to animals.

Can we argue that depictions of animals having sex are exploitative? When we voyeuristically look at animals having sex, are we acting unethically? Culturally speaking, we do not grant the same level of ethical consideration and subjectivity to nonhuman animals as we do to humans. As a result, most would argue that showing animals having sex is neither unethical nor exploitative. Yet, sex between animals has use-value in our visual culture; it is a commodity, much like human sexual expression. Like images of violence, depictions of sexual activity are selling points for natural history programs; the 2009 miniseries *Life* (which will be analyzed in Chapter V) contains a significant amount of footage of animals copulating. If the main purpose of showing humans engaging in sex is the audience's arousal and gratification, what is the purpose and value of showing animal sex? The motivation for including the footage may be partially its shock value. We recognize that the act is a sex act, and therefore it is close to being illicit activity without actually crossing culturally constructed boundaries between what is an acceptable form of voyeurism and what is not.

Just as images of nature are often “more natural than nature,” pornography is almost always “more sexy than sex.” For pornographic photographs (which range from so-called “cheesecake” and “beefcake” images to the far more explicit visual representations of sex), models, carefully selected to represent cultural ideals, are lit in such a way as to emphasize the parts of themselves that are considered most desirable (and, conversely, to de-emphasize anything that might be perceived as a flaw). Photographers take dozens of pictures—hundreds, even—to get the handful or single shot that make it into the pages of the magazine or onto the website. Filters, angles,

lighting, and PhotoShop ensure that the end product is perfect—far more so than any real encounter could be. Pornographic films follow the same basic production process. The actors, setting, and props are arranged and lit to optimize the viewers’ experiences and stimulation. Multiple takes, different camera angles, and various other production techniques ensure that the final product fulfills its purpose. In most commercially produced pornographic films, the sex act is always “successful”; that is, all participants become aroused, experience intense sexual pleasure, and reach orgasm. There are few if any awkward moments or unsuccessful experiences; every climax is earth-shattering and there certainly are not any physical imperfections or inabilities to perform. The cumulative effect of pornographic still photography and film is insidious and pervasive, warping our perceptions and replacing a continuum of sexual possibilities with a single experience in the cultural unconscious.

Replication is a reciprocal process in many ways. As sex education material, pornography lends itself easily to mimesis, offering new and liberating possibilities for both the sexually inexperienced and those whose sexuality has been repressed or oppressed. On a more basic biological level, as Linda Williams suggests in *Screening Sex*, hard-core pornography’s effect on the body is deeply mimetic—that is, in those for whom pornography is arousing, it causes physical responses that are largely out of the viewer’s conscious control (16). Our own bodies replicate the physical responses of the actors onscreen, sometimes against our conscious wishes. Some have theorized that unease over this betrayal by the physical body, as a reminder of the undeniability of our sexual desires, lies at or near the heart of the anti-pornography movement. For example,



the religious-conservative members of the Meese commission argued that “any sexually explicit material was harmful if it provoked people to engage in illicit (that is, nonmarital) sex” (Berger et al. 27). This perspective is based upon two main ideas: first, that pornography has the power to so inflame the passions that its viewers will lose their proper, Judeo-Christian self-control; and second, that since pornography rarely depicts married couples having sex, viewers will replicate the consequence-free, unmarried (read: promiscuous) lifestyle they see onscreen. First Amendment scholar Frederick Schauer contends that films depicting explicit sexual intercourse, screened for paying customers “who, observing the film, either reach orgasm instantly or are led to masturbate while the film is being shown,” should not be protected as free speech because of its direct effect on the body (qtd. in Williams, *Screening Sex* 16). For Schauer, there is no significant difference between watching sex and having sex. But, as the following section will show, the various kinds of mediation that occur between the viewer and the image create distances and disruptions that lie at the core of how visual representations of sexuality and nature operate in our culture.

### **Disconnection and Interruption**

One of the most common anti-pornography arguments is that by decontextualizing and objectifying its subjects, pornography disengages them from their humanity. Many feminists object particularly to the dehumanization of women in pornography, arguing that it institutionalizes and legitimizes inequalities that have far-reaching consequences. The narrative of most mainstream pornography follows a

particular sexual script that involves an active, often aggressive male and a passive, receptive female. MacKinnon contends that “men’s power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be” (qtd. in Berger et al. 37). Despite marked increases in both female producers and consumers of pornography, the industry—and therefore the narratives—remain male-dominated. And yet, while it is all too easy for some to lay the blame for all types of sexual violence and misogyny on pornography, these scripts did not originate with pornography. The inequalities to which MacKinnon, Dworkin, and others object so strenuously are visible throughout our culture. While it may be true that pornography tends to perpetuate gender roles that reflect a dominant male and submissive female, I argue that MacKinnon’s contention that “Pornography constructs *who women are*” is an oversimplification of a vastly more complex system of naturalized sexism (Berger et al. 37, emphasis in original). Pornography is one part of that system; some of its conventions are part of the normalization of inequalities and are complicit in rape culture, in no small part as a result of the disruptions and distance they help create.

It would be a gross oversimplification—and one that many radical anti-pornography critics make—to think of pornography as a single, monolithic thing. Pornography is a vast continuum of representations of sex and sexuality, available in as many forms and styles as there are preferences, predilections, and fetishes—that is to say, an almost infinite variety. Rather than arguing whether pornography deserves to exist *at all* or taking the position that all pornography is inherently violent and misogynistic, we might begin by identifying the conventions that one might categorize

as harmful. While the previous section analyzed the unrealistic idealization evident in pornography, this section examines practices that help create disruption and distance. In their seminal study of degrading practices toward women in pornography, Gloria Cowan and Kerri F. Dunn identified nine main themes: 1) sexually explicit behavior that is “mutual without indicating an affectionate personal relationship between the two people”; 2) “sexual activity showing that the woman is available to anyone who wants her”; 3) “Sexual activity [in which] the woman is used to satisfy the man’s needs. Her gratification is not important”; 4) “Sexual activity that incorporates the idea that a high status woman can be reduced to a purely sexual being”; 5) “Sexual activity and the accompanying scenario that indicates inequality”; 6) “Sexual activity that begins with the woman's unwillingness to participate and ends with her loving it”; 7) “Sexual activity that revolves around worship of the penis [wherein] the ejaculate (semen) is especially central to the woman's satisfaction”; 8) “Sexual activity and the related scenario that explicitly shows that the man is dominant”; and 9) “Sexual activity that treats the woman as an object or a plaything” (13).<sup>12</sup> While all of these practices are cause for concern, for the purposes of this project this analysis will focus on depictions of violence and powerotics, the tendency to portray women as both passive and sexually insatiable, the propensity to reduce the body to its functional parts, and voyeurism, as well as advancements in film technology that enhance all these conventions.

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<sup>12</sup> Cowan and Dunn observe that “Participants found dominance, objectification, and penis worship the three most degrading themes” and conclude that “these themes most clearly depict active subordination and most blatantly disrespect women” (18). The study also found that “Gender differences emerged in rated levels of degradation and arousal, with men rating all the themes as less degrading than did women and men rating seven of nine themes as more arousing than did women” (Cowan and Dunn 19).

Recognizing how these conventions operate as part of visual representations of sex and sexuality is key to understanding the visual rhetoric of pornography (and by extension, what these insights might offer a study of ecopornography).

The contention that all pornography is harmful is an overgeneralization based in part on the argument that sex is always coercive and violent “even if it feels nice because every man has power and privilege over women, whether he uses it blatantly or subtly” (Deevy qtd. in Berger et al. 41). From this perspective, unequal power between the sexes means that the male is exercising his privilege over the female, even if she believes she has given consent—because “consent” is not voluntary. Such claims imply that all sex is both metaphorically and literally violent, and that by extension, so is all pornography. A related assertion is that incidents of coercion in the industry make pornography a violent practice. Therefore, even pornography that depicts nonviolent, egalitarian sex between consenting partners who give and receive pleasure equally is deemed indefensible and a “‘core constitutive practice’ that helps to institutionalize and legitimize gender inequality” (Berger et al. 37). However, many liberal and moderate feminists argue that critics like MacKinnon and Dworkin conflate sex and violence and mistakenly believe that violent hard-core pornography is more common than it actually is. A more fair-minded view might indicate that overt physical violence is the exception, not the rule.

In pornography, violence takes many forms, from the moderate (assertive men controlling acquiescent females) to the more physical violence of spanking, pinching, or slapping. Perhaps the most violent of legal pornography is BDSM (bondage,

domination, sadism, and masochism), itself a complex continuum fraught with ethical quandaries in regard to legality, power, gender, and consent. While a comprehensive analysis of BDSM is outside the scope of this project, this type of pornography, because it trades specifically in depictions of domination/submission and pain and visually identifies these practices with sexual pleasure, has more potential than typical pornography to have the negative consequences that MacKinnon and others fear, including the normalizing of sexual aggression and the infliction of pain.

While certainly many practitioners of BDSM participate willingly and express informed consent, the very nature of BDSM lends itself to abuse. Even a scenario in which the female is dominant and the male is submissive does not necessarily signify an equal power distribution or a relationship in which the woman asserts control beyond the bedroom or playroom. Carter argues that

She is most truly subservient when most apparently dominant: [the dominatrix] and her pretended victim have established a mutually degrading pact between them and she in her weird garb is mutilated more savagely by the erotic violence she perpetrates than he by the pain he undergoes, since . . . her cruelty is an economic fact of her real life, so much hard work. (21)

This description of the deferential female is part of Carter's "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman* in which she asserts with few equivocations or qualifications the general powerlessness and submissiveness of women. Carter has a specific rhetorical purpose in writing as she does, but in her zeal she denies even the possibility of sexual

empowerment for women. She writes that “The prick is always presented erect, in an alert attitude of enquiry or . . . affirmation; it points upwards, it asserts. The hole is open, an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled” (4). The vision of sexuality that Carter describes in *The Sadeian Woman* denies the possibility of the mouth (either literal or figurative) being the active participant—the consumer rather than the passive receptacle. Powerotics is far more complex than Carter allows for. This interpretation of the female as equally assertive and pleasure-seeking, rather than always acquiescent or submissive, is perhaps one of the most significant counterarguments to the radical perspective that all pornography—all sex, even—is inherently violent. Depictions of overt violence *are* present in pornography, however—and even under the best of circumstances, wherein all parties are participating voluntarily with informed consent, these images have a very real ability to be harmful because linking violence and sex visually creates an immediate identification between them. At the same time, the audience for BDSM and other forms of powerotic pornography, however, represents only a fraction of the overall viewership.

One aspect of violence in pornography that is virtually irredeemable is any depiction of nonconsensual or reluctant participation, sexual assault, or rape. This includes everything from so-called “rape pornography”—films depicting a rape scenario with actors—to films in which female actors feign hesitancy at first but then “give in” to either their desire or the demands of the other participant(s). (Obviously, any film of an actual sexual assault would be criminal.) For those opposed to censorship, rape pornography can create a serious ethical dilemma. Perhaps more than any other type of

pornography, rape pornography both reflects and perpetuates violent and sexist views that are at the core of cycles of abuse and rape myths and rape culture. Cowan and Dunn argue that “The theme in which women mean *yes* when they say *no* or show initial resistance . . . best illustrates rape mythology” and power inequality (13, emphasis in original).

These views are reinforced by another convention of pornography: the representation of the female as sexually insatiable and perpetually aroused and receptive. The popular “scene” style of pornography, in which a DVD contains a half-dozen individual scenes (as opposed to movie-length films), lends itself particularly to this interpretation through its decontextualization of both the female and the sex act. This disruption creates distance between the viewer and the female subject. MacKinnon’s argument that “Men *have sex* with their image of a woman” refers in part to the idealized, decontextualized female pornographic subject (qtd. in Berger et al. 38). The sexual archetype of the wanton woman who is not just amenable to sex but always hungry for it is part of the sexist mythology that perpetuates rape culture by helping enable common practices like victim-blaming and “slut-shaming.”<sup>13</sup> Carter argues that in this common narrative of active male/passive female, the aroused male is a symbol of

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<sup>13</sup> The recent so-called “Steubenville rape case,” in which an unconscious teenage girl was repeatedly sexually assaulted for hours by several high-school classmates, is a clear instance of how rape culture operates. The rapists claim they did nothing wrong and even posted images of the assault-in-progress on social media sites. The victim—a minor, who was identified by name by several media sources—and her family received numerous death threats from people defending the rapists and attacking her character. Perhaps most disturbingly of all, some of those same media sources expressed sympathy—even empathy—with the rapists upon their conviction. In particular, CNN’s Candy Crowley and Poppy Harlow sparked a nationwide backlash in which Harlow was labeled a “rape apologist” for her emotional commentary outside the courtroom in which she said, “These two young men, with promising futures, star football players, A students, literally watched as their lives fell apart.”

virility, strength, and potency; the aroused female, however, is inert. Carter contends that “man aspires; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting” (4). As previously noted, however, this perspective denies the female agency in her own sexuality. While there is a strong argument that the depiction of the female as perpetually aroused has the potential for harm, one could argue that in the short-scene style of pornography, the male is likewise characterized as continually aroused, as evidenced by his erection. The female, despite Carter’s claims to the contrary, may have the agency to be a sexual being on her own terms; her participation in the sex act is not inherently coercive or violent. And pornography and erotica that depicts a more complete narrative in which both women and men have real lives of which sex is a part, but not the sum total of their existence, is not as complicit in rape culture.

Pornography, as Carter writes, “is art with work to do” (12). This work, the arousal and sexual gratification of the audience, relies on the graphic depiction of sex, including the constituent body parts. One common criticism of pornography is that it tends to reduce the body to its functional parts rather than considering him or her as a whole person. The camera, which frequently focuses on various parts—tongue, breasts, buttocks, penis, vagina, and so forth—as well as penetration and other sexual acts like oral stimulation, controls the audience’s gaze. The actor or model becomes fragmented. This parceling of the body is further enhanced by modern film and viewing technology, which permits the viewer to pause, rewind, fast-forward, and in some systems even slow the speed of the film and zoom in. Prior to the home video revolution, pornography had to either be viewed in a public theater or in a private setting using a projector. The



advent of VHS and then DVDs and Blu-rays (not to mention the short-lived LaserDisc format), as well as digital format and streaming video, significantly changed how viewers *look* at both pornography and the pornographic body.

In *Screening Sex*, Linda Williams argues that the “reproduction of a couple ‘having sex’ . . . makes a new kind of ‘contact’ possible, what Michael Taussig, commenting on Benjamin, calls a ‘palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’” (16). Unlike some critics, who see little difference between the act of sex and visual representations of the sex act, Williams recognizes pornography as mediated. Accessing a reproduction is not the same as accessing the thing itself. Yet, we are driven to try and access that knowledge. If, as Williams argues in *Hard Core*, pornography is part of what Foucault has called “the modern compulsion to speak incessantly about sex,” it is also an attempt to obtain knowledge of pleasure, to hear sex itself speak (2). Cinema, Williams suggests, is “profoundly related to the sexual pleasures of male viewers through glimpses of the previously hidden, and often sexual, ‘things’ of women” (*Hard Core*, 4). Pornography certainly fits this description. Male sexuality is visually apparent; female sexuality, less so. Pornography, as one of its tasks, seeks to uncover the “secrets” of female sexuality, to explain them by letting them speak. However, as a product of a male-dominated industry produced for a mainly male audience, the “secrets” revealed are too often spoken in a language belonging not to the female, but the male.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey argues that “the cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking).

There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (16-17). Voyeurism is an exchange between a viewer and a viewed, between a voyeur and the object of his or her gaze. James Elkins argues that when we look at anything, we activate “desire, possession, violence, displeasure, pain, force, ambition, power, obligation, gratitude, [and] longing” (31). In pornography, not only are the actors and models the objects of desire, possession, and so forth, but so is the sex act itself. The idealized and so-often unrealistic images are both a fantasy—what Steven Marcus calls a “pornotopia”—and a unique space for contact between viewer and viewed. The viewer is simultaneously outside the action, looking in, and a participant, by virtue of the body’s physical reactions. As with most cinema, pornography invites both looking and vicarious participation—the essence of voyeurism.

Voyeurism tends to encourage the development of a discursive relationship with an object, an image, rather than the thing itself. It also can impair one’s ability to imagine a relation to others in anything but terms of the self. In other words, voyeurism disrupts the contact between viewer and viewed, between audience and subject. This is equally true for both human pornography and ecopornography. The proliferation of images of nature invites us to look at mountain vistas, green valleys, crystal-clear mountain lakes, and sun-dappled forests from the comfort of our homes or offices. In “Nature’s Voyeurs,” Mabey calls many modern natural history films “peep-shows,” adding that “it hard to think of an approach that is more alienating and patronising to our fellow creatures.” Evolving filmmaking technology has expanded our ability to spy on

animals and plants in increasingly detailed and invasive ways. Mabey argues that “The fact is that in almost every area of our public culture we are disengaging from nature, rendering it as a plaything, a scene from the Picturesque, or a horror film - and always as an object.” But does the tendency to look at nature voyeuristically create the same kinds of disruptions and distance between the viewer and the viewed as human pornography?

As Chapters II and III demonstrate, a favorite staple of natural history filmmaking is scenes of violence and bloody spectacle, from confrontations between rivals to predators attacking their prey. Slow-motion and high-definition technology—which we have fetishized as a culture almost as much as the female body or the mountain vista—has enabled viewers to extract every last nanosecond of vivid enjoyment (or horror) out of scenes of wildebeests struggling with crocodiles, raptors tearing into rodents, and elephant seals battling for supremacy. “Nature, red in tooth and claw” is so thoroughly common as to be unremarkable; to make blood spectacular again, filmmakers must up the ante by showing more and in more detail. In “Curbing Nature’s Paparazzi,” McKibben argues that

There is something frankly pornographic about the animal horror videos (*Fangs!*) marketed on late-night TV, and even about some of the shots you see in something as staid as *Nature History* magazine. Here is an emerald boa eating a parrot—the odds, according to the photographers I talked to, were ‘jillions to one’ that it was a wild shot. Indeed, the photographer who took it boasted to *People* magazine about how, in order to get other dramatic shots, he’d spray-painted ferrets to convert them to

the endangered blackfooted kind, and how he'd hoisted tame and declawed jaguars into tree branches for good shots, and starved piranhas so that they would attack with great ferocity. (19)

The photographer's surprising frankness and arrogance about his unethical practices is certainly troubling, as it points to both the potential for fakery in wildlife photography and the importance of being skeptical, engaged consumers of images. In response to another photographer, who defended the photograph of the boa eating the parrot by claiming that it "graphically illustrates the relationship between higher and lower vertebrates," McKibben quips that "So it does, but that's a little like saying that Miss September graphically illustrates the development of the mammary gland in *Homo sapiens*" (19-20). In addition to the ethics of picture-taking, McKibben recognizes the tendency of nature photography to mask environmental and conservation issues. For McKibben, the parallels between wildlife photography and human pornography are evident: not only are both practices exploitative, but "the constant flow of images undercuts the sense that there's actually something wrong with the world" (20). The endless exposure to images of nature, especially violent images, is a distraction from the harsh realities of habitat destruction and climate change.

It would not be inappropriate to draw an analogy between this kind of footage and the "snuff film" subgenre of human pornography. A snuff film, in which a victim (usually a female) is supposedly tortured, murdered, and often dismembered for the pleasure of the participants, and then the footage sold for profit, is one of the least common types of pornography. It is important to differentiate between snuff films and

the filmed deaths of people killed in accidents, by assassination, or murder. While it is unclear if any real snuff films actually exist—as any that gain any kind of notoriety are quickly determined to be frauds—their authenticity is less important than the reality that, for a small percentage of the population, witnessing torture, rape, and murder is stimulating, even arousing. Many nature films feature not just “filmed deaths,” but real animal snuff films in which an animal is killed, its bloody struggles emphasized, even fetishized. While “snuff films” represent a very small percentage of pornography, scenes of violent death are one of the most common tropes in natural history filmmaking.

The reduction of the nonhuman animal to an object and a source of bloody spectacle is one way in which ecopornography mirrors human pornography. Another is the “man vs. nature” motif, which trades in domination and submission. This genre, which Mabey describes as “extrovert men trying to prove their machismo by tormenting ‘dangerous’ reptiles,” is a violent encounter. The human subdues nature, either by “surviving” a (sometimes laughably staged) confrontation or wilderness experience and/or by physically dominating an animal whose potential for causing injury or death has been heavily emphasized or exaggerated. The host asserts himself as the dominant and nature as the submissive. This scenario echoes the “human chauvinism” that so disturbs Mander: the idea that mankind is superior to and has the (divine) right to “manage” his environment. Like human pornography that depicts dominant males and submissive females, this type of show helps naturalize and institutionalize the notion that man is in control of nature. This idea of not only a separation but a significant power

imbalance between humans and their environment is profoundly disruptive to environmental and conservationist programs whose success depends largely on the understanding that humans are a part of a vastly interconnected ecosystem.

The perceived separation between humans and “nature” helps enable both the objectification, degradation, and exploitation of our planet. In March 2013, Texas Rep. Steve Stockman (R-TX), whose main source of campaign contributions for the 2012 elections was the oil and gas industry, exemplified this attitude when he Tweeted that “The best thing about the Earth is if you poke holes in it oil and gas come out” (qtd. in Beauchamp). The phallic and power-assertive imagery of “poking” the Earth to gain access to its resources without consideration of the consequences reveals a key insight into the pro-drilling and so-often anti-environmentalist way of thinking about our planet as a “repository for natural resources” (Stockman qtd. in Beauchamp). Stockman is also notorious for describing climate change as “the new fad thing that’s going through America and around the world” (Stockman qtd. in “House Science Panel”). Stockman’s comments reveal the troubling consequences of refusing to extend ethical considerations to the land. Man is free to inflict violence upon the land by poking and drilling into it; meanwhile, the Earth, to borrow a phrase from Carter, “has no other function but to exist, waiting.” Under this paradigm, the Earth is characterized not only as passive but as insatiable; like the female in pornography, there is no context or content that suggests that there is an end to the Earth’s resources. Poke the Earth where and whenever you may, and you will be rewarded with oil, gas, coal: the lifeblood of our modern lives. If

the depiction of women as passive and insatiable is disturbing, the portrayal of our planet in the same light should be equally alarming.

It is not difficult to see the comments of Stockman and his cronies as alarmingly ignorant and short-sighted, as well as damaging. But depictions of the Earth as passive and vulnerable—and their potential for harm—are not always so easy to identify. As Knighton, Millet, Welling, and others have noted, even the publications of conservation and environmental organizations feature photographs that frame nature as both an object whose beauty gives us pleasure and as passive *thing* waiting for us to save it. Images of mountains, valleys, and charismatic animals looking directly at the camera with big, imploring eyes are as common in conservationist publications as footage of bloody violence is in natural history films. In the images, nature waits patiently for us to act on its behalf. Humans are still separate, still in the dominant “management” position, even in these publications. Welling notes that ecopornography “traffics in pictorial versions of the same land-as-woman tropes that . . . have done much to authorize the genocidal oppression of native peoples and the colonization of their lands” (57). Even environmental and conservationist organizations are complicit in perpetuating the colonizing gaze.

If human pornography can be said to reduce the body to its functional parts, the same can be said of ecopornography. Landscapes are frequently divided into categories: mountains, lakes, forests, deserts, shallow ocean and deep ocean, plains, polar regions, and so forth. Animals often experience the same fate; snakes become fangs, predators defined by teeth and claws, prey reduced to fearful eyes and torn flesh. Perhaps most

damaging, “nature” or “wilderness” is presented as separate from human civilization. We do not share the frame or the scene with the pristine landscape or the animal; as a result, we do not share the ecosystem. Our sense of the ecosystem and our own place within it is fractured along with the landscapes and animals we see. The disconnections and disruptions perpetuated by both human pornography and ecopornography are perhaps their most damaging consequences.

I argue that ecoporn is a way of seeing as well as a type of discourse. Repeated exposure to ecoporn trains the gaze in very particular ways, making it difficult for the viewer to recognize the differences between the image and the thing in the world. The ecopornographic gaze sees the image as the reality and derives pleasure from it, relating to the image only in terms of the self and how it may be of use. The ecopornographic gaze no longer sees the mountain—it sees only the image of the mountain. The viewer’s connection between the self and the mountain is disrupted and replaced with a association to its image.

### **Closing: A Rhetoric of Ecopornography**

In “Second Thoughts on *Hard Core*,” Linda Williams argues that “Pornography is a volatile issue not simply because it represents sexual acts and fantasies, but because in that representation it frankly seeks to arouse viewers” (46). Other genres that seek to elicit bodily responses—thrillers, mystery, horror, sentimental romance, comedy, and even speculative fiction and fantasy—tend to also find themselves on the outside of the mainstream looking in. If we are suspicious of genres that can provoke visceral



reactions such as fear, adrenaline, weeping, laughter, or even wonder, then it stands to reason that a genre that taps into one of our most primal and private drives—our sexuality—would challenge us profoundly in regard to how we make meaning from our bodies’ responses to what we read and see. Williams finds insight in the famous line from Justice Potter Stewart regarding pornography (“I don’t know what it is, but I know it when I see it”): “The middle-class, white male Supreme Court justice who uttered those famous last words was saying, in essence, ‘It moves me’ (whether to arousal or outrage hardly matters), ‘and that is all we need to know’” (*Hard Core* 5). Williams is arguing that pornography “moves” the audience; that is to say, it appeals to, or pleases, the beholder. The ability of pornography to move the viewer, sometimes against his or her will, is perhaps one of the most significant reasons for the mistrust with which we regard it.

Many anti-pornography activists and feminists, including Dworkin and MacKinnon, would seem to agree with the notion that identifying pornography and its effects is “all we need to know”; they are quick to dismiss pornography out of hand as a single entity that is simultaneously “the cause and the symptom of all women’s problems” (Williams, *Hard Core* xi). Williams, on the other hand, has approached the study of pornography from a much different perspective, writing several books and numerous articles analyzing the genre, history, conventions, and visual rhetoric of pornography, with the express purpose of getting “beyond the question of whether pornography should exist to a consideration of what pornography is and what it [offers] those viewers—primary men, but, now women in increasing numbers—who have been

‘caught looking’ at it” (*Hard Core* xi). Unlike MacKinnon and Dworkin, Williams is willing to admit that she does not find “every image of every film absolutely disgusting,” and this admission forms a far more fruitful point of departure from which to launch an academic study of the genre (*Hard Core* xi).

Williams considers the etymology of the word “obscene”—literally, *off the stage* or *scene of representation*—as in, things that some think are better left offstage. But in a culture in which, as Michel Foucault suggests, we are obsessed with talking about sex (or talking about *not* talking about sex), Williams argues that “sexual representations are so much *on the scene* . . . that they cannot be easily dismissed as *ob scene*” (“Second Thoughts” 47, emphasis in original). Instead, Williams considers the “on/scenity” of sexuality and the ways in which sex, especially sexual “deviants” who differ from a phallogentric heteronormativity, are scapegoated for everything from AIDS to child molestation, rape, and sexual harassment. Williams contends that pornography, due in large part to its representation of these sexual “deviants” and because of its ability to “liberate” formerly repressed sexualities (e.g., gays, lesbians, bisexuals, sadomasochists, and even female sexuality), is often targeted for the same type of scapegoating. In essence, pornography, like sexual “deviants,” is an easy target when the causes of the problems are more systemic, widespread, and rooted in mainstream culture than most would care to admit.

It would, perhaps, be equally easy to lay the blame for our disconnection from nature and the commodification of the land and nonhuman animals at the feet of ecoporn. After all, as I noted in the opening to this chapter, you have to look hard to

find humans included in the images of nature that surround us on a daily basis. Ecoporn is but one element in a kaleidoscope of messages about the environment and humanity's place in it that each person is exposed to on a daily basis. Our visual culture is saturated with advertising images and their unending refrain that urges us to consume, consume, consume. As the following chapter will show, these messages, combined with the human chauvinism that Mander identifies and the rhetoric of ecoporn outlined in this chapter, create an enormous hindrance for environmental and conservation programs.

## CHAPTER V

### NATURAL PLACES AND VIRTUAL SPACES: COMMODIFICATION OF EXTINCTION AND THE RHETORIC OF THE BIG-BUDGET NATURE FILM

Nature is beautiful, and the best way to enjoy it is to buy *Planet Earth* on Blu-ray.  
—Daniel Tosh, comedian<sup>14</sup>

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a significant evolutionary step in natural history filmmaking: the big-budget nature film (hereinafter, BBNF). The BBC Natural History Unit (NHU) produced series such as *The Blue Planet: Seas of Life* (2001), *Planet Earth* (2006), *Life* (2009), *Human Planet* (2011), *African Cats* (2011), and *Frozen Planet* (2012). In the wake of *Planet Earth*'s enormous success, National Geographic jumped on the bandwagon with *Great Migrations* (2010). The Walt Disney Corporation created Disneynature, a division of Walt Disney Studios dedicated to the distribution of independent nature documentary films. Disneynature distributed the feature-length theatrical release of *Planet Earth*, called *Earth* (2009), as well as *Oceans* (2010), *The Crimson Wing: Mystery of the Flamingos* (2010), *African Cats* (2010), *Wings of Life* (2011), and *Chimpanzee* (2012), with another film, *Bears*, scheduled for release in 2014. These films and series have helped bring natural history programming back into cultural consciousness at a time when environmental and conservation issues are more pressing than ever. Because they have enjoyed unprecedented popularity

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<sup>14</sup> In an episode of the Comedy Central series *Tosh.0* aired 17 March 2011

among the general viewing audience both on television and in theaters, BBNFs also have an unparalleled ability to (re)frame our perception of endangered species, threatened habitats, and even the role of humans in the natural world.<sup>15</sup> Despite their enormous commercial success, however, BBNFs have yet to attract much attention from scholars in visual rhetoric, environmental rhetoric, or film studies. This chapter represents an initial foray into addressing this oversight by analyzing the (visual) rhetoric of the genre, as exemplified by the BBC series *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth*, and *Frozen Planet*.<sup>16</sup>

### **Defining the Big-Budget Nature Film as an Emergent Genre**

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, images of nature in general and natural history filmmaking in particular do certain kinds of cultural work and fulfill specific cultural needs that differ depending on the era. To understand the roles that big-budget nature films occupy in our contemporary culture requires that we analyze not only their similarities to other types of natural history films but also the distinctive elements that give this emergent genre its unprecedented popular appeal. Defining a genre is a complex task. Killingsworth notes that genres “emerge, shift, combine, separate, and disappear” (“No Illusions”). This plasticity presents both unique challenges and productive opportunities for film critics and rhetoricians alike, whose

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<sup>15</sup> For example, in the U.K., each episode of *Planet Earth* was watched by an average of nine million viewers, or a full 34% audience share. In the U.S., where the series was broadcast a year later in 2007, it earned massive ratings for the Discovery Channel, averaging 5.16 million viewers per episode, 2.4 million of which were adults 25-54 years old (Crupi SR4).

<sup>16</sup> This analysis focuses on the BBC editions of the series, rather than the “Americanized” versions aired on the Discovery Channel. While a detailed comparison between the BBC and Discovery Channel versions is outside the scope of this essay, each version has a different narrator, the latter is shorter, and the former is the version that is offered on Blu-ray.

divergent approaches to the question of genre take into consideration tautological definitions, semantics, syntax, pragmatics, purpose, subject, and rhetorical situation, among other elements.

In “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” Rick Altman critiques approaches that seek to define and analyze genres by identifying a corpus of works through inclusive or exclusive lists. Altman notes that

On the one hand, we have an unwieldy list of texts corresponding to a simple, tautological definition of the genre (e.g., western = film that takes place in the American West, or musical = film with diegetic music). This *inclusive* list is the kind that gets consecrated by generic encyclopedias or checklists. On the other hand, we find critics, theoreticians, and other arbiters of taste sticking to a familiar canon that has little to do with the broad, tautological definition . . . [this *exclusive* list of films is] mentioned again and again, not only because they are well known or particularly well made, but because they somehow seem to represent the genre more fully and faithfully than other apparently more tangential films. (28, emphasis in original)

The central problem with these limited and contradictory approaches is that genres are dynamic and complex. They resist the kind of simplistic classifications offered by tautological definitions or lists that are subjective at best and arbitrary at worst. Take, for example, the 1986 film *Aliens*. An inclusive view of genre would say, “*Aliens* has Marines and focuses on a combat unit; it's a war movie,” but an exclusive view might

counter with “Well, yes, but it takes place in an unreal science fiction universe, so it's not a war movie. Now *Saving Private Ryan* is a war movie!” For theorists like Altman, neither of these arguments is terribly helpful for adding to our understanding of either the film or the genre.

Altman argues that the most useful approach to genre study is one that considers syntax and semantics rather than offering tautological definitions or lists. While syntactic analysis focuses on motifs, stock characters, and technical components, the study of semantics considers the relationships linking lexical elements (i.e., narrative and theme). Altman’s semantic/syntactic methodology allows for the complexities of genre—particularly the texts that limn the “boundaries” where genres tend to overlap and destabilize generic markers. For such a critic, *Aliens* would best be described as having the semantics of a science fiction film (spaceships, aliens, future setting) but the syntax of a combat film (a diverse unit on a mission that goes wrong working as a team to survive an enemy attack). The latter approach shows not only how meanings are made synchronically but also how genres can change over time (diachronically) by innovatively combining semantics and syntax from different generic traditions. In *Aliens*, the semantics of the combat film have been appropriated by a science fiction film and have since become something that could be redefined as its own genre (the sci-fi action/combat film), with its own semantic and syntactic cues.

Our shared understanding of generic cues affects how we think about what we watch by shaping our expectations. Thomas Schatz argues that “genre exists as a sort of tacit ‘contract’ between filmmakers and audience [and] the genre film is an actual event

that honors such a contract” (642). For Schatz, genre is a kind of perceptual process based on the fulfillment and/or subversion of expectations. These expectations arise from what he terms “deep structure” and “surface structure”; the former is the static “rules, components, and function” and the latter the variance that occurs among “individual members which comprise the species” (643). Both Schatz and Altman also emphasize the significance of historical context to the study of genre; as Chapters II and III of this dissertation have shown, interpretation is often deeply interconnected with the cultural milieu in which a text is produced. I argue that what Altman refers to as “extrafilmic events” and Schatz as “cultural context” have as much or more influence on the process of making meaning as the cinematic techniques employed by filmmakers to create narrative (Altman 35; Schatz 646). Schatz’s contention that “a genre . . . represents a *range of expression* for filmmakers and a *range of experience* for viewers” underscores the need for not only analysis of the cinematic elements that make up a genre, but also consideration of the rhetorical situation that is the exchange between filmmaker and viewer in the cinematic space (646, emphasis in original).

From a rhetorical perspective, the study of genre (as a system of classifying discourses) can also clarify social and historical contexts, the relative positions of author and audience, and the connections between genre and recurrent rhetorical situations. In “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn R. Miller argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). Miller advocates a pragmatic definition of genre—one that occurs at the level of discourse rather than at the syntactic or semantic levels, and



that considers genre as a kind of practice, something one does rather than something one means or something one writes in a particular way. While Miller's article on genre focuses on types of speech acts, it is equally useful as part of a study of film genre. For example, in *Aliens*, a pragmatic approach would perhaps argue that it is a gender-questioning film in the age of feminism, or a cautionary tale of corporate greed trumping human life in the materialism of the 1980s, or a narrative about young, unprepared soldiers in an era still reeling from the trauma of Vietnam.

Miller's analysis focuses on situation and motive, based on "Burke's view of rhetorical acts as strategies to encompass situations" and Lloyd F. Bitzer's "formulation of the relationship between situation and discourse" (152). Miller argues for a view of genre that is "organized around situated actions . . . rather than syntactic or semantic" (155). For Miller, the key to understanding genre is the rhetorical situation, certain types of which recur, resulting in the emergence of particular types of rhetoric (or rhetorical genres). These genres are shaped by motive and exigence. For Miller, genre is distinct from form, which she argues fuses with substance and context to create meanings through hierarchical and semantic relationships as each combination of substance and form become substance for the next-higher level of form. Despite their divergent approaches, Miller, Altman, and Schatz all characterize genre in terms of a complex system of signification and context that creates meaning.

Chapters II and III present both semantic/syntactic and pragmatic analyses of natural history filmmaking. On the syntactic level, viewers of natural history films are accustomed to spectacle, dramatic encounters, a heroic explorer-host or nature showman,

authoritative narration, a musical score, “untouched” areas and unfamiliar species, and varying degrees of depoliticization, anthropomorphism, and Disneyfication. Semantically, the natural history film is notable for its themes of man vs. nature, nature as object, nature as separate, nature as evidence of “divine order,” nature as commodity, nature as terrifying and dangerous, and nature as innocent (versus the corruption of civilization). On a pragmatic level, the natural history film participates in many of the dominant cultural discourses of its time. Early documentaries (and even some modern ones) reflect racist, colonialist, and imperialist ideologies and reinforce ethnocentric attitudes that, historically, have facilitated the oppression and exploitation of indigenous peoples and their lands. The natural history film is also a part of a culture of longing—a longing to look, to see, to discover, to understand, to own, to defeat risk and even death. It is part of an impulse to preserve, even as we sense so many of the regions, biomes, species, and habitats we are trying to conserve slipping away. The peril of an endangered planet has led to a desire to find a refuge or escape from these anxieties, and many natural history films—including the BBNF, on which this chapter focuses—are a part of this broader cultural inclination. It is surely no coincidence that in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost all of our highest-grossing films are fantasies of escape, culminating in the spectacular defeat of some kind of powerful, often faceless, evil.

BBNFs share more than a fantasy of escape with modern big-budget summer blockbusters; they also borrow many semantic and syntactic elements of these high-grossing films. For example, there are chase and combat scenes (enhanced with special effects for maximum impact), exaggerated dramatic climaxes, overly sentimental

moments, and deadlines before which certain actions must be completed in order to create tension. The successful action/superhero movie is often fast-paced, with numerous action scenes that alternate with slower-paced scenes that allow the audience to catch its breath, and frequently sacrifices substance in favor of style and visual stimulation. The BBNF is structured in essentially the same way. The producers and marketers of BBNFs capitalize on these familiar motifs in the selling of the shows. TV spots advertising *Planet Earth* feature scenes of epic grandeur, from extreme close-ups, slow-motion attack sequences, and time-lapse photography, set to an “O Fortuna”/“Duel of the Fates”-esque score composed by Emmy winner George Fenton and performed by the BBC Concert Orchestra. The composition of the trailer is virtually indistinguishable from action films—other than, as Devin Gordon notes in his review of *Planet Earth*, it “just happens to feature snow leopards instead of superheroes.” Play the trailer for *Planet Earth* back-to-back with the trailer for *The Avengers* (2012) or similar films and the similarities between the genres become evident. The intertitles in the trailer emphasize the epic-action feel of the series: “this spring / open your eyes / to the power / the majesty / and the wonder of planet earth.” The intertitles are interspersed throughout some of the most breathtaking images from the series and highlighted with dramatic music.

This dramatic style is typical of all BBNFs. The trailer for *Life* opens with a slow-motion scene of a monkey lifting a rock over its head, then bringing it down to smash a hard-shelled nut—a scene more than a little reminiscent of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The trailer continues with images from and references to *Planet Earth*: “With

the landmark series *Planet Earth*, we brought you the world and its remarkable habitats”—quite a claim, and also quite revealing. Certainly *Planet Earth* profiles a wide range of animals and biomes: mountains, fresh water, caves, deserts, polar regions, great plains, jungles, shallow seas, seasonal forests, and deep oceans. But how can a nature documentary bring us the world? It can provide knowledge of various geographical regions, habitats, and species, but that limited knowledge is not “the world.” To make the claim that a documentary *can* bring viewers “the world” is to define the world as knowable through short, decontextualized vignettes that feature the most dramatic moments from nature and none of the mundane. It could be claimed that *Planet Earth* brought viewers a particular vision of the world—one that, despite all the HD technology and unique footage, still fails to do justice to the real wonder and scope of our living planet.

The dramatic voice-over describes the contents of *Life*:

Now, for the first time, in unprecedented detail, we'll reveal the amazing creatures that bring our planet to life. The unexpected. The unimaginable. From BBC Earth comes *Life*. Extraordinary animals, extreme behavior, on every continent and in every habitat. More than four years in the making, 3,000 filming days around the globe: a breathtaking ten-part blockbuster.

The trailer uses all the magic words: “unprecedented,” “reveal,” “unexpected,” “unimaginable,” “extraordinary,” “extreme,” “breathtaking,” and “blockbuster,” as well as an overt reference to the scope of the project in terms of the time investment made by

the producers and filmmakers in creating the series. These words serve to increase the value of the product by emphasizing the rarity of the footage and promising exciting experiences. Not only does the trailer imply similarities between the series and summer blockbusters, but by using the word “blockbuster,” the trailer creates an overt identification between them. The trailer supports this claim with slow-motion action shots of various species doing amazing things: geese “walking” on water, frogs snatching dragonflies in midair, orcas leaping from the water to catch seals, hippos battling, a Venus flytrap closing on its meal, and a chameleon deploying its long tongue to catch an insect. These scenes are very similar to the stunts similarly featured in trailers for action films. Quite apparently, this is not your parents’ wildlife film; this is a documentary for the superhero-flick generation.

The BBC’s most recent BBNF, *Frozen Planet*, is marketed in a very similar way to its predecessors. In the BBC trailer, the intertitles read: “First *The Blue Planet* / Then *Planet Earth* / Now Journey / To a World Beyond Imagination / Where the Ice Rules / . . . And Only the Strong Survive / Share Intimate Moments / From a Disappearing World” (ellipsis in original). Like *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth*, and *Life*, *Frozen Planet*, which focuses on the polar regions, trades mainly in promises of new experiences in the form of rare and unique footage. Notably, it is also the first of the BBNFs to invoke habitat loss as a part of its marketing. The polar regions are described as “disappearing”—a gentle way of phrasing the problem. As with the other series, *Frozen Planet* co-opts habitat loss as part of its sales pitch: you should see this now, before it’s too late. Unlike previous series, however, *Frozen Planet* takes a more active approach to environmental

awareness; the last episode, “On Thin Ice,” focuses on climate change, global warming, the melting of the ice caps, and the resulting effects on both animals and people. The Discovery Channel’s “Americanized” trailer for the series omits the references to climate change, preferring to characterize the series as “An epic drama / above and below the ice / like nothing else on earth.” Originally, Discovery opted not to even air “On Thin Ice,” fearing a backlash from “climate-change skeptics” and because climate change was a “particularly sensitive” topic during that year’s presidential race (“Climate Change”). A third of the thirty networks to which the BBC sold the series chose not to air the seventh episode for much the same reasons, leading the BBC to dub it a “companion” episode that networks could exclude from their purchase of the series (Gonzalez). A public outcry led to the episode’s inclusion in the American broadcast of *Frozen Planet*.

The BBNF was forged in the crucible created by rapid technological advancement, blockbuster movies, increased audience expectations, and the high-profile battles about the health of our planet. BBNFs have more potential to influence viewers’ concepts of nature than more traditional nature documentaries because of their popular appeal; they are at once familiar, sharing many characteristics with more traditional nature programming, and new and exciting for the conventions that make them different. BBNFs share many of the conventions of traditional nature films analyzed in Chapters II and III. Like most other natural history programming, BBNFs offer limited contact with the natural world often while trying to flaunt the skill of the filmmakers and/or hosts. BBNFs try to contain nature, immortalize their subjects, create an archive of the world,

preserve knowledge, educate, amuse, unsettle, and even horrify. They can help viewers discover new places, animals, and behaviors, while blending science with popular knowledge, education with entertainment, and authenticity with artifice. Their narrative and filmmaking techniques attempt to create identification with some subjects while objectifying others. While BBNFs are frequently guilty of commodifying nature, scarcity, and spectacle, they can also be a virtual place for regeneration and renewal. In pursuit of capturing the spirit and mystery of nature, some filmmakers resort to various types of fakery. Each new series or film features advancements in both technology and technique that help enable research and discovery. The authoritative and often paternalistic narrator, combined with the musical score, editing, and ability of the camera's gaze to exclude as well as include, decontextualize and recontextualize the images and guide the audience's interpretation. Often excessively sentimental, the BBNF tends to anthropomorphize animals, which can help build identification between the audience and the film's subjects but can also falsely attribute human emotions and motivations to animals, thereby enhancing the tendency of the audience to look at the world only in terms of the self.

Other critics have noticed trends in modern nature documentary filmmaking, including so-called "blue-chip" documentaries. The term "blue-chip," which often refers to stocks or premier athletes, denotes a quality product that is reliable and expected to be profitable. Film critic Bagust suggests that the *Walking with . . .* series are examples of blue-chip documentary. Bagust argues that blue-chip documentaries tend to share some or all of these conventions:

1. the depiction of mega-fauna, especially large predators;
2. visual splendour and spectacular scenery;
3. dramatic narrative – the animals are often anthropomorphized;
4. the absence of history and politics;
5. the absence of people (except occasionally tribal, pre-industrial or “natural” people, including park rangers);
6. the absence of explicit references to the scientific method (although its application is implicit). (219)

BBNFs, as a type of blue-chip documentary, exhibit these same conventions; as the name I have given the genre suggests, however, the unprecedented budgets of BBNFs are their most defining characteristic. Most documentaries are produced on a shoestring budget by individuals or small groups of filmmakers (see Table 1). Limited resources affect the entire production, from location and videography to post-production and distribution. BBNFs, by contrast, are made possible by previously unheard-of financial backing (see Table 2). Funding like this is made possible through co-financing agreements among production partners, such as the BBC, the Discovery Channel, NHK (Japan’s state broadcaster), and others. These production partners expect to make significant profits, which differentiates them from most standard documentaries, where profit is a secondary concern behind raising awareness and/or educating the public.

**Table 1: Sample Documentary Budgets**

<b>Title &amp; Year</b>	<b>Production Partners</b>	<b>Est. Budget</b>
<i>Roger &amp; Me</i> (1989)	Warner Bros. Pictures, Dog Eat Dog Films	\$160k <sup>2</sup>
<i>Paris is Burning</i> (1991)	Miramax Films, Off White Productions, Prestige	\$500k <sup>2</sup>
<i>Bully</i> (2011)	Where We Live Films, The Bully Project	\$1.1 million <sup>1</sup>



**Table 2: Sample BBNF Budgets**

<b>Title &amp; Year</b>	<b>Production Partners</b>	<b>Est. Budget</b>
<i>The Blue Planet</i> (2001)	BBC Natural History Unit (NHU) Discovery Channel (DC)	\$11 million <sup>1</sup>
<i>Winged Migration</i> (2003)	Canal+, Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC), France 2 Cinéma, France 3 Cinéma, Galatée Films	\$32 million <sup>1</sup>
<i>Planet Earth</i> (2006)	BBC NHU, DC, NHK Japan, CBC	\$20 million <sup>3</sup>
<i>Earth</i> (2009)	BBC Worldwide, BBC NHU, Gaumont, DC, NHK Japan	\$39 million <sup>1</sup>
<i>Life</i> (2009)	BBC NHU, DC, Skai TV, Open University	\$15 million <sup>4</sup>
<i>Oceans</i> (2010)	Galatée Films, Pathé, France 2 Cinéma, France 3 Cinéma, Notro Films, JMH-TSR	\$80 million <sup>2</sup>
<i>Frozen Planet</i> (2012)	BBC NHU, DC, Antena 3 Televisión, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), Open University, SKAI, DC Canada	\$25 million <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Source: IMDB.com

<sup>2</sup> Source: boxofficemojo.com

<sup>3</sup> Source: Strauss, Gary. "Behold 'Planet Earth' in All Its Glory." *USA Today* 22 March 2007. Web.

<sup>4</sup> Source: *London Times*

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthnews/8889541/BBC-drops-Frozen-Planets-climate-change-episode-to-sell-show-better-abroad.html>

The budgets shown in Table 2, which are more consistent with feature films, allow for substantially increased production values throughout the filmmaking process and an end product consumers will want to buy. The filmmakers can conceptualize a project with a far-more ambitious scope than standard documentary fare. For example, with a budget of up to \$2 million per episode, *Planet Earth* was filmed by 71 camera operators in 204 locations in 62 countries over a five-year period, statistics that are heavily emphasized in the marketing of the series. Likewise, *Life* features 150 locations on all seven continents. Alastair Fothergill, former head of the BBC NHU and executive producer of *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth*, *Frozen Planet*, and a host of other natural history programs, revealed in a 2011 interview that he envisions his film projects as taking a minimum of two to four years, plus one year of research prior to filming (Cropper). The enormous budget also permits the development and use of cutting-edge filmmaking technology, which is an essential component of a BBNF and so key to its

commercial success. For example, for *Planet Earth*, which was the first nature documentary to be filmed entirely in HD, the team developed the heligimbal, which is a gyroscopically stabilized HD camera with a long zoom lens that is attached the underside of a helicopter, allowing camera crews to film animals in close-up from up to a kilometer away (Whitney 18). The extreme zoom capability of the heligimbal permitted not only long-distance filming to minimize or eliminate disturbing the animal subjects but also dramatic pull-back shots that were previously impossible. While preparing to film *Frozen Planet*, the filmmakers adapted the heligimbal to be mounted on ships in order to film in rough waters in the Arctic and around Antarctica. Shots like the footage of killer whales working as a team to dislodge a seal from an ice floe depended on gyroscopically stabilized cameras. The ability to film in HD using extreme close-ups, long shots, and slow-motion and in challenging, even prohibitive, conditions plays a significant role in creating the “epic” and “heroic” style that the filmmakers envision.

The conventions analyzed by Scott and Bagust suggest some compelling questions for the digital age: Can we consider nonfiction films that are comprised partly or even entirely of CGI images (or images so manipulated by technology that they *look* like CGI) to be “documentaries”? How much “reality” can or should viewers and critics demand in order for a series or film to bill itself as a documentary? The answers to these questions may depend largely on how one defines the genre of documentary. In the 1930s, documentary pioneer John Grierson famously defined “documentary” as “the creative treatment of actuality” (qtd. in Winston 14). As the previous chapters

demonstrate, the tension between “actuality”—a term Grierson and others used to signify the (inaccessible) unmediated world around us—and representations of it has been problematic from the earliest days of documentary filmmaking. Documentary filmmakers have produced many films that push the boundaries of what might constitute “actuality.” In some cases, such as the *Walking with . . .* series and various BBNFs, filmmakers go so far as to create virtual environments for specific rhetorical purposes. The BBNF constructs a virtual environment and presents it as “nature” in order to provide refuge, escape, diversion, knowledge, and calming reassurance in the midst of daily reminders about the declining health of our planet.

### **Virtual Environments: Zoos, Parks, and BBNFs**

One of the outcomes of carefully controlling wildlife encounters and filming conditions is the creation of virtual environments that appear unaffected by humans. In many cases, the exclusion of humans and human influence seems directly connected to controversial topics like global warming, habitat destruction, and conservation. In a 2006 interview with the London *Times*, Alastair Fothergill responded to the question of whether *Planet Earth* has an environmental agenda:

The opening programme [“Pole to Pole”] starts with a very simple message. We just say “100 years ago there were a billion and a half people on our planet; now there are six billion. And yet, enormous areas of the world remain untouched.” And they do. Despite the fact that we’ve trashed quite a lot of it, the vast majority of it – most of the

mountains, oceans, deserts, most of the wilderness areas are relatively untouched, that's what makes them interesting. The function of *Planet Earth* is to raise people's awareness and to show them things that are still out there which are still unspoilt. ("Alastair")

And yet, the series focuses almost entirely on endangered species and species on the edge of extinction—species whose populations have been devastated over the past century largely due to over-hunting and habitat destruction. Fothergill's claim that "most of the wilderness areas are relatively untouched" seems to be contradicted by the contents of his own series, and far more in the service of selling the exclusivity of the footage than raising awareness for conservation issues. Even in the most isolated areas featured in the *Planet Earth* series—the Gobi, the forests of eastern Russia, the Arctic, the mountains of Pakistan—nonhuman animals face obstacles and even the threat of extinction caused by human encroachment, pollution, and global warming. It would seem that to find Fothergill's "relatively untouched" areas, one must go to the proverbial ends of the earth—and even then, humanity's footprint is still visible just beneath the illusion of pure wilderness.

To understand how and why the BBNF constructs these illusions, it is fruitful to consider the similarities between these films and the modern wildlife theme park and zoo. Chapter II argues that natural history filmmaking in general is part of the same history of exploitation of nature as wildlife theme parks and zoos. Recent research indicates significant concerns about the role of parks and zoos in conservation, ecotourism, and education, as well as what their design and visitors' responses might

reveal about how modern urban populations relate to their environment. I argue that the same anxieties apply to BBNFs, which serve many of the same purposes as zoos and parks in our contemporary culture. I also contend that in many ways, the BBNF seems to be more analogous to wildlife parks and zoos than to traditional nature documentaries. As with the analysis of human pornography and ecopornography in Chapter IV, the comparison between zoos and wildlife parks and BBNFs is useful for enhancing our understanding of how images of nature function rhetorically. This section analyzes those similarities and demonstrates how zoo discourse, in combination with film studies and ecocriticism, can enhance our understanding of BBNFs.

It is certainly worth noting at the outset that not all zoos are created equal. As documented in Chapter II, most menageries and zoological parks changed little despite the passage of the centuries. Even some contemporary zoos bear a striking resemblance to the Tower Menagerie, with too-small cages with bars that separate human visitors from the animals. Visits to zoos such as these can be depressing and even traumatic for visitors, particularly children. The more modern and enlightened incarnation of a zoo—the type of zoo to which I am alluding in this section—represents both a much different experience and more ethical way of interacting with animals. In this model, many animals—even large and dangerous ones—are kept not in cages but in large open areas, separated from visitors by low railings and other more subtle barriers. At zoos like Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo, the San Diego Zoo, and many other premiere zoos, there are few if any metal cages; instead, big cats, bears, apes, snakes, and other animals are kept in large glass enclosures. The animals’ natural habitats have been reproduced

within their enclosures, and it is apparent that many zoos have prioritized providing a better quality of life for their inhabitants. There is a long-running and much-impassioned debate over the ethics of zoos and wildlife theme parks and their treatment of animals. Most of this debate is outside the scope of this project, which focuses on the rhetoric of zoos and the ways it illuminates the study of BBNFs. As such, as with the issue of pornography in Chapter IV, this study proceeds with an eye toward what cultural work zoos and parks *do* and *how* they do it, rather than debating whether they should or should not exist.

Irus Braverman notes that most contemporary zoos use two design techniques to create a naturalistic setting: zoogeography and immersion design (815). According to Braverman, zoogeography “is a specific interpretation of nature in that it creates pockets of nature that are identified by their geography, rather than through their habitat (for instance desert or rainforest) or other taxonomic means” (816). Zoos incorporate this design technique by organizing their layout by continent (an African section, a South American section, and so forth), thus rendering the whole world as subordinate to the human spectator. The zoogeographical arrangement also presents itself as representative of the whole, while simultaneously causing dedifferentiation and the disintegration of conceptual boundaries between bioregions; as Braverman notes, “Penguins from the Arctic swim a few yards away from Kenyan lion, giraffes roam near polar bears” (816). This dedifferentiation can seriously undermine conservation efforts that focus on protecting biodiversity. The “thematic” arrangement of most BBNFs can have a similar effect. For example, the *Planet Earth* series is divided into episodes that focus on types

of biomes, such as “Deserts,” “Seasonal Forests,” “Great Plains,” and “Ice Worlds.”

While scenes in the episode were filmed in locations around the world, the end result is a conflation similar to that caused by zoogeographical arrangement.

A popular type of contact zone at these modernized zoos—and a space that perhaps best illustrates how zoos fulfill their cultural roles—is the immersive enclosure, which attempts to make visitors feel as though they are part of the habitat, rather than outside the enclosure looking in. Popular immersive enclosures include jungle or desert domes. Once patrons enter the structure, every effort is made to mask the artificiality of the enclosure. One sees little evidence of the building itself; walls are covered or replaced with “natural” elements like trees or images of nature, and the floors virtually vanish, either painted a nondescript matte black or supplanted with dirt or stone walking paths. Evidence of man’s involvement in the construction of the environment fades away the farther in one ventures (with the exception of clearly marked Exit signs and hand sanitizer stations, which provide occasional jarring reminders that one is inside a building). In a jungle enclosure, patrons walk along dirt paths lined with tropical trees, plants, and rocks, often ducking under low-hanging leaves and vines and walking over rope bridges traversing small jungle streams and waterfalls. Tropical animals like birds and reptiles are dispersed throughout the enclosure, which maintains a high level of humidity that further enhances the illusion. In desert enclosures, the temperature is hot, the air is dry, and desert animals and plants line the walkways. Other common immersive enclosures include bird and butterfly aviaries, aquariums, nocturnal animal enclosures, swamps, and polar regions. These habitats offer sight, sound, smell, touch,

and even taste via the scents in the air—a virtual reality experience that involves all five senses for maximum engagement.

For immersive design to have its desired effect, the human visitor must cooperate by looking past the artificiality. Killingsworth contends that

In virtual reality, you purposely lose sight of where you are in order to see someplace where you are not. You enter the rainforest pyramid of Moody Gardens [in Galveston] and leave behind the laughing gulls and Gulf atmosphere of natural Galveston. The air is still humid in the pyramid, but cooler in the shade of real tropical trees. Ficus and other things I think of as houseplants grow impossibly huge. The cries of birds are different, too, uttered by species that would never naturally test the air-space of East Texas. (*Going Back* 6)

Many immersive enclosures blend living plants and animals with artificial versions to create the optimal experience for visitors. The “sounds of the rain forest” or “desert” are often piped in via speakers hidden in artificial rocks; trees are sometimes synthetic and made to a very specific design. Architect Gwen Howard of the Buffalo Zoo reveals how detailed these designs are: “The fake is very prescribed. You’re going to build me one tree; it’s going to be this diameter, this kind of species; it’s going to have six primary branches, and off of each of those would have a minimum of three to five secondary branches” (qtd. in Braverman 818). This is the nature many visitors have come to see: perfectly formed and pervasively unnatural.



The wildlife theme park, as exemplified by Disney's Animal Kingdom, Busch Gardens, San Diego Zoo Safari Park, and hundreds of smaller "safari" parks across the nation and around the world, is the ultimate immersive enclosure. Some load patrons into park-owned chauffeured vehicles or trains; others allow visitors to drive their own vehicles on designated roads at their own speed. While the traditional zoo, with its paths, enclosures, buildings, snack stands, and ubiquitous souvenir shops, is always apparently a zoo, the wildlife theme park's ultimate goal is to get patrons to forget that it, too, is a zoo—just with larger enclosures. Perhaps most significantly, what we are seeing is not really a copy of natural space but an idealized manifestation of our own conceptions about how that space in nature *should* appear. A visitor to a zoo—whether traditional or immersive—sees not nature, but his/her own ideas reflected back as the zoo draws connections not to nature but to the meanings we have assigned to nature. Anything that does not fit is excluded. As Meister and Japp note,

Every supposed reflection of some facet of experience is in reality a selection . . . [chosen] to represent the idea or issue under focus. Such selections are inevitably deflections; they hide and obscure what lies outside the selection. Over time, one forgets (if indeed one ever realized) that the selection does not reflect the whole. (7)

This statement highlights two fundamental problems with both zoos and BBNFs: that they represent only a tiny fraction of the earth's habitats and species, and that they exclude not only the balance of those places and animals but also the factors that are threatening their very survival in the wild.

What is the cultural work of zoos? They construct virtual environments that are more easily accessible than many of the geographical regions they represent, while offering existentially authentic experiences. Few people are able to travel extensively enough to see even a handful of the animals one might see in a zoo or wildlife theme park. Even those who *can* travel to ecotourist destinations often find that nature is hard to access—only the most intrepid explorers are willing and able to trek sometimes miles off the beaten track to get to a point of interest like a waterfall, a scenic view, or a spontaneous wildlife encounter. The trip to the zoo or the settling in for an evening of watching a BBNF may substitute for actual wildlife encounters. Burke notes in *Philosophy of Literary Form*, in regard to “inspirational” or self-help literature, that “*The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success. It is while they read that these readers are succeeding*” (299, emphasis in original). The reader wants “easy success” and thus exchanges the act of the reading for the act of earning real-world success. In this way, reading is “not the *prelude to*, but the *substitute for*, action; vicarious, armchair experience is less threatening than facing the decisions necessary for change” (Japp and Japp 84). The trip to the zoo and the watching of a BBNF are analogous to the kind of reading-as-substitute-for-action that Burke and Phyllis M. Japp and Debra K. Japp analyze. A visit to a zoo or the viewing of a nature film are safe types of engagement that provide the good feelings of a wildlife encounter without forcing the visitor or viewer to engage with difficult realities or expend the time, energy, and resources to venture out into nature and seek out an encounter for oneself.

Exposure to the images of nature analyzed in Chapters II-IV, as well as our post-industrial sensibilities, may well have shifted our expectations for both the ease of encountering nature and the type of encounters we should expect to have. In lieu of routine interaction with less easily accessible manifestations of nature's grandeur, virtual reality experiences like immersive enclosures and wildlife theme parks become essential contact zones and resources not just for information but also to help create identification and emotional and ethical connections between humans and animals and even humans and particular biomes. The existentially authentic experience—as differentiated from the objectively authentic experience of encountering these animals and their habitats in the wild—is a key component of making these connections.

Zoos and BBNFs are a form of virtual ecotourism, which Chris Ryan and Jan Saward define as “appreciation of wildlife [wherein] . . . such wildlife is to be observed with minimal disturbance within its natural settings” (247). David B. Weaver defines ecotourism as “a form of tourism that fosters learning experiences and appreciation of the natural environment,” adding that ecotourism appears to be “environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable, preferably in a way that enhances the natural and cultural resource base of the destination” (15). However, as Ryan and Saward point out, ecotourism has many detractors, who cite the potential for disrupting natural behaviors and cycles, dubious evidence that ecotourists modify their behavior, the threat of communicable diseases, the recasting of natural habitats into leisure space, and the tendency to look at landscapes and wildlife as a source of spectacle (247-8). Ecotourism, as a form of tourism, necessarily requires that nonhuman animals and

habitats be commodified and assigned a market value as objects to be observed; this in some ways positions ecotourism against conservation, which seeks to disrupt consumerist apathy toward wildlife and its surroundings. Though zoos and BBNFs can act as substitutes for actual ecotourism, these virtual realities stir equally unsettling questions about the effects on thinking about conservation and the world around us.

To create existentially authentic experiences, zoos and BBNFs must design and build complex virtual worlds that artfully combine entertainment and popular appeal with education and conservation. N. Katherine Hayles argues that “When ‘nature’ becomes an object for *visual* consumption . . . there is a good chance it has already left the realm of firsthand experience and entered the category of constructed experience that we can appropriately call simulation” (411, emphasis in original). She offers the example of “Buffalo” Bill Cody’s traveling Wild West show, which became popular only after the “Wild West” was disappearing as both a way of life and a place. Buffalo Bill’s show also demonstrates how a simulation can construct reality. For both American and European audiences, the show’s depiction of what life was like in the American frontier—as well as its portrayal of Native Americans—became the “real” Wild West, which no longer existed (and never really existed at all in the form presented by the show anyway). The show is clearly part of the same traditions of exploitation and commodification of nature that is analyzed in Chapter II (Roman wild animal shows, menageries, and traveling circuses)—a tradition that continues today, in part, in the modern zoo and BBNF.

The show also contained elements of a “human zoo”; in addition to animals, it showcased Native Americans, including Sitting Bull and twenty of his braves for a time. As Chapter II shows, there is nothing new about including humans in exhibitions; in fact, it was a deeply racist, degrading, and common practice in many imperial and colonial cultures both abroad and in the United States. And as with those other incarnations of the “human zoo,” the simulation and simulacra they created had an enormous impact on both contemporary perceptions and modern misconceptions about the very real places, people, and events they depicted. Louis E. Warren argues that Cody’s show was instrumental in creating and disseminating the so-called “Custer myth,” which became

an icon of imperial expansion and race war that . . . reflected deep anxieties, particularly among the managerial classes about the swamping of America by immigrants, freed blacks, and union organizers, and . . . was a set-piece of masculine combat in an age profoundly concerned about the survival of white masculinity. (50)

According to Warren, many scholars also contend that the show’s depiction of Custer’s defeat at Little Big Horn as a slaughter committed by Native Americans played a significant role in perpetuating the idea of Native American aggression against whites. Here again we see not only the simulation (or simulacra) becoming reality, but also how the rhetorical process of decontextualization and recontextualization helps control the parameters of the discourse and strengthen the argument that the “savage” Native

Americans were both inferior and dangerous and therefore their oppression and even extermination was justified.

The case study of Buffalo Bill's Wild West clarifies Hayles's argument that simulations easily become reality, particularly in the absence of the thing they claim to represent. Many such simulations are so integrally a part of the fabric of our lives that they are virtually indistinguishable from what we (perhaps arbitrarily or mistakenly) designate as their opposite (the "real," the "actual," the "authentic"). As Hayles asserts, however, it is neither useful nor accurate to make such distinctions. One runs the risk of devolving into a kind of "bad simulation/good nature" binary way of thinking, which, as Killingsworth and Palmer and others have noted, is an all-too-common dialogue-ending problem in environmental discourse. But more to the point, as Hayles emphasizes, is that "constructing the situation in these terms . . . relies on distinctions that quickly become problematic. What counts as natural? Can we consider Yosemite National Park an embodiment of nature? If so, then nature is synonymous with human intervention" (410). Indeed, on our crowded planet, it is difficult to locate any area of wilderness that remains so *without* human intervention. Here, Hayles echoes the arguments of Cronon, Mitman, and others, who have drawn attention to the "trouble" with the concept of wilderness. Hayles instead prefers to think of nature and simulation "not as two separate worlds, one natural and one simulated, estranged from each other, but interfaces and permeable membranes through which the two flow and interpenetrate" (413). The fact that nature is *always* mediated, as we come to it through discourse, further complicates the notion of distinguishing between nature and simulation, as any kind of "real, pure

nature” may be both inaccessible and inexpressible. Zoos and BBNFs illustrate how nature and simulation act, as Hayles suggests, as “interfaces and permeable membranes through which the two flow and interpenetrate.” Thinking of these spaces in those terms rather than as one or the other—or even as an intersection of the two—helps clarify the complex rhetorical exchanges that occur between the agents of production and the audience within what I will refer to as “hybrid spaces.”

To create these hybrid spaces and sell the illusion of actual wilderness experience, the architects and engineers of zoos build with concrete, metal, nets, glass, and stone; the producers of BBNFs use camera angles, careful editing, post-production effects, and high-definition filmmaking equipment. The BBNF uses HD, extreme close-ups, and the exclusion of humans to immerse viewers in a virtual environment. Like the “perfect” simulated tree, with its aesthetically pleasing and optimally functional six primary branches and three-to-five secondary branches, the BBNF is made to exacting specifications. It is nature at its most perfectly formed. The BBNF asks the viewer, like the visitor to the immersive exhibit, to “buy into” the tableaux: to ignore what the camera excludes, to overlook the fact that the film has been painstakingly edited and enhanced, to decline to ask what is “real” and what is simulated. The immediacy and illusions of immersive zoo exhibits and BBNFs have real potential to undermine conservation efforts; even if the encounters are presented in the context of climate change, global warming, habitat destruction, and so forth, as McKibben observes, the essential message remains: there are animals *here*.

As Chapter IV demonstrates, the rhetorical process of decontextualization and recontextualization helps control the parameters of discourse and reveals insight into the agent(s) of production's motivations and agendas. Separating something from its inherent political, ideological, and historical contexts is an essential component of constructing virtual realities and hybrid spaces like BBNFs and zoos; it is also essential for making these consumer products more appealing to patrons. While BBNFs and zoos offer knowledge and entertainment, above all, they are selling an experience.

There are some indications that viewers are concerned about being sold a fake bill of goods when it comes to natural history programs. A title card at the beginning of episodes of *Frozen Planet* informs viewers that “To ensure no negative impact on wildlife and in the interest of crew safety, some scenes were filmed in controlled settings. All scenes accurately illustrate conditions and behavior in the wild.”

Controversy erupted when it was revealed that one of the series' most dramatic scenes—newborn polar bear cubs in their mother's den—was actually filmed in a Dutch zoo. Various news outlets labeled the scene “fakery” and sharply criticized the BBC for “hiding” the truth in a hard-to-find video clip on the BBC's website rather than making it clear in the episode that the scene was filmed in a zoo (Gladdis). While some viewers commenting on the news stories express dismay at being misled, many seem inclined to accept the practice of substituting footage obtained in a zoo; their comments indicate an understanding of both how commonplace the practice is and that some scenes are impossible or impractical to capture in the wild. Which other scenes are referred to by the title card and what else might constitute a “controlled setting” is unclear, but the



caveat foregrounds the debate over the accuracy and ethics of “illustrating” the conditions and behavior of wildlife in “controlled settings.” This pronouncement may be a failed attempt to avoid the controversy that occurred in 2001 after it became known that some of the footage in *The Blue Planet* was actually filmed in aquariums. In that case, a spokesperson for the BBC argued that it would have been “impractical and unethical” for the series to have filmed lobsters spawning in the wild, as it was feared that the filmmakers’ presence would interfere with essential biological processes. The spokesperson assured viewers that the sequence was “in no way fake”; series producer Fothergill added that the location of the filming “wasn’t the point” and though he estimated that 2% of the whole series was filmed in tanks, the overall educational value of the program outweighed that fact (“BBC Defends”). The controversy demonstrates the ethical tensions inherent to natural history filmmaking, as well as the potential for repercussions when viewers feel as if they have been deliberately misled by filmmakers.

The debate over how *The Blue Planet* and *Frozen Planet* (mis)represent particular scenes calls to mind the claims made by Disney that the True-Life Adventures were “photographed in their natural settings and are completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed.” The BBC made no such claim to authenticity for their films; they merely neglected to mention that certain scenes were shot in controlled environments like aquariums and zoos and then blended with footage from the wild without differentiating between the two. The angry reactions of some viewers who felt duped counter the comment made by Bronx Zoo Director Jimmy Breheny, who, when asked if zoo visitors were made aware of which materials of the zoo’s Congo exhibit were artificial, replied:

“Why would we want to do that? For 90 percent of the people who come here, this is as close as they are going to get to a field experience” (qtd. in Braverman 818). The matter of objective and existential authenticity is still very much at issue in both exhibit design and nature filmmaking, and the consumers’ willingness to buy what the designers and filmmakers are selling seems at least somewhat dependent on how trustworthy the former perceive the latter to be. This trust becomes particularly important in natural history programs, where the camera becomes an additional level of mediation between the viewer and first-hand experience.

Insights into how filmmakers, like zoo designers, construct virtual environments is one way in which zoo discourse can contribute to an analysis of BBNFs. Another similarity is the ways in which both reflect a tendency to reduce human/animal interaction to brief, dramatic encounters. According to one study conducted at the Singapore Zoo, “the mean time for viewing exhibits was 62.8 seconds, but with a high standard deviation based on the popularity of the animals and their behaviours (e.g. big cats could attract more attention when active, but less when sleeping)” (Ryan and Seward 247). The layout of wildlife parks and zoos is conducive to brief encounters; parks encourage visitors to proceed through the park, and zoos, by virtue of their design, offer a wide variety of mini-encounters that are analogous to the short vignettes that comprise BBNFs. Most scenes are just a few minutes long; some are much shorter. Mitman has noted the effect these brief encounters have on viewers and visitors. Describing a trip to Denali National Park, Mitman notes that his fellow park visitors seemed to look at the wildlife in the park as if they were watching a film, excited by

brief dramatic encounters with predators and quickly bored by “the serene and subtle qualities of this vast Arctic landscape. The camera had shaped our expectations, defined our experience” (207). Mitman’s assessment illustrates some of nature films’ potential effects on viewers’ attention spans, which carries over into real-world encounters with nature and, as Mitman notes, diminishes the ability to connect meaningfully or for extended periods with the natural world.

One of the stated goals of both natural history programming and zoos is facilitating connections between humans and animals. Even so, the “distancing” that Scott argues is a result of common conventions in natural history programs is evident in zoos and parks, where human visitors are generally separated from animals by fences, walls, dry or water-filled moats, or strict admonitions to stay in one’s vehicle and on designated pathways. The boundaries of human world and “natural” world are thus clearly delineated. According to Ryan and Seward, studies have shown that opportunities to break through these boundaries, such as visitors directly feeding animals, increased visitor satisfaction with their experience, but the studies did not measure whether visitors who had physical contact with the animals expressed or demonstrated improved environmental awareness or empathy (249).<sup>17</sup> Other studies analyze the divisions between humans and animals in zoo and park environments.

Braverman argues that “The zoo’s interpretation of nature . . . reinstitutes nature as a

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<sup>17</sup> A 2007 study conducted by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA), however, claimed that “visiting accredited zoos and aquariums in North America has a measurable impact on the conservation attitudes and understanding of adult visitors” (qtd. in Marino et al. 127). Despite the report being cited by numerous zoos and aquariums, however, its findings remain in dispute. This study has significant implications for evaluating the relative value of BBNFs in regard to raising awareness about the importance of conservation.

pre-existing entity and humans and nature as separate and remote” (810). Braverman’s study, comprised of 35 interviews with zoo personnel, offers insights into zoo spaces, including the “illusion of nature” of exhibit spaces, the “intense human management” of the unseen holding areas, and public spaces such as gift shops, carousels, and promenades (810). Gift shops, which sell plush simulacra, photographs, and videos of nonhuman animals, reinforce both the “thing”-ness of nature and its status as a consumer product, available to purchase and take home with you. Dale Jamieson contends that “Zoos teach us a false sense of our place in the natural order. The means of confinement mark a difference between humans and animals” (142). The concerns raised by Ryan and Seward, Braverman, and Jamieson are only a few of the ethical issues being raised in the ongoing debates about zoos and their role in education, entertainment, and ecotourism—debates that are equally applicable to natural history programs in general and BBNFs in particular.

The BBNF, with its authoritative voiceover narration, frequent omission of history and politics, and aversion to including humans, creates equally distinct spaces and boundaries between humans and animals. According to Scott, didactic, paternalistic, and authoritative narration is common in natural history programs, where it presents considerable amounts of information to the viewer and compliments the onscreen images (30-31). While onscreen images are open to interpretation, the narrator attempts to control this process by decontextualizing and recontextualizing the scene and controlling the discourse. Documentary film critic Carl R. Plantinga argues that “Today’s audiences are quite suspicious of the media, and do not accept what they see as natural, or the

claims of a voice-over narrator as the unproblematic truth” (159). The skepticism to which Plantinga alludes must vary depending on the source of the information and the (perceived) identity and ethos of the narrator. For example, visitors to a zoo or wildlife park are not likely to challenge seemingly objective data provided by the zoo about a particular species or habitat, as the zoo and the scientific research behind it are expected to be reliable. Similarly, the agents of production and the narrators of the BBNF have established their credibility. The BBC NHU has a long history of producing top-quality natural history programs; in the United States, the Discovery Channel (who has been a production partner of the BBC NHU for several BBNFs) has a similarly strong reputation. The voiceover narrator for the BBC versions of *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth*, *Life*, and *Frozen Planet*, as well as dozens of other natural history programs, Attenborough commands more authority than perhaps any other narrator in television documentary history. As noted in Chapter III, Attenborough is recognized worldwide for his body of work in natural history programming. More than merely an actor reading a script, Attenborough has contributed in no small way to the research, filming, and production of each series he narrates. As such, he is nature’s best-known paid spokesperson.

The Discovery Channel broadcasts “Americanized” versions of the original BBC BBNFs featuring celebrity narrators such as Pierce Brosnan (*The Blue Planet*), Sigourney Weaver (*Planet Earth*), Oprah Winfrey (*Life*), and Alec Baldwin (*Frozen Planet*), presumably to appeal to American audiences who are either less familiar with Attenborough or deemed more likely to identify with these celebrities than a British

naturalist. The all-seeing, all-knowing (often off-screen) narrator becomes a godlike figure, a single human voice that is the source of knowledge and explanation for the inscrutable world of mysterious animals and unfamiliar plants. While some nature programs feature an onscreen host/narrator, the BBNF does not. There could be several reasons for this exclusion. It is possible that the producers feel that the image of a human will disrupt the “epic” feel of the show, which is based on images of the unfamiliar and strange, rather than the mundane. It is also possible that the lack of onscreen host is a reflection of the BBNF’s aversion to including humans. If one of the goals of the BBNF is to find “relatively untouched” locations, one way to emphasize their supposed lack of human contact is to use an off-screen narrator rather than a visible host. Whatever the reason(s) may be, the end result is a complete separation of the human world and the natural world and a reinforcement of the idea that humans do not “belong” in the natural world—our expeditions are intrusions wherein we will be confronted by a host of unfamiliar, untamed, and potentially threatening plants, animals, and habitats.

To what end, then, do zoo designers and the filmmakers of BBNFs combine virtual environments, accessibility, zoogeography, immersive design, artificiality, brief dramatic encounters, decontextualization and recontextualization, and omniscient narrators? Education is certainly an important mission for both zoos and nature films. Conservation is a major part of the modern zoo and wildlife park; directly, they house endangered and threatened species and participate in breeding and rehabilitation programs and research designed to improve the likelihood of species survival.

Indirectly, they promote conservation values and environmental awareness to visitors. BBNFs also promote conservation and environmental awareness, albeit as gently as possible to avoid alienating their audience. But perhaps the most significant reason for the popularity of BBNFs, as well as zoos and parks, is that these virtual environments provide an escape from unpleasant realities; for the price of a ticket (or Blu-ray, or cable subscription), one can escape into a fantasy world untouched by global warming, habitat destruction, and pollution.

Zoos, wildlife parks, and national parks appeared in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the country made the transition from a rural and agricultural nation to an urban, industrial one. Simultaneously, scientists were becoming aware of declining numbers of various once-common species, and the impulse to preserve large areas of land and limit their development led to the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, Yosemite in 1890, and dozens more since. As more people moved to urban areas during the twentieth century, the nostalgia for lost nature contributed to the popularity of the zoo as an urban attraction and “domesticated spectacle,” where visitors could simultaneously marvel at specimens from around the world and “the ultimate triumph of modern humans over nature, of city over country, of reason over nature’s apparent wildness and chaos” (Braverman 814). In many ways, however, this nostalgia was directed at an imaginary idea: “pure wilderness,” a state that has not existed since humans and their ancestors first began modifying their environment to suit their needs and desires. And yet zoos, wildlife parks, and BBNFs strive to (re)create these “untouched” spaces for the pleasure of the human spectator.

Zoos and parks utilize a variety of methods to (re)create habitats, seeking the Holy Grail of zoo/park design: the appearance of authenticity that makes the visitor forget, even if for a moment, that he or she is within a construct. As Jean Baudrillard noted in his epigraph to *Simulacra and Simulation*: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” In the case of zoo and wildlife park habitats, the exhibits mask the absence of a profound reality—they profess to be reliable copies, but in truth, they are copies with no original. There are no habitats in the natural world that are as untouched by climate change and habitat destruction as those in the zoo. These exhibits blend natural elements such as rock, soil, grass, trees, and so forth with the artificial so seamlessly that it is often impossible to determine what is “real” and what is synthetic.

The BBNF follows an essentially analogous process; raw footage is the semi-natural element, and filmmaking technology and postproduction techniques are the synthetic. Like the zoo designer, the filmmaker combines the natural with the synthetic to (re)create an encounter with simulated animals and habitats to satisfy the needs of the viewer. The zoo, the wildlife park, and the BBNF are outside of time; they are always the present. While habitat destruction, poaching, global warming, over-hunting, destructive fishing and farming practices, and human encroachment affect every inch of the planet, the zoo, park, and BBNF are locked in time, virtual environments that remain accessible—for a price—to assuage our anxieties about our endangered planet.



## **A Pragmatic Approach to Advertising and Big-Budget Nature Films**

Let us return for a moment to the offer on the Discovery Channel Store's webpage to "Own *Life* and *Planet Earth* Today!" A shopper who clicks on the tantalizing "Shop Now!" link is taken to a landing page showing the various versions of *Life* and *Planet Earth* available for purchase, which are described in terms of their "amazing" and "unprecedented" footage:

*Life* is the landmark natural history series from Discovery Channel and the BBC. Discover the extraordinary lengths filmmakers went to in order to bring *Life* to the screen with behind the scenes [sic] footage. *Planet Earth* brings you the world as you've never seen it. *Planet Earth* redefines blue-chip natural history filmmaking. The series will amaze viewers with never-before-seen animal behaviors, startling views of locations captured by cameras for the first time, and unprecedented high-definition production techniques.

The strategy for promoting the sale of the DVD and Blu-ray versions of *Life* and *Planet Earth* is to emphasize the difficulties filmmakers experienced and promise viewers "the world as you've never seen it." The series are identified with the masculine quest narrative of the expedition film and as sources of unique footage of behaviors and locations. What is included in the description is perhaps less telling than what is excluded: that the majority of the animals featured are threatened or endangered, some on the edge of extinction; that these "never-before-photographed" locations will not be protected by the purchase of these DVDs; or that these animals and locations are part of

the same ecosystem as the viewer, not part of a separate world that somehow remains magically immune to the effects of climate change and habitat destruction. The up-front cost of feeling good about nature and the environment: \$16.99 to \$105.99, depending on which set you purchase. The long-term costs may be immense.

As previous chapters have demonstrated, the BBNF is part of a long history of commodification and exploitation of nature and scarcity. Meister and Japp have linked nature and environmental issues with economics, observing that “nature is symbolically transformed into a variety of cultural texts because it is used in the mass production and marketing of commodities. Consequently, nature, like the shampoo and laundry detergent bearing its ‘likeness,’ becomes a mass-produced commodity designed for cultural consumption” (2). In their study of the ways various agents of production represent and assign use-value to nature in popular culture, Meister and Japp argue that for most people, popular culture is primarily where meaning is made. During the course of a day, the average person is exposed to mediated “fragments of information, bits of dramatic stories, visual images, and examples” of the natural world and humanity’s place in it, creating “a kaleidoscope of images of places, spaces, species, geographies, and landscapes” (Meister and Japp 3). This “kaleidoscope” can, in turn, produce shifting, unclear, and conflicting perspectives on nature. News reports and documentaries frighten or anger with talk of the consequences of climate change and habitat destruction, while advertising urges us to consume more of everything. The strangest and most disconcerting incarnation of all may be so-called “green advertising,”

the juxtaposition of consumerism and environmental values that urges us—oxymoronically—to consume for the good of the planet.

While not a new phenomenon by any means, the use of images of nature in advertising is particularly influential on modern ways of thinking about our environment. Corbett argues that “Advertising commodifies the natural world and attaches material value to non-material goods, treating natural resources as private and ownable, not public and intrinsic” (146). Advertising also encourages us to think materialistically, to think in terms of private possessions and having the newest, fastest, sexiest products. By using parts of nature in ads or creating identifications between elements of nature and products or services, this very capitalistic process insists that *everything* has its price—even *Planet Earth*. This philosophy can also be counterproductive to environmental and conservation efforts if it leads to the mistaken belief that we can “buy” solutions to the problems of global warming, climate change, and habitat destruction. Even some environmental and conservation organizations inadvertently contribute to this misconception by encouraging consumers to “save the polar bears/pandas/rain forest” by donating to the organization. “Saving” the polar bears, pandas, and rain forest is a complex process that involves many processes and changes from the individual level to government and international levels; a simple, single monetary donation to an organization, no matter how well-intentioned, has virtually no chance of success. In a capitalistic consumer culture, however, the idea that if we throw enough money at it, the problem will go away is difficult to counter when the voices of industry and advertising are so much louder than the voices of ecologists.

Advertising also tends to characterize nature in terms of its usefulness to humans; if we can't climb it, drive on it, or make it work for us, what use is it? Ads designed to sell SUVs as tools to access nature show these gas-guzzling vehicles climbing over rocks and plowing through streams without regard to damage caused by their intrusion. Even more damaging than the obvious physical evidence of the SUV's passage, however, is the more insidious underlying assumption that humans have a right to drive these destructive vehicles wherever we please.

Indeed, advertising tends to represent nature as either an adversary to be conquered or as "sublime, simple, and unproblematic" (Corbett 150). As Cronon observes in "The Trouble with Wilderness," the sublime is a romanticized view of nature in which one feels awestruck and close to God. Sublime nature symbolizes an ideal state of being to which we are supposed to aspire, and certain products promise to assist us in getting there. As Corbett notes, many pharmaceutical companies use sublime nature as a backdrop to represent health, relying on the viewer identifying the beauty of nature with well-being. Other ads emphasize nature as a place of chaos, full of threatening unknowns that must be subdued and controlled via bug spray, landscaping, or lawn care equipment. A 2010 ad campaign by lawn and garden equipment manufacturer Husqvarna features a suburban home literally under attack during the night by rampaging grass, trees, and shrubs that disrupt the perfectly mowed lawn and trimmed hedges. In the daylight, a man opens his garage door and squares off against his overgrown patch of suburbia. Backlit by the sun, he is a heroic masculine figure wielding a hedge trimmer like a weapon. The company's then-slogan, "Taming the

Wild,” exemplifies the idea of civilized man exerting dominance over wild nature. Husqvarna’s current advertising, under the newer slogan “Out There,” prominently features images of wilderness and nature-based extreme sports like mountain biking that seem incongruous with the company’s identity as a manufacturer of lawn-care machinery. The campaign makes sense, however, if one considers Mander’s distinction between a company’s “image” and its “identity.” Husqvarna is cultivating an image of being in harmony with nature, while also underscoring the notion of man’s dominance over nature (an idea that drives the company’s bottom line) with images of mountain bikers conquering nature’s toughest terrains. Users of Husqvarna’s products can also identify with these intrepid mountain bikers, transforming their mowing, hedge-trimming, and leaf-blowing into acts of victorious heroism. When these acts are tied to masculinity—as the advertising from Husqvarna clearly shows—the purchasing and use of lawn-care equipment becomes an enactment of masculine dominance over nature.

Thirty-five years ago, a person living in a city was exposed to as many as 2,000 ad messages a day (Story). By the early 2000s, that number had risen to more than 3,000, and more recent studies have indicated that the number may be closer to 5,000 (Corbett 141; Story). While we notice and react to only a tiny fraction of those ads, their messages are processed by our subconscious minds, and thanks to repetitive exposure via multiple conduits, advertising is the most pervasive and invasive of pop culture media. As Mander and many other ecocritics have noted, the cumulative power of advertising dollars and their saturation of our culture “provides strong dissonance to oppositional or alternative messages” (Corbett 154). Advertising is only one of many

cultural elements that push us to consume; the rhetoric of progress and growth, which are synonymous with economic stability and fiscal health, pervades our lives from local to government levels. In addition to entreating us to consume more and faster, many of the companies whose practices and products have the greatest negative impact on our environment continue the practice begun in the 1960s and 70s of greenwashing their images. Following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on April 20, 2010 that lasted until July 15 and contaminated the Gulf of Mexico with an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil, BP, the owner of the well, launched a series of ad campaigns promising to clean up the massive oil slick, save and protect wildlife, restore the area beaches, and compensate Gulf industries from fishing to tourism for their losses (the actual extent of BP's cleanup and compensation is hotly debated). Once the initial event had passed, the company launched another series of ads designed to rehabilitate their image by touting the company's safe practices and contributions to nonprofit organizations.

At the same time, as gas prices soared above \$4.00 and \$5.00 a gallon in the United States amid reports that oil companies such as ExxonMobil were posting sequential yearly record profits, these companies responded to strong negative popular opinions by launching their own "we're the good guys" ad campaigns. These ads feature various scientists employed by ExxonMobil and a few representatives of the company's upper management, all expressing the same basic script, as exemplified by the transcript of this commercial from 2012:

The world has two real, large challenges right now. One of them is to make sure that we have enough energy to supply our economies and

improve the standard of living for people all over the world. And the second challenge is to be able to do that without harming the environment. It's a massive amount of energy that's needed, and it's projected to grow more than 30 percent over the next 25 years. There's plenty of oil around for the future. The challenge is they're in more difficult places. You have to make very large investments and underlying it all is technology. ExxonMobil has developed breakthrough technology . . . [that allows us to] go further afield. We have to apply more and more technology. It's very exciting when you think about technology that not only accesses additional energy supplies but also minimizes environmental impact. (ExxonMobil)

The tagline for the ad is "ExxonMobil: Taking on the world's toughest energy challenges." The ad campaign attempts to establish an ethos of heroism, environmental responsibility, and altruism that is in direct conflict with the company's identity. To do so, they employ all the right buzzwords to make the audience feel good about ExxonMobil and the oil industry: "challenge," "economy," "standard of living," "environment," "plenty," "investments," "technology," and "exciting." The company's belief that there is "plenty of oil around for the future" contradicts many scientists' claims that our oil supply is dwindling rapidly. Equally troubling is the ad's assertion that we must root around in the earth for these hard-to-find reserves, and that technology will not only permit us to do that, but that it will "minimize" the impact on the environment.

The March 29, 2013 rupture of Exxon's Pegasus Pipeline that resulted in tens of thousands of gallons of crude oil flowing through Mayflower, Arkansas and the company's concerted efforts to cover up the extent of the damage is far more revealing of their real attitude toward the environment. On April 13, 2013, Exxon released a statement claiming that "Approximately 182 live animals have been captured to date . . . . Fourteen animals of various species have been released and approximately 27 are still being cleaned. The majority of the impacted wildlife has been reptiles, primarily venomous snakes" (Graves). The statement implies that only a handful of animals have been harmed by the spill, which has been estimated to involve 84,000 gallons of crude, and that the majority of these animals are harmful venomous snakes that we are better off without anyway.

The oil industry is hardly alone in its campaign to sway public opinion on its products and practices by greenwashing their advertising. The plastics industry launched a massive pro-plastic campaign in the early 2000s designed to remind us of "all the wonderful ways plastic contributes to our lives," including ads in which plastic is visibly "deleted" from our daily lives, creating chaos, and inconvenience (Corbett 154). The message is clear: sure, we could give up plastic, but it would cause too much disruption to our daily lives. Americans have already demonstrated a reluctance to put up with even minor inconveniences in the name of helping the environment. In 2009, Frito-Lay, with much fanfare, announced that Sun Chips would be sold in biodegradable, compostable bags. Eighteen months later, the new bags were discontinued and replaced with the old, non-biodegradable bags amid customer complaints that they were too



noisy. Bruce Horowitz argues that “While consumers say they want companies to be more environmentally conscious, consumer pressure continues to be strong for companies' products to be convenient, predictable and consumer-friendly.” Though Frito-Lay has said that it continues to research other types of green packaging, consumers sent a clear message that when it comes to being environmentally responsible, they draw the line at a noisy chip bag.

So, how does all this analysis of advertising, lawn-and-garden equipment, oil industry greenwashing, plastics manufacturing, and noisy chip bags fit into a study of big-budget nature films? When nature is a commodity, a sublime fantasy, a backdrop, a place of refuge, an adversary to be tamed, or a matter of convenience, it is separate from humans. The BBNF is part of these discourses; it reinforces many of the same ideas as ads for SUVs, Husqvarna, and ExxonMobil—particularly the idea that nature is a commodity. The ways in which nature is valued are evident in the popular reviews of *Planet Earth*. Many of the reviews of *Planet Earth* focus on the filmmaking technology used by the filmmakers and the aesthetic value of the images they captured. Discussion of conservation issues is minimal or absent. For example, Lorraine Cademartori, reviewing the DVD release of the series for *Forbes*, lists more than a half-dozen of the series' most dramatic images and then calls nature, as presented in *Planet Earth*, “cinematic Prozac,” adding that “there's just something about nature that makes humans happy” (158). Cademartori classifies nature as a drug, making it a “thing” in service to human viewers rather than living flora and fauna with intrinsic value. The *Time* magazine review opens with: “Nature shows are meant to be educational, but face it: we

watch them to ogle wild places and cool animals, preferably eating other cool animals. We want to be awed” (Corliss et al. 85). *Planet Earth* fulfills this desire, making it, according to the reviewers, well worth purchasing on DVD. *MediaWeek*’s Anthony Crupi approaches *Planet Earth* from the angle of its importance to the Discovery Channel’s bottom line; the series represents a significant investment for the company, which is expected to turn enormous profits and become a flagship series for the Discovery Channel’s role as HD entertainment pioneer. Crupi’s article begins with a description of one of the series’ most “arresting images”: the bloody plight of a starving, displaced, wounded, and dying polar bear—and then jumps abruptly to the (apparently) more important point of the article, *Planet Earth*’s massive ratings, and what they will mean for the company’s financial success. The review makes it clear that HD technology and the spectacle of death equal big ratings and big profits. Kyla Dunn’s interview with producer Huw Cordey for *Discover* focuses entirely on the logistics of filming in extreme conditions and the crews’ use of cutting-edge filmmaking technology (70).

Of all the popular reviews of *Planet Earth*, only two mention environmentalism and conservation, and both of those contain interviews with Fothergill in which he downplays both issues. In a review published in *Television Week*, Jarre Fees describes *Planet Earth* as a production “that could well stand as the last, best record of a disappearing natural world” (32). Fees’s review focuses mainly on the technology used making the series and the series’ popularity both in the UK and the U.S. In his interview with Fees, Fothergill argues that “the polar bear is not used to make a statement in the

series . . . but the lack of comment might be just as powerful, as ‘the polar bear has now become the symbol for global warming’” (32). In other words, Fothergill is relying on the iconic image of the polar bear to remind the viewer about global warming so that he will not need to include overt references in the voice-over narration, which would distract from the spectacle of the dying bear.

The scene, which was also referenced in Crupi’s article, takes place in the “Ice Worlds” episode; the polar bear’s plight to find food on the shrinking ice causes him to make a desperate attempt kill a walrus. This desperation leads to one of the series’ most heart-sickening sights as the bear, horribly wounded by a walrus’s tusks, limps away across the ice to die off-camera. Though the narrator reminds the viewer that the bear must risk his life in this way because of a shrinking habitat, the episode changes locations, and the polar bear’s gruesome and lonely death is set aside in favor of the next breathtaking scene. Even if the viewer acknowledges the polar bear’s representation of the crisis of global warming, that connection is quickly submerged under the subsequent waves of striking images.

The other review that addresses environmentalism, Gary Strauss’s article in *USA Today*, features both Fothergill and Sigourney Weaver, whom Strauss describes as a “longtime conservationist.” Fothergill and Weaver are united in stating emphatically that the series “doesn’t aim to have an aggressive environmental message.” Weaver goes on to reassure potential viewers that the series “is neither preachy nor a soapbox for environmentalists”; rather, it utilizes a gentler approach designed to allow the viewer to “fall in love with the wonder and majesty of the planet.” The “party line” is apparent:

the series is most definitely not about environmentalism or conservation. There is no room in this epic action film for the politically charged subjects of endangered species and threatened habitats—unless, of course, they can be made to contribute to the bottom line.

*Planet Earth* markets itself as the best—and, in some cases, the only—source of images of some of the rarest and most critically endangered species and habitats on the planet, many of which are predicted to vanish in the next few decades. The voice-over narration emphasizes the extreme rarity of the featured animals, as well as the scarcity of images of them. It is unusual to go more than five minutes in any episode without hearing the narrator boast that “this is the first time this species/this behavior/this habitat has been filmed.” The BBC sent out a press release announcing all of the “firsts” in *Planet Earth*. The contents of the list, while impressive, are less important than the fact that it became a significant part of the marketing for the series. The filmmakers’ emphasis on finding never-before-seen species and locations supports nature writer Mabey’s contention that

At best, film-makers are sometimes field scientists, glimpsing, because of the necessity of close and patient vigils with animals, new aspects of their behaviour. But at worst, they remind me of the reckless knowledge vandals of the “Age of Enlightenment,” and . . . the prying is no less intense today, and still based on the belief that the creatures’ “innermost secrets” belong, by rights, to us.

These “innermost secrets” are enormous selling points for BBNF filmmakers because they are making a consumer product, and simple economics tells us that scarcity and demand determine value. Images of hunting dogs, dancing birds of paradise, new species of cave fish, and remote mountain plateaus are assigned value as sources of aesthetic pleasure and knowledge. However, their value is determined not by their intrinsic value but by their use-value.

The other type of rare encounter featured in BBNFs is footage of endangered or nearly extinct species and vanishing habitats. The series encourages viewers to consume the images of these rare species. *Planet Earth* features a host of endangered species, including African wild dogs, snow leopards, giant and red pandas, blue whales, green sea turtles, Bactrian camels, lions, Asian elephants, and the critically endangered Amur leopard. While the precarious status of these species is noted by the narrator, their scenes are often followed by another with the ability to distract the viewer, such as a touching family interaction or an exciting chase sequence. The lack of humans also effectively depoliticizes the scene. In this way, the filmmakers exhibit the “gentle” environmental rhetoric Weaver alludes to and maintain the series’ popular appeal. The rhetorical strategies of the filmmakers demonstrate how this depolitization and decontextualization of images in prime-time nature documentaries reflects the tendency to commodify extinction by reducing the struggle for survival of endangered species to easily digestible, elegantly presented, beautifully “plated” tidbits guaranteed to please the palate and not disturb the digestion.

Another way in which BBNFs commodify death is part of a trend in natural history filmmaking that, as previously discussed in Chapter IV, has recently become standard prime-time fare: the animal “snuff” film. *Planet Earth* is certainly not averse to showing death in all its bloody high-definition glory; technology helps intensify the experience of watching predators attacking their prey. Scenes of lions taking down a full-grown elephant, crocodiles ripping the throats out of wildebeests, and competing groups of chimpanzees tearing each other limb from limb are shown close-up and in slow-motion. Night-vision cameras zoom in on the gaping mouths of the lions, showing their teeth and fur covered in blood as they tear into the elephant’s carcass. In super-slow motion, a wildebeest struggles against a crocodile for an interminable length of time, only to finally succumb to exhaustion and be dragged beneath the water. Reacting to similar scenes in a different nature program, Mabey laments, “It was depressing to see red teeth and claws coming to the forefront again,” adding that

These things happen and are crucial parts of all creatures’ lives. But in the hands of documentary film-makers they have become central, dominating motifs, as sensational and distorting portrayal of life in the wild as scenes of human violence are in the tabloids. For the record, predators, like human hunter-gatherers, spend only a small part of their lives hunting. Mostly they are up to less spectacular business, sleeping, resting, reflecting, grooming, playing and gazing back at camera lenses.

For Mabey, these violent scenes are an example of looking at nature as a source of spectacle. And, as with the national park visitors whom Mitman observed quickly losing

interest when animals were not active, exposure to the overly dramatic scenes in nature films has led many to envision nature as a place of constant danger, excitement, and battle, when in truth these interactions are the exception and not the rule.

BBNFs prominently feature spectacular predation sequences in their promotional materials. These scenes become synonymous not only with the series in which they are featured, but through repetition and advertising, with the animals and habitats they have come to represent. One of the crown jewels of *Planet Earth* is footage of great white sharks leaping out of the water in pursuit of seals off the coast of South Africa. This footage was slowed down by a factor of 40 to make an event that lasts one second in real time stretch into nearly a full minute in which a viewer can see every detail of the attack. This scene is perhaps the most replayed of all the BBC BBNFs, featuring prominently in advertising for *Planet Earth*, *Life*, and *Frozen Planet* and for the DVD and Blu-ray releases of all the series. The spectacle is significant not just because it documents a rarely seen behavior, but also for its broader implications about how filmmaking technology is capable of revealing nature's secrets and putting them up for sale in our commodified world.

### **Big-Budget Ecopornography**

As Chapter IV illustrates, ecopornography, like human pornography, is a rhetorical practice and a way of seeing that stands in for real engagement and reduces complex experiences to the elements that are the most desirable and easiest to fixate upon. Rather than participate in a sometimes difficult relationship, the viewer of

ecoporn partakes in a fantasy that allows him or her to experience superficial involvement without being forced to confront unpleasant realities. Like human pornography, ecoporn's purpose is to create a physical response in the viewer; the former is intended to enhance the arousal and sexual satisfaction of the audience, while the latter's purpose is to offer reassurance and escape. Both are designed to make the audience feel good. But, as with so many other escapes, these good feelings come with a hefty price.

Welling argues that ecopornography is “a type of contemporary visual discourse made up of highly idealized, anthropomorphized views of landscapes and nonhuman animals” that works to conceal not only the human involvement in their creation but also human impact on the animals and landscapes it depicts (57). In ecoporn, anthropomorphism encourages identification between the audience and the animals onscreen, but the identification is with a simplified, decontextualized, and recontextualized fantasy object, *not* with the real animal in the wild. Because ecoporn rarely includes humans, preferring instead to exclude all evidence of human presence in favor of an illusion of “pure” wilderness, it is easy for the viewer to adopt a sense of private ownership over the landscape and/or animals included in the fantasy image. Just beyond the edge of the frame, urbanization threatens, habitats are being destroyed, animals poached, trees cut down, rivers and lakes poisoned with chemicals and industrial runoff. The price of excluding and hiding these harsh realities and replacing them with a fantasy of “unspoiled” wilderness is perhaps the greatest and most immediate cost of ecoporn.



When it comes to perpetuating the myth of untouched spaces, the big-budget nature film may very well exceed all peers and predecessors. As this chapter has shown, the BBNF is only one of many elements in the daily “kaleidoscope” of images of and messages about nature to which consumers are exposed. However, the BBNF draws upon the considerable ethos of the BBC NHU, Discovery Channel, and Attenborough, a highly respected naturalist. If these respected agents of production implicitly or explicitly state that “enormous areas of the world remain untouched,” that assertion carries considerable rhetorical weight. The lack of an onscreen host or narrator—or virtually any evidence whatsoever of even the existence of humans, much less their influence on the habitats and animals featured on the series—creates the illusion that every location in the series is “virgin” wilderness. When combined with the constant assertions that this is the first or only time this species/this behavior/this activity has been caught on film, the lack of human presence implies that mankind only inhabits a fraction of the Earth’s surface. Even worse, it implies that there are “enormous areas” that are unaffected by the actions and inactions of humans, a dangerous and harmful misconception that directly undermines environmental programs that emphasize the interconnectedness of our planet’s ecosystems.

Showing remarkable prescience, in an article published three years before the release of *Planet Earth*, Mabey (whose credentials rival those of Attenborough) argues that “The aim of what are called ‘blue-chip’ documentaries is to avoid any sense that human beings impinge on the natural world, or even live on the same planet. It is certainly inadmissible to suggest that wild creatures have any impact on us.” Like

Cronon, who expresses similar anxieties in “The Trouble with Wilderness,” Mabey is deeply concerned about the consequences of the perceived separation between humans and their environment. Ecoporn not only disengages nonhuman animals and habitats from their intrinsic value, but it can effectively create distance and dissociation between the viewer and the natural world by substituting a facsimile and encouraging viewers to develop superficial (even neurotic) connections with that facsimile.

As shown in this and the previous chapter, ecoporn almost always excludes humans or evidence of human existence, and the BBNF certainly follows suit. Other than the last two episodes of *Frozen Planet*, which focus on human inhabitants and explorers of the polar regions and the consequences of climate change, respectively, the only time humans are seen in BBNFs is in the so-called “Production Diaries” that accompany each series. The production diaries include behind-the-scenes footage of the making of the series and brief interviews with members of the production crews. Only in the diaries is there evidence of human involvement in the making of the films—but, far from what Welling calls much-needed “self-reflection on the part of the image makers,” the production diaries are essentially the distillation of the masculinist quest narrative that frames all BBNFs as heroic (masculine) adventures into the passive (feminine) unknown (60). The production diaries from *Planet Earth* trumpet the innovative HD technology that was developed at great cost for the series, as well as the sacrifices made by the film crews to obtain the exceptional footage featured in the series. For example, according to one diary, a cameraman spent six weeks camped out in a blind in the jungle of New Guinea to film one of the series’s most remarkable sequences:

the courtship dances of birds-of-paradise. Another crew was repeatedly turned away from venturing into the mountains of Pakistan to film the elusive snow leopard because the military was engaging Taliban forces in the area thought to be hiding Osama bin Laden; when they were finally allowed to film, they spent six months searching for snow leopards to film. Other crews invested months in the Namib desert tracking Bactrian camels, took to the sky in hot-air balloons to film African painted dogs hunting as a pack, and dove beneath solid ice to document the underwater grace of seals and penguins.

In one of the few negative diaries, a crew filming in Africa claim that they were frequently awakened by gunfire, which they attribute to poachers operating in the area. While the crew's account of the immediate threat posed by poachers certainly adds gravity to an otherwise typical episode of a BBNF, the overall theme of the diaries—as insights into the extreme conditions the filmmakers experienced in their quests—frames their story not as a reality check about over-hunting and habitat destruction, but as an example of the risk the crew took to bring the audience this footage. As such, the poachers' gunfire becomes not just an indirect selling point (in that over-hunting has caused many of these species to become endangered, and therefore valuable), but a commodity in itself. The production diaries, which are separated from the main episodes so that the presence of the human filmmakers does not detract or distract from the ecopornographic aesthetic pleasure of the BBNF, represent an additional missed opportunity for the BBNF to carry a meaningful environmental or conservation message. The crews who traveled around the globe were in a perfect position to offer firsthand

accounts of the devastating effects of poaching, over-hunting, habitat destruction, and climate change, but any such insights were excluded in favor of good feelings and the masculinist quest narrative.

### **Closing**

As long as there is an audience for them, BBNFs will continue to be produced. A successful consumer product will not be discontinued unless demand for it decreases. The ethical issues surrounding environmental visual rhetoric such as BBNFs and ecoporn in general are central to current conversations about the future of ecocriticism. The BBNF, with its unprecedented budget and popular appeal, has an extraordinary ability to (re)frame the general public's perception of endangered species and threatened habitats. If, as Robert Cox states, "Dominant systems of representation of 'environment' influence societal deliberation about and/or response to environmental signals, including signs of deterioration of human health, climate, or ecological systems," it is essential for environmental discourse to identify and analyze BBNFs to understand their role in global eco-politics (14). This chapter suggests that, as a result of their construction of virtual environments, perpetuation of the myth of "untouched spaces," commodification of death and extinction, and emphasis on the ecopornographic and aesthetic at the expense of meaningful and ethical environmental discourse, the BBNF is more likely to undermine conservation efforts than to support them. In response to the question of ethical responsibility in natural history filmmaking, Mabey argues:

At this critical moment, when we are trying so hard to think of ourselves as connected with the rest of creation, it is important we consider what kind of relationship film-makers should aspire to with their subject, as well as their subjects. Zoology is two-dimensional nonsense if it is divorced from ecology. Ecology is about the relationships between creatures and their environments, in all senses of that word.

If, as Welling suggests and Mabey seconds, ecoporn is a trope, a mode of representation, and an ethical problem, how might natural history programming overcome the pitfalls of ecoporn to create an environmentally and ethically responsible nature film that maintains popular appeal while adhering to Cox's call for ethical environmental communication in the midst of crisis?

There is reason to hope that as each program is produced, the filmmakers will strive for more sophisticated and ethical engagement with the very pressing matters of environment and conservation that are pounding on the doors of their virtual environments. The recently released special edition Blu-ray set of *Planet Earth* contains the production diaries that were left out of the previous version, as well as the companion series *Planet Earth: The Future*, which focuses on environmental and conservation issues. *Life* contains far more references to environmental issues than its predecessor. *Frozen Planet*, the BBC's most recent BBNF, includes two episodes that indicate a possible shift in BBNFs from pure aestheticism to a more ecologically engaged approach: one episode, entitled "The Last Frontier," focuses on the people who live in and visit the Arctic and Antarctic regions. The episode "On Thin Ice," features

Attenborough on-camera as he “journeys to both polar regions to investigate what rising temperatures will mean for the people and wildlife that live there and for the rest of the planet.” That the episode caused so much controversy both in the UK and the U.S. from climate-change deniers is indicative of how contentious the issues of environmentalism and conservation remain. Even so, natural history programming in general—and the BBNF in particular—must become participants in a more ethical dialogue if these visual media are to contribute in any significant way toward meaningful environmental reform.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: “THE WORLD WOULD BE A POORER, DARKER, LONELIER PLACE WITHOUT THEM”: THE RHETORIC OF *LAST CHANCE TO SEE*

Extinction happens, and the world keeps turning. Does it really matter if the Amazonian manatee ceases to exist? Some will argue that each species is a crucial part in a complex ecosystem. Perhaps. But this is what I think: I think that it’s just indecent if humanity, through our actions or through our neglect, should cast into oblivion a piece of intricately perfect evolutionary engineering, millions of years in the making. I think that somehow, we have to do better than that.

—Stephen Fry, *Last Chance to See*, episode “Amazonian Manatee”

I have a terrible feeling that we are in trouble.  
—Douglas Adams, *Last Chance to See* (book)

In the inaugural issue of *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, Cox states that

The field of environmental communication arises at a moment of conjunctural crisis, defined in not insignificant ways by human-caused threats to both biological systems and human communities, and also by the continuing failure of societal institutions to sufficiently engage these pressures. (7)

Cox argues that the emergent field of environmental communication is undergoing a period of crucial self-reflection, in which its search for identity, values, and goals mirrors that of environmentalism in general. In Chapter I, I reflect on the implications of Cox’s contention that environmental communication is a discourse of crisis and the

related argument that it is also a discourse *in crisis*, subject to the ebbs and flows of economics, politics, and weather events. As Killingsworth asserts in “A Phenomenological Perspective on Ethical Duty in Environmental Communication,” one of several responses to Cox’s article commissioned by the journal, crisis is a matter of perception; many who can recognize and react to immediate problems, such as hurricanes or high gas prices, have a much more difficult time perceiving crises as ongoing or conceptualizing ways to deal with them. By and large, environmental rhetoric, as Shellenberger and Nordhaus and others have noted, has proven to be insufficient in dealing with these fluctuations. Killingsworth rightly points out that “During times of falling public interest or business as usual, the concept of crisis may not be strong enough to sustain environmental communication” (“A Phenomenological Perspective” 59). What is needed, then, is a rhetorical approach to environmental communication capable of transcending the vacillations of crisis and accounting for the enormous influence of enviropop culture on public perception of humanity’s place in the environment.

Killingsworth, like Cox, calls attention to the problematic term “environment,” which literally means *that which surrounds* (as Wendell Berry points out in *The Unsettling of America*). Killingsworth offers an alternative term from the tradition of Continental phenomenology: *lifeworld*, a word that denotes

the place that exists independent of any conceptual framework we might impose upon it. Air and water from the lifeworld constantly circulate through the body, making it a part of the elemental exchange known as



the ecology or more simply the life of a place. The body is not separate from the lifeworld; life and world combine, intermingle, cocreate. (60)

One of the paradoxes of eco-rhetoric is that language helps create the separation between ourselves and the lifeworld—and yet, it is through language that we must work to restore those connections. Killingsworth suggests that one way to do so is to think of the world around us as *extensions* of ourselves—ourselves as nodes in a deeply interconnected system that resonates whenever something is disturbed. Those who are deeply attuned to these resonances find it impossible to ignore their warnings—and even those for whom the vibrations are faint may still feel a vague, niggling sensation that something just isn't right.

Throughout this dissertation, I have analyzed a wide variety of films and series whose engagement with environmental and conservation issues varies from significant (*Miss Goodall and the Chimpanzees*, the “On Thin Ice” episode of *Frozen Planet*) to virtually nonexistent (early expedition films, the majority of BBNFs and contemporary nature series). Chapter II traces the development of natural history filmmaking through its infancy in the silent, single-reel films of the turn of the century to a troubled childhood in the early decades of the 1900s marked by the racial and colonialist ideologies of the period. The genre was—and continues to be—heavily influenced by the masculinist quest narrative in which a “hero-scientist is working against a deadline, like extinction or seasonal weather” (Crowther 131). Nature, or the “wilderness,” is consistently framed as mysterious and full of secrets that these heroic figures must uncover and reveal to the audience. In Chapter III, natural history filmmaking entered

the television era with popular series such as Disney's True-Life Adventures, *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, *Wild America*, *Nature*, and the numerous series produced by the BBC NHU, National Geographic, PBS, and the Discovery Channel. These films and series have an enormous influence on our modern culture's concept of our world and its animal inhabitants and habitats. The most popular type of nature show currently on television tend to be the reality show, focused on humans either in conflict with or engaged in occupations in which they rely on natural resources for income. Frequently, nature shows are utilized by stores to sell the latest technology in televisions and Blu-ray players.

Chapter IV analyzes ecopornography as both a rhetorical practice and a way of seeing and compares it to the rhetoric of human pornography to illustrate how the study of one might illuminate the other. Though even ecopornographic images of nature have the ability to move audiences, they too often substitute for real engagement and undermine eco-political programs by leading the viewer to believe that environmental and conservation problems are less serious than they really are. Chapter V focuses on the big-budget nature film as a type of virtual space which, like the modern immersive zoo or wildlife theme park, blends natural and synthetic elements to create a fantasy of escape from the harsh realities of habitat destruction and extinction. I argue that the BBNF is part of the larger discourse of commodification of nature that works against ecology's efforts to emphasize the holistic nature of our planet by perpetuating the illusion of separation between humanity and the "natural world." As an ecopornographic consumer product, the BBNF arouses good feelings in the audience and

tends to avoid environmental and conservation issues in an effort to maintain its popular—and profitable—appeal, a trend that is evident in most current nature programs on television.

By way of conclusion, I analyze *Last Chance to See*, a multimedia project begun in 1988 by zoologist and photographer Mark Cawardine and Douglas Adams, author and conservationist, and revisited in 2009 by Cawardine and Stephen Fry, a longtime friend of Adams who had assisted with the original series in a limited capacity twenty years before. According to the book that Adams and Cawardine published to accompany their initial adventure, the project began with an 1985 trip to Madagascar in which Adams, as a journalist, and Cawardine, a photographer, went in search of the elusive and endangered aye-aye, a type of lemur. After this trip, Adams and Cawardine created a list of nine endangered species from around the world whose declining numbers and disappearing habitats they wanted to document: the aye-aye in Madagascar, the Komodo Dragon in Indonesia, the Kakapo in New Zealand, the mountain gorilla in Zaire, the Northern white rhino in Zaire, the Yangtze River dolphin in China, the Rodrigues fruit bat in Mauritius, the Amazonian manatee in Brazil, and the Juan Fernández fur seal in Chile. Their travels were documented in a BBC Radio 4 documentary series that aired in 1989, and the companion book was published in 1990.

Adams passed away suddenly in 2001. According to Cawardine's 2009 book, *Last Chance to See: In the Footsteps of Douglas Adams* (hereinafter, *Footsteps*), in 2007, Cawardine invited Fry to join him on a journey to visit the nine animals and their habitats for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original series. Fry and Cawardine's expedition

aired on BBC 2 in 2009 and is also titled *Last Chance to See* (hereinafter, *Last Chance*). I argue that the *Last Chance to See* project represents a very different approach to natural history filmmaking than big-budget nature films. Like the BBNFs analyzed in Chapter V, *Last Chance* focuses on endangered species, but that is where the similarities end. Cawardine and Fry and their companions are a constant onscreen presence; unlike the BBNF, which features an off-screen narrator and tends to avoid showing humans, *Last Chance* includes humans as much or more than animals. The series features conservationists working to save various species, locals who act as guides for the BBC team, members of local communities, and the film crew. There is no attempt to separate humans from animals or habitats; in fact, the series emphasizes the holistic nature of our world—how the health and stability of animals, habitats, and humans is deeply interconnected in both expected and unexpected ways. *Last Chance* is far from “cinematic Prozac”; the series pulls no punches. These species are endangered—some critically—because of human action (or lack thereof). But rather than point fingers or adopt a fatalistic tone, *Last Chance* remains hopeful. It is a sometimes-harsh reality check—but the reality is that human action *can* make a difference. The key, as Fry and Cawardine and the conservationists they interview demonstrate, is changing attitudes and making connections among people, animals, and habitats—not connections with images, but with the things themselves. What the BBNF disrupts, *Last Chance* works to recouple.

In the series’s first episode, “Amazonian Manatee,” Cawardine and Fry travel to Brazil in search of this lugubrious and elusive mammal. On one of their first stops, the

crew stayed briefly in a jungle lodge comprised of nearly 300 rooms on stilts and connected by a network of elevated boardwalks. In *Footsteps*, Cawardine describes the lodge as “an Amazonian theme park right in the middle of the Amazon. It took the jungle out of the jungle. It made everything seem artificial” (33). The lodge offers three helipads for the convenience of its high-profile guests, such as Helmut Kohl, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Gates. Cawardine adds that the lodge gives “the sensation of adventure without the unpleasantness and inconvenience of adventure itself” (33). In the episode, both Cawardine and Fry express similar dissatisfaction with the lodge and its touristy amenities, where visitors enjoy wifi and poolside bars, and rarely look beyond the perimeter of the boardwalk. Cawardine’s comparison between the lodge and a theme park resonates with my argument from Chapter V in which I contend that the modern nature film—especially the BBNF—is analogous to theme parks and zoos, particularly in that they substitute for “dirty” engagement (both existential and political), head off questions about the reality and the problems of ventures into nature, and facilitate separation rather than connection.

Once Cawardine and Fry leave the lodge behind and venture into the rain forest, they (and through them, the audience) make their first important connection with another endangered species: the pink Amazon river dolphin. Cawardine and Fry snorkel and interact with the dolphins, which engage the human explorers in elaborate games in their underwater world. The contrast between this level of interaction and the superficial contact facilitated by the lodge (and its televisual equivalent, the BBNF) is evident: in *Last Chance*, the audience sees humans sharing space with nature—walking through the

rain forest, snorkeling and playing with dolphins, admiring the beauty of emerald tree boas, reflecting on the impact humans have on the jungle and its inhabitants. Though some would argue that hands-on eco-tourism of this kind can be seriously disturbing to the ecosystem involved (much like the “contact phenomena” of colonialist interventions), the important message is apparent: humans are unmistakably a part of this ecosystem, not separate from it, and our actions (or lack thereof) have an enormous impact on the world.

These impacts become quite visible in the “Amazonian Manatee” episode, as Cawardine and Fry are unable to find manatees in the wild, despite venturing deep into the rain forest. Here is another key difference between BBNFs and *Last Chance*; the latter series emphasizes the *lack* of manatees rather than their presence. This approach calls to mind McKibben’s critique of nature photography, in which he asks, “How can there really be a shortage of whooping cranes when you’ve seen a thousand images of them . . . We’re rarely shown a photograph of the empty trees where there are no baboons anymore.” *Last Chance* chooses to show the empty trees. And while BBNFs, with their aversion to including humans (or the implication that humans even exist in the locations featured in the series), omit discussion of the cultural and economic contexts that so often play a significant role in over-hunting, poaching, and habitat destruction, *Last Chance* makes these issues central to their rhetoric. The manatee was a staple food for a long time for many indigenous people in Brazil. And in many isolated and communities that rely on subsistence fishing and are largely outside global capitalism, where providing for one’s family often takes priority over conservation efforts, the slow-

moving mammal, which used to move about in herds, seemed like a limitless supply of food. *Last Chance* features interviews with locals, who reveal that manatee is no longer a staple, but that one can find manatee meat on the black market in places like Manaus, though it is increasingly difficult to do so. In fact, according to the show, many locals have never even *seen* a manatee in the wild.

To see an Amazonian manatee, Cawardine and Fry travel to a zoo in Manaus, where they watch manatees in tanks. Both Cawardine and Fry are entranced by the manatees and their underwater grace; their emotional connections are evident. Cawardine dons a SCUBA suit and joins the manatees underwater, where he photographs them as they play and nuzzle him. The poignancy of seeing these gentle so-called “sea cows”—who literally swim or walk along the bottoms of rivers and graze on aquatic plants—in tanks in a zoo emphasizes their vulnerability in the wild, a vulnerability that has led to their endangered status.

The crew flies to the small town of Tefé, where a group of conservation biologists has been rehabilitating an injured Amazonian manatee named Piti who was wounded by a harpoon. Cawardine and Fry hold and comfort Piti as he is measured by the biologists, who are preparing to release Piti back into the wild. The connection between the biologists and documentary hosts and the flatulent manatee provides a model for an ethical connection between humans and wildlife that BBNFs notably lack. The zoologists relocate Piti to a temporary enclosure in a small village and send word to surrounding communities that a rehabilitated manatee will be staying in the area until he is ready to be released into the wild. The day the manatee arrives, scores of children and

their families come to see the manatee, to feed him and interact with an animal few have ever seen. The program's goal is to facilitate a personal emotional and ethical connection between the children—as the next generation of local conservationists—and the manatee, in hopes that their love of Piti will filter back through their communities and help shift cultural attitudes about the manatee. The case of Piti's rehabilitation is a microcosm of the tone of the entire series: human action has had a great deal to do with what Cawardine and Fry call “the largest mass extinction in history”—and human action is key to slowing its growth. The most important element of this sea change is not necessarily the rehabilitation of individual animals or even species—it is to transform attitudes.

*Last Chance's* emphasis on exploring not only the biology and elusiveness of the nine endangered species they profile but also their habitats and the cultural, political, and economic contexts that have had an enormous influence on their status demonstrates that conservation cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. Teams of biologists and zoologists who come into an area in attempt to intervene in the conservation of particular species and/or habitats face enormous challenges well beyond the protection of animals and land. That is not to say that the protection of animals and land is a simple matter—only that each region faces its own set of unique challenges, from poverty to long-held cultural beliefs and even the turmoil of war. The team featured in “Amazonian Manatee” demonstrates a type of grass-roots conservation effort aimed at changing attitudes.



Each of the episodes of *Last Chance* follows a similar pattern: Cawardine and Fry arrive in the country that is home to their target species and provide cultural, political, and economic context for the audience. They interview locals who offer insights into the species in question, as well as other aspects of the local ecosystem. At no point is there the implication that these animals or their habitats exist separate from humans; in fact, interactions between humans and animals are central to the series's goal of creating connections between the audience and animals. As I note in Chapter IV, replication is a reciprocal process; *Last Chance* provides a model for identification and connection that its hosts clearly hope will be emulated by the audience.

The second episode of the series also highlights a lack rather than a presence, though this absence is far more extreme. As with the “Amazonian Manatee” episode, Cawardine and Fry travel to meet a group of conservationists, this time in the country formerly known as Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The region is embroiled in a bloody civil war that has cost millions of lives—and is the only area where the critically endangered northern white rhinoceros lives. The conservationists are hoping to move the last few remaining northern white rhinos to a protected area specially prepared for them—but even as Cawardine and Fry and their crew arrive, it becomes known that there is no sign of these last northern white rhinos, and they are now believed to be extinct in the wild. The empty pens are being dismantled, and the grief of the conservationists, some of whom had dedicated most of their lives to trying to protect this most rare of rhino subspecies, is palpable. There is an enormous emptiness where the northern white rhino should be in the episode.

The episode certainly does not avoid discussing the reasons for the northern white rhino's disappearance: the species was slaughtered mercilessly for their horns and as trophies by big-game hunters. According to *Footsteps*, by the 1990s, 95 percent of all rhinos had been killed for their horns, which can fetch up to \$8,000 each (Cawardine 87). The horns are valuable to collectors of such items and as part of traditional medicine, which claims it has magical healing properties for everything from blurry vision to erectile dysfunction—allegations that no test has ever supported, as the horn is simply made of keratin (the main component of fingernails, claws, and hooves). The blame for the disappearance of the northern white rhino lies squarely on the shoulders of humans—from trophy hunters and practitioners of “traditional” medicine to the bloody civil war and its attendant political upheavals. In areas affected by war and civil unrest, the rare and scarce become increasingly valuable as a source of income for arming soldiers (as in the case of so-called “conflict” or “blood diamonds”). Animal skins and horns are bought and sold for much the same reasons.

The episode concludes with a visit by Cawardine and Fry to a chimpanzee rehabilitation center, where orphaned and rescued chimps are raised in safety and prepared for reintroduction into the wild. Again, the audience confronts unpleasant truths about human treatment of wildlife. Conservationists at the rehab center relate the histories of some of their primate residents, many of whom were orphaned when poachers killed their mothers (after chaining up the youngsters as bait for their mothers), or rescued from the illegal pet trade. While Fry must keep his distance because of a cold, Cawardine, who has confessed a fear of chimps, enters the enclosure and quickly

becomes enamored with a young chimp who was rescued from the tiny crate where he was kept by his owners. Cawardine's transformation from fear to love offers a model for the audience, as does the scene of the chimp's reintroduction to adult chimps for the first time in many years. The adult chimps immediately adopt the youngster, hugging it and participating in mutual grooming. This display of behaviors, as well as the information the hosts and conservationists provide about the ways chimpanzees are abused and commodified in the global illegal animal trade, provides another opportunity for the audience to connect with the chimpanzees. The episode combines the bitter with the sweet, blending the harsh truth about the ways humans victimize animals with the efforts of many dedicated people determined to make a difference. In the end, however, the episode closes with a reminder that the northern white rhino is gone from the wild, and its loss reverberates.

The series's other episodes follow essentially the same pattern: a combination of ecology, history, economics, and conservation, as Cawardine and Fry explore the habitats and cultures in a variety of locations around the world. The final episode, which was to be a visit to China to check the status of the Yangtze river dolphin, was replaced by a visit to Baja California to visit with blue whales after the Yangtze river dolphin was declared officially extinct in 2007. In *Footsteps*, Cawardine expresses his grief at the loss:

Losing something as precious as a dolphin was quite a momentous event in the history of the world. There should have been a day of international mourning, some form of tribute to one of the most enigmatic and

beguiling animals on earth. But the passing of the Yangtze river dolphin went virtually unnoticed. It slipped away, quietly, while the rest of the world was apparently oblivious or entirely unconcerned. (305)

The Yangtze river dolphin fell victim to the heavy boat traffic, agricultural runoff, industrial pollution, untreated sewage, riverbank development, dam construction and overfishing in a river basin that, as Cawardine notes, is home to one-tenth of the entire human population (306). With the construction of the Three Gorges Dam and other smaller dams that blocked its migratory routes and fragmented the population—and that also displaced huge numbers of the local human populations, an increasing problem in mega-dam construction (see Martinez-Alier)—the dolphin’s fate was sealed. For Cawardine, the extinction of the Yangtze river dolphin is about far more than the loss of a single species; it illustrates a complete failure of conservation programs, many of which, as Cawardine points out in *Footsteps*, “were shouting about the plight of the world’s most endangered large mammal, while doing little or nothing about it” (310). Cawardine argues that “without major changes in attitude and political thinking, I believe we will continue to make the same mistakes over and over again,” adding that “If we can’t save an appealing and charismatic dolphin—one that has lived on earth for more than twenty million years—what can we save?” (*Footsteps*, 310).

I am certainly not arguing that *Last Chance* is an ideal nature documentary. It still participates in the masculine quest narrative, with Cawardine and Fry venturing into a variety of inhospitable and dangerous locations, their sufferings documented in the series and in *Footsteps*. A misadventure during the filming of the “Amazonian

Manatee” episode led to Fry’s right arm being broken in three places and necessitated his immediate return to Miami for surgery, in which a steel plate and ten screws were required to repair the arm. Fry’s injury, their many bouts of food poisoning and other illnesses, the threat of violence during their visit to Uganda and the DRC, and the discomfort experienced during travel in difficult-to-access areas still appeal to the idea of nature as an antagonist to be conquered by a strong male explorer. However, there is not the sense of separation between man and his environment that characterizes so many other nature series and films. This negative consequence that I argue has the most potential to undermine conservation and eco-political programs is minimized as much as possible in this series. In fact, as both the series and the book make clear, the main goals of the *Last Chance to See* project are emphasizing the interconnectedness of our planet and providing models for changing attitudes that take into account the many factors involved in both the endangerment and conservation of various species and habitats. Despite the fact that Cawardine is a photographer, there is little about *Last Chance* that is ecopornographic—far less than many other contemporary natural history filmmaking projects. Parts of it are beautiful, others are strange, and some downright ugly—because our world, its inhabitants, and its habitats are all of these things. It has both style and substance. From this perspective, the *Last Chance to See* project is an example of the kind of environmental communication that seeks to create and strengthen connections between humans and their environment and transform attitudes—the very kind of environmental communication that shows perhaps the best promise for transcending the fluctuations of crisis and redefining our world as an extension of our selves.

The field of environmental visual rhetoric is still in its infancy. Critics are only just beginning to understand the extent to which images of nature not only influence the way humans conceptualize the world but also impact the efficacy of eco-political programs on the local, regional, national, and global levels. The related—and equally emergent—field of environmental justice, about which Martinez-Alier writes, and the complexities of structuring conservation programs that take into account the economic realities of the places in which endangered species and habitats struggle for survival alongside their human neighbors, make clear that there are no easy answers to the challenges of conservation. The *Last Chance to See* project is only one of many films that address these issues. Each film uses a different rhetorical approach to move the audience to act, and each requires the attention of ecocritics in the context of visual rhetoric's influence on enviropop culture. Activist films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Cove* (2009)—both high-profile winners of Academy Awards for Best Documentary Feature—force viewers to confront harsh realities about the effects of climate change and animal cruelty. These films represent only a fraction of the genre of natural history filmmaking as it exists today. It is imperative that future studies in environmental visual rhetoric analyze these representations of nature to understand their influences.

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