

Speaking Animals:

NOTES ON THE HUMAN VOICEOVER IN WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARIES

by Margot La Rocque *

Nature conservationists have often credited wildlife documentaries with doing much to awaken public environmental concern. But these assertions have given too little critical thought to what I take to be a central problem: the failure of such programs to address what we might term issues of ideology. Wildlife documentaries present a view of the world in which such issues are deliberately kept underdeveloped, and are isolated conceptually from other social and political domains. We need then to ask the following questions: In what ways do these documentaries serve to legitimate existing human relationships with the nonhuman? And how do they affect our perception of, and our willingness to take action on, environmental problems?

Unfortunately, the history of wildlife filmmaking remains largely undocumented--conspicuously absent from historical and critical studies of film, television, and environmentalism. To begin this discussion, I have therefore chosen to focus rather narrowly on the function of the human voiceover to suppress a serious inquiry into patterns of human domination, while simultaneously claiming to speak *on behalf of* the nonhuman. I will attempt to sketch the various ways in which this voice authorizes and sustains a limited number of relationships between human and non-human nature: by speaking *through* animals, *about* animals, or *for* animals, but rarely *as* animal.

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The very concept of 'wildlife' is both a product and an expression of the physical and cultural marginalisation of the nonhuman in our society. 'Wildlife' names nature as wild, as *Other*--not only as other than domesticated life, but as other than human life.

As Roderick Nash has noted in his history of the idea of wilderness:

Until there were domesticated animals it was impossible to distinguish them from wild ones. Until there were fenced fields and walled cities 'wilderness' had no meaning. Everything was simply habitat, which man shared with other creatures.¹

The notion of a wildlife film or wildlife television documentary (and I am going to collapse the two media here for brevity's sake) serves then to underscore at least two disjunctures: the gulf between *wildlife*, on the one hand, and *human* life and social practices on the other, and the gulf between this highly conventionalized genre and other types of programming.

It may seem odd to begin a discussion of wildlife documentaries by privileging the audible over the visible, and the human over the nonhuman, but let us consider the following points. First, the disembodied (usually male) voiceover is most characteristic of this genre. It is this voice, I would argue, that is primarily responsible for guiding the apparent haphazardness of natural events toward an intended meaning. As Mary Ann Doane has noted of the voiceover in television documentaries and news programs in general, it normally "carries the burden of 'information' while the impoverished image simply fills the screen."² Second, this voiceover tends to establish a 'complicity' between itself and the spectator: together they understand and thus *place* the nonhuman as subject to the human. Indeed, the term 'voiceover' names a particular hierarchical relation not only between sound and image, but

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between human and nonhuman. When confronted with the essential muteness of the nonhuman--a condition which we as *speaking* animals are very likely to interpret as a condition of lack--three major modes of address emerge (as I have suggested above):

(1) To speak *through* animals: here the human voice substitutes for the non-human voice, effectively erasing it, in order not to speak of Nature, but rather of human society;

(2) To speak *about* animals: here the human voice subjects the nonhuman to naming and questioning; and

(3) To speak *for* animals: here we endeavour to speak on behalf of those who are 'needy' and cannot speak.

I will concentrate in this abbreviated paper on the first mode.

Speaking Through Animals

Walt Disney's *Bear Country*, an Academy award-winning live-action short subject produced in 1953 as part of the *True-Life Adventure* series (and recently re-released by the Disney corporation) seems to offer a virtual textbook illustration of *speaking through animals*. Here the voiceover turns animals into *human* characters that are not unlike characters of the silent cinema, with their exaggerated gestures and 'voices' severed from the image of their bodies.

Briefly, *Bear Country* tells the story of two years in the life of two male bear cubs, beginning with their emergence from the den a few weeks after birth in early spring, and ending with their achievement of adulthood in the late autumn of their second year. The narrative is organized around the centrality of the family unit, with the mother bear mediating between the cubs and the rest of the world. (Father bear is all but absent, but more on that in a moment.) The natural world envisioned here is merely a clever disguise for the human world, in which rules for child-rearing have been translated into 'laws of nature.'

The process of growing up proceeds in fits and starts, as the cubs enter into conflict with many other species, and with various external circumstances. Out of a condition of union with all species ("the young of all species get along" claims the narrator),

through close encounters with coyotes, a rattlesnake, and a mountain lion--to name just three--the cubs gain enough experience and training from their mother in order to understand their difference from, and even opposition to, other species. The film ends with the mother bear chasing her yearling cubs out onto a limb, literally, and abandoning them, counting on two years of discipline to keep them there. At first, the cubs wait obediently for Mother to return, but torn between their fear of her reprisal and growing hunger pangs, they eventually gain enough confidence to consider their own needs over their mother's wishes, and climb down from the treetop. This descent marks their clear achievement of adulthood, as their sense of self is now delineated not only in opposition to other species, but finally in opposition to Mother as well. The passage from infancy to adulthood--with its recurrent feelings of struggle, empowerment, abandonment, and nostalgia--is thus condensed for the young human spectator not only to a period of two years, as in a bear's life, but further digested to fit the twenty minutes or so it takes to view the film.

Now, in the course of viewing this film, the voiceover steers the young human spectator through two distinct phases that are somewhat analogous to the developmental phases of the maturing bear cubs. First, it encourages the child to identify with all the species presented on the screen, and then it orients *him*³ toward a more 'objective' perception of reality. Let me elaborate.

In the early part of the film, *bear country* is presented primarily as *like-human country*, with its requisite cast of stereotypical characters and human-like occurrences. For the young human spectator, the process of *self-recognition* is aided by the cubs' natural affinity for play, and the insistence of the voiceover on the similarity of all animal young. It is only through the cumulative information provided by the commentary that the young spectator slowly learns to distinguish the characteristics of bears from other nonhuman species, and ultimately from his own species.

For example, as the film progresses, the actions of the bears become more and more exaggerated and corny--indeed, *subhuman* like. The commentary increasingly mocks the young cubs, comparing them in one long sequence for instance to heavyweight wrestlers:

These contenders seem to be battling for the heavyweight title. The cham-

pion meanwhile watches from the sidelines. 'Dead-lock', 'hammer-lock', 'half-Nelson'--they've got all the holds down pat. The title holder views the proceedings with bored disdain. But the small-fry watch with the fascination of hero worship. And whenever they get the chance, they're quick to try the tricks of the trade on each other.

The cubs never completely grow up. In the final scene I have described above, where the cubs have been abandoned by their mother, a lullaby rocks the young bears to sleep in their "tree-top cradles" despite the commentary's insistence that they *have* achieved adulthood.

Bear Country offers the young spectator a mirror of a part of himself that he is longing to outgrow, at the same time that it encourages him to make fun of the antics of those who will *always* be even sillier than he is. The drawing power of a film like *Bear Country* may thus be seen to lie in this twin capacity to engage the young spectator in a process of identification *with* the young cubs at the same time that it provides the vehicle for him to be able to stand *outside* or, more precisely, *over* the non-human, in a relation that cannot help but feel like one of mastery.

"To cast the rest of nature in our image", as the naturalist John Livingston observes--even, I might



Vulpes vulpes

add, the image of an eight year old child--of course virtually guarantees the supremacy of the *human* species. Livingston writes:

We judge wildlife species by human standards *in order to find them wanting in human qualities* so that they may be appropriately ranked and filed. Because our standards are specific to us, no other species can possibly meet them. Man is thus the rational measure of all things; the proof is universal, and the perceived hierarchy is firm.⁴

Bear Country is doubly interesting from our present point of view in that such an evolution from infancy to adulthood--or from a magical *identification with* other species to all-knowing *master of* all species--also parallels a progression in the history of wildlife documentaries from Disney, let us say, to David Attenborough, and an informal hierarchy within wildlife programming (where we rank films which appeal to science as *higher than* films which sentimentally pursue human likeness in the nonhuman).

In *Bear Country*, the authority of even the mother bear is ultimately supplanted by the authority of the human male: a rational, disembodied voice able to interpret the actions of both mother and cubs--indeed *all* species--and thus able to claim omniscience. (The absent Father bear only aids this supersession.)

When we 'progress' from speaking *through* animals to speaking *about* animals, we shift from a voice that freely describes the ways in which nature is *like-self*, to a voice which names for us a nature which is more *like-object*.⁵ To speak *about* animals, then, is to submit that a neutral state of language exists, from which would flow other, inferior languages, such as the anthropomorphic language of *Bear Country*, or those mediated by individual consciousness. Our inclination then is to accept this seemingly neutral or transparent language as the superior one, and employ it even when we attempt to speak on behalf of, or *for*, the nonhuman.

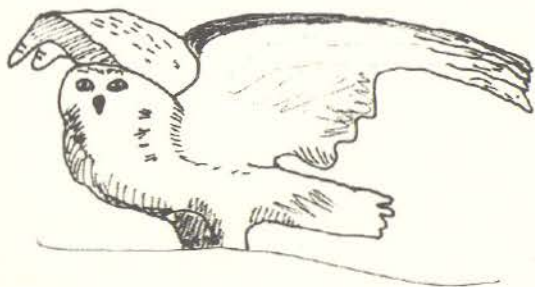
Speaking For Animals

"I think the birds here in Massachusetts disappeared *simply* because of civilization," says an 'expert' in a film on the reintroduction of bald eagles.

"Without such forests, many creatures would *simply* cease to exist," claims Marlin Perkins in an episode of *Wild Kingdom*.⁶

We, as individuals, are innocent, then. As Graeme Turner argues in an uncommon article on wildlife television documentaries, the depredations of humankind become natural forces like flood and fire. "The threat to the species is seen as the mechanism of nature in remorseless operation, something for which no one person can be held responsible, and something which flows from the domination of the species, not the individual."⁷ On the rare occasion where specific destructive acts are spoken of, they are inevitably the actions of citizens of 'developing' countries. According to Turner, the species under threat is then offered sympathy and token help: zoos, nature reserves, etc. Turner compares these sorts of ameliorative gestures to a humanist act which, like the taking of refugees, tries to avoid the political act: "dealing with the source of the refugees."⁸ The source of the problem here, of course, lies primarily in the conflict between the *needs* of the nonhuman and the *wants* of people. But these are precisely the sorts of issues which are deflected by vague notions of the "fragility" and "interrelatedness of Nature." The voiceover denounces "Man" just enough to pay lip-service to biological conservation, but fails to truly serve conservation by offering us a critique of, for instance, the consumer ethos, scientism, or the notion of progress.

Insofar as it is generally issued from the field of corporate sponsorship, under the pretext of objective knowledge, the voiceover must refrain from identifying the actions of any particular person or group--the documentary could therefore not be trusted. The voiceover must not age; it must be incontestable. What speaks then is what Pascal Bonitzer terms the "anonymity of 'public service,' of television, of information in general."⁹ It "neither is supposed to be, nor can be, a burning voice," writes Bonitzer of such a voice.¹⁰ A near empty plea vaguely reiterates the



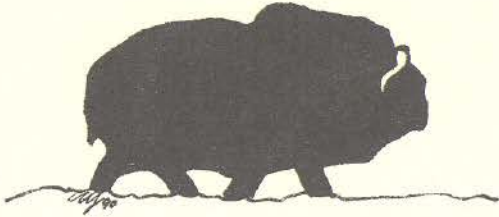
great abstractions of "Man" and "Nature." But it is not truly charged with representing the nonhuman in its otherness; on the contrary, it is charged with fixing it. It censors questions of why this destruction occurs (for they are variable and exist only in human consciousness) and concentrates only on what we cannot doubt: the number of square kilometers a certain creature requires, for instance. The frequently used closing image of some threatened creature soaring majestically against an expanse of sky shows *nothing* of the exploitation of the non-human world; it is only a glimpse of a world which can exist today *only* on the screen.

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Looking back at the numerous claims that have been made about the capacity of the wildlife genre to be yoked to the efforts of conservation and its contemporary variant, environmentalism, what I find striking is the enormous consistency in statements spanning over eight decades of unmitigated, incessant environmental destruction. One of the principal tenets of our society, as David Ehrenfeld notes, is the belief that "all problems are soluble"--and, more specifically, all problems are soluble by people.¹¹ To the long list of humanistic and technocratic assumptions Ehrenfeld cites, clearly we must add the assumption that the *media can be used to solve the ecological crisis*. However, one further observation is in order to temper this blind optimism.

At its core, the yearning to make wildlife documentaries--and to watch and listen to these documentaries--seems to be an urge to *make nature whole*: to disengage ourselves from the whole complex of social and natural relationships, and project a phantasy of unity and even purity onto the natural world.

But this desire leaves us with a number of dilemmas (indeed, environmentalism is *riddled* with such dilemmas). How can we confront an external reality--i.e. speak of environmental destruction--while simultaneously wanting to take refuge in this increasingly illusory unity? How can we take pleasure in the wildlife spectacle without becoming egoistically thrilled with the grandeur of our own sweeping vision? And finally, how can we speak on behalf of those who cannot speak, without erasing their voices, or mastering them? I will briefly address this last question now.



nature do--we may be guilty of the same perverse logic as Samuel Scudder was in 1870, when he declared in the annual report of the Boston Society of Natural History that professionals "should 'popularize science'--not by degrading it but by divesting it of its mysteries, by elevating the popular knowledge to our own standard."¹⁵

Granted, the cinematic apparatus was dreamt of and invented under the shadow of positivism. It supported the premise that nature is knowable, objectifiable, *uncontaminated* by human vision. But *as a language*, the dominant cinema developed in a way that we can only describe as fundamentally anthropomorphic: based on human dimensions of time and space, and the spectator's fascination with his or her likeness on the screen. As such, the imperatives of wildlife documentaries drag us in two contradictory directions: toward scientism and objectivity on the one hand, and toward anthropomorphic representation on the other. However, if we are to respond more adequately to the current ecological crisis--although I am not sure there *is* an adequate response--the challenge would seem to me to lie not in speaking *about* animals (concerned filmmakers often claim what is needed is "better science"), or even in speaking *for* animals, but rather in attempting to subvert the discourses of human mastery, and learning to speak *as* animals.

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I would like to digress for a moment, to close with matters of more practical concern.¹⁶ I have gathered a number of recommendations here, drawing in many instances on the unpublished proceedings of the International Wildlife Film Festival (IWFF), held annually on the University of Montana campus at Missoula. I hesitate to set them forth, for I am afraid they are so small and ultimately what is required is something far greater than *better* representations; but to suggest nothing can be done to speak effectively *as animals* is to shy away from the challenge.

First, I believe we need programs that do not separate the human and nonhuman, and that seek out relationships between the two that are lived, not abstracted. As I have suggested above, a reevaluation of the concept of anthropomorphism would likely lead us to more engaging representations of the nonhuman. When our ideas of the nonhuman are saturated with scientific fact, is it no wonder that we turn to images of alien creatures and Care Bears to mirror

From the stories of Ernest Thompson Seton through to the cinematic tales of a fierce and savage Africa, and the more tame specular entertainment of Disney, virtually all early attempts to bring 'nature' to a *mass* audience have been indicted for their failure of objectivity--for the imposition of human feelings, ambitions, and fears onto the nonhuman world. Indeed, it was often argued that the very success of a popular nature movement hinged on the construction of a *better*--i.e. more objective, *more grown up*--way of seeing the nonhuman, divested of all narrative or poetic elaboration. Doubtless there was merit in the critique of sham natural history, given the banalities that have been levied on the nonhuman world. But doubtless there was also comfort to be found in the drawing of analogies between human and nonhuman worlds--in what the naturalist-writer John Burroughs described nostalgically as the "pretty little anthropomorphic view of things."¹²

Clearly, Disney's *Bear Country* was the material product of an era of filmmaking in which heavy cameras and insensitive film stocks demanded a well-lit, studio-like situation, and therefore trained, or at the very least, captive, animals. In the context of most contemporary work, it appears the relic of a period characterized by the unscrupulous bending of natural facts and rampant anthropomorphisms, despite the film's insistence that "Nature is the dramatist" here.¹³ But what are we to make of the fact that these *True-Life Adventures* are oft-recollected with fondness and vividness by biologists and non-specialists alike? Paradoxically, a type of film which is disdainfully rejected by modern sensibilities for being the epitome of falsehood or childishness, would seem to have engendered an empathetic relationship with the nonhuman world of such potency that many specific scenes are often recalled decades after they were originally viewed.¹⁴ In opposing cinematic truth to anthropomorphic representation then--as films which profess to speak *about*

ourselves?

Secondly, we need to hear the *burning* voices of people privileged to live in close contact with the natural world. As the deep ecologist Arne Naess has argued:

When biologists refrain from using the rich and flavorful language of their own spontaneous experience of all life forms—not only of the spectacularly beautiful but of the mundane and bizarre as well—they support the value nihilism which is implicit in outrageous environmental policies.¹⁷

If we *must* have celebrities and exemplary witnesses as authorities to guide our mediated explorations of the natural world, then at least let them be selected from those who have written lovingly, knowingly, and intimately of the natural world.

A third suggestion is that we need to hear from completely *other* voices. For instance, in his introduction to an address by Edward Abbey at the IWFF in 1982, Doug Peacock asked the audience to imagine "a Blackfoot film on bison made a hundred years ago."¹⁸ Our continuing fascination with the lone white male in the wilderness suggests that we have yet to come up with a satisfying model for 'nature loving' in our documentaries.

A final suggestion is that we need to have more programs that seek to address some of the *root* causes of the ecological crisis. I offer that a truly radical conservation documentary would construct and counterpose a voice that is simultaneously burning and lucidly argued, intensely personal and political. Of work already produced, I believe the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's 1985 series *A Planet for the Taking* comes the closest to achieving these objectives.

There are, of course, many other possibilities, but to go on at length here with these prescriptions would be to suggest that I believe that there is a solution to environmental problems through mediated communication--i.e. through *better* representations, *better* programming, etc.--and that we do not ultimately want to wrap ourselves in a blanket of technology, of which the film and television industry is surely a part.

Notes

I would like to thank Ray Parker for his helpful comments on this paper.

1. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (3rd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. xiii.
2. Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. by Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 341. Originally published in *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980), pp. 33-50.
3. I am assuming a male spectator, for clearly the film, with its focus on two male bear cubs, does.
4. John A. Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), pp. 75-76.
5. Neil Evernden makes this distinction between 'nature-as-self' and 'nature-as-object'. See his "Nature in Industrial Society" in *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, ed. by Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 151-164.
6. The italics in these quotes are an attempt to reflect the emphases of the narrators.
7. Graeme Turner, "Nostalgia for the Wild: Wildlife Documentaries on TV," *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3:1 (1985), pp. 62-71.
8. Ibid.
9. Pascal Bonitzer, "The Silences of the Voice," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, p. 325. Originally published in *Cahiers du cinema*, no. 256 (February-March 1975).
10. Ibid.
11. David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 16-17.
12. John Burroughs, *The Writings of John Burroughs*, vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton, 1904-23), pp. 225-26. Cited by Bruce Piasecki in "American Literary Environmentalism before Darwin," *Teaching Environmental Literature*, ed. by Frederick O. Waage (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1985), p. 15.
13. The opening of *Bear Country* includes the following title card: "This is one of a series of True-Life Adventures presenting the strange facts about the world we live in. In the making of these films, Nature is the dramatist. There are no fictitious situations or characters."
14. For a discussion of some of the rewards of anthropomorphic relationships with the nonhuman, see Leesa Fawcett, "Anthropomorphism: In The Web of Culture," *Undercurrents*, 1:1 (1989), pp. 14-20.
15. Samuel H. Scudder, "Annual Report of the Boston Society of Natural History for 1869-1870", p. 326. Cited by Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "From Learned Society to Public Museum: The Boston Society of Natural History," p. 386.
16. This final section was added at the request of the editors of *Undercurrents*.
17. Arne Naess, "Intrinsic Value: Will the Defenders of Nature Please Rise?", *Conservation Biology*, ed. by Michael E. Soule (Sunderland, Mass.: Sinauer Associates, Inc., 1986), p. 512. Cited by Leesa Fawcett in "Anthropomorphism and Children's Relationships with Animals" (unpublished Masters Thesis, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, 1988), p. 45.
18. Doug Peacock, International Wildlife Film Festival, April 17, 1982, Missoula, Montana.