

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROPOSAL FOR A PARTNERSHIP NATURE FILM

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis essay and film, *Pine Rockland Composition*, to all living things in the South Florida pine rocklands and that includes the passionate humans.

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ABSTRACT

I propose that contemporary natural history documentary films need to incorporate multiple cultural disciplines or perspectives like critical studies, environmental philosophy, dialectical biology, and documentary film theory. A multidisciplinary nature film creates a partnership representation of humans and nature absent in natural history documentary films. I use critical rhetoric and examples from contemporary nature films to argue that a partnership nature film showing humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect is compatible with conservation and incompatible with a profit-driven commercial broadcast system.

INTRODUCTION

It seems to me that nature films¹ from the Walt Disney *True-Life Adventure*² series in the mid 20th century to the BBC *Planet Earth* series in the early 21st century try to “cash in on nature” as spectacle with the justification “before you teach conservation, you have to fascinate” (Mitman 2,3). This attitude leads to a problematic populist entertainment imperative for contemporary nature films (Wilson 125). The problem is that we live in a postmodern world of global environmental degradation where that kind of film no longer fits or belongs in representations of nature. Films that represent nature as entertainment and spectacle for commercial gain are inconsistent with nature conservation³. Anthropocentric, reductionist and expository nature films as a commercial enterprise generally fail to represent humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect. Representations of nature on film need to show humans as part of and partners with nature, not superior and separate, to deconstruct human hyperseparation from nature in our Western culture. Hyperseparation reinforces the dominant ideology that positions nature as passive object, rather than an active agent and equal subject. And yet, no matter what the representation, nature films will always signify a cultural construction of nature by the filmmakers. William Cronon writes, “The way we describe and understand that world (natural) is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated” (25). Nature as culture begs the question for natural history filmmakers to be more self-aware when deciding what nature and whose

nature to represent. “If we hope for an environmentalism capable of explaining why people use and abuse the earth as they do, then the nature we study must become less natural and more cultural” (Cronon 36). My own values and assumptions about nature as an artist, naturalist, Caucasian, graduate student, woman, and middle-class American influence the way I see nature and humans as equal, interacting, mutually responsive partners. It sounds simple to construct a film showing humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect, but it is anything but simple. In my essay, I argue that contemporary nature films desperately need a multidisciplinary approach. I identify multiple disciplines or perspectives intrinsic to nature filmmaking that include critical studies, environmental philosophy, dialectical biology, and documentary film theory. Overall, this is a proposal for a multidimensional partnership representation of humans and nature that is noticeably absent in the contemporary nature film archive. A partnership of humans and nature is compatible with conservation and incompatible with a profit-driven commercial broadcast system. I refer to the BBC *Planet Earth* film series (2007) and my thesis film, *Pine Rockland Composition* (2010), throughout my essay to illustrate the need for a multidisciplinary approach to natural history filmmaking.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Nature films will never escape the complex web of values and meanings of the filmmakers because film production is a human system of representation. Nature films will always contain some degree of anthropocentrism. However, I propose that conservation filmmakers minimize anthropocentric nature constructions.

Anthropocentrism as an ideology interprets and positions nature exclusively in terms of human values and experiences. Anthropocentric films privilege the human perspective which automatically marginalizes nature as lesser and other. It also diminishes respect not only for nature, but also for decontextualized, or denaturalized, humans.

Anthropocentric nature films are ubiquitous on broadcast television. For example, each episode from the BBC Natural History Unit (NHU) *Planet Earth* series needs a rethinking from anthropocentrism to a partnership ideology.

Partnership as an ideology interprets and positions nature and humans as equal, mutually responsive partners (Merchant 25). Carolyn Merchant proposes a partnership ethic based on mutual living interdependence and dynamic relationships of give and take between human and nonhuman communities. Merchant says in her book Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture,

The only way we can, as human, integrate ourselves into a life-sustaining relationship to nature, is for both of us, males as much as females, to see ourselves as equally rooted in the cycles of life and death, and equally responsible for creating ways of living sustainably together in that relationship (36).

A partnership ethic in a nature film is consistent with conservation and my thesis

argument to show humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect. It is also inconsistent with anthropocentrism and reductionism that characterize contemporary nature films.

Planet Earth is the most expensive nature documentary television series in the history of the genre. *Planet Earth* filmmakers describe the film series as "the definitive look at the diversity of our planet" (*Wikipedia*⁴). This statement reveals a high degree of anthropocentrism, lack of respect for nature, and underlying cultural hegemony of the BBC NHU filmmakers. No film can ever offer a definitive look at our extremely diverse planet, especially a film that removes all human social context.

Consider the BBC *Planet Earth* episode *Seasonal Forests* (2007). It is anthropocentric on multiple levels because it reflects and disseminates the human values and experiences of the BBC production team and viewers by representing nature with an anthropocentric narration and without humans. In other words, humans can talk about nature behind the camera but they can not appear in front of the camera with nature. It is remarkable that the BBC disseminates a construction of spectacular images of nature without any signs of humans or civilization. This anthropocentric perspective encourages humans to apply more value to spectacular nature and nature as wilderness and less value to nature with humans and nature in our backyards and local communities. *Seasonal Forests* encourages humans to see themselves as separate and superior to an inferior nature thereby distorting the complex human and nonhuman interrelationships and social context within nature.

The spectacular opening shot in *Seasonal Forests* ascends a redwood tree from the

BBC film balloon; it passes two climbers during the ascent before revealing an aerial of the redwood forest. Who are these humans and why are they climbing this redwood tree? As viewers, we will never know. This opening shot is the only representation of humans in the entire film. The climbers appear to symbolize human domination over nature. In another example, *Seasonal Forests* represents the critically endangered Amur leopard as struggling for survival during the winter season. The narrator explains how survival for the leopard is difficult because of the extremely cold winter. The film fails to represent the extensive regional forest logging, subsequent reduction in prey food, and poaching as reasons for the critically endangered status. In Wildlife Films, Derek Bousé argues that a film that says too much about an issue, like threatened and endangered species, will lose the audience, but if it says too little, it will lose the subject (16). *Seasonal Forests* loses both its subject and its audience with a singular, anthropocentric perspective. The omniscient narrator, David Attenborough in this case, explains every single nonhuman behavior using human terms and ideology. Val Plumwood argues in her book Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason that anthropocentric language constitutes a lack of respect for the differences of animals by representing them in terms of humans. The narrator should not “be” the other, but “represent” the other; and further, the narrator should not speak “as” the other but “with” the other (Plumwood 60). A typical *Seasonal Forest* excerpt exemplifies the focus on magnificent nature and anthropocentric narration:

The American conifer forests may not be the richest in animal life, but their trees are extraordinary...Higher up in the nearby mountains, Bristlecone pines, the oldest organisms on the planet...They were alive before the

pyramids were built and were already 3,000 years old when Christ was born. An aerial shot transports the viewer between a Giant sequoia and a Bristlecone pine while representing the forest with narration like statistical facts, emotionally manipulative music, and consequently, low respect. In this example, the narrator fails to speak *with* nature neither representing nature as active agent nor as an equal subject. In another example, horror movie music accompanies the emergence of millions of periodical cicadas. The *Seasonal Forest* narration explains, “After seventeen years underground, creatures are stirring. Now they march like zombies towards the nearest tree and start to climb.” This narration is more consistent with an anthropocentric entertainment objective rather than an ethical representation, or partnership objective.

Anthropocentric films further fail to represent nature with respect due to underrepresentation of both natural soundscapes and the gradualness of nature⁵. As naturalists attest, humans learn about and appreciate nature through their senses, especially listening to natural soundscapes. Personally, I was yearning to hear the natural soundscapes and synchronized sounds in *Seasonal Forests*. Instead, *Planet Earth* introduces each forest from the Taiga to the Baobab with a dramatic musical score, non-diegetic human narration, and nonsynchronized sounds. Natural soundscapes are infrequent, artificial, and often compete with dramatic music. One soundscape represents a forest interior but accompanies an aerial shot floating high above the forest exterior. The best sound representation is not a soundscape, but rather individual vocalizations for species like the Great Grey owls and periodical cicadas. Overall, the *Planet Earth* filmmakers lose the subject (i.e., nature) by removing synchronized sound and natural

soundscapes from their representations of nature. Diane Ackerman speculates in her book Natural History of the Senses,

Virtually all movies these days have soundtracks and background music. The assumption must be that we're not competent to hear the world, and that we need music to supply us with quick, relevant emotions. Is this because we don't think the world is worth listening to? Is it because filmmakers wish to combine words and music for the most intense emotional effect? Or is it just that they think we're too lazy, or too shallow, or too numb to have an emotional response to what we're viewing (216)?

I agree that excessive, dramatic music removes value from nature and natural soundscapes and adds value to sounds that are emotionally manipulative. In *The Artifice of the Natural*, Charles Siebert presents a critical viewer perspective about constructed wildlife documentaries referring to them as “extravagant animal opera, dramatizing, scoring, voicing in human terms the vast backdrop of inhuman action” (43). Because nature films show a fast-paced nature to satisfy a fast-paced culture, they create an inaccurate representation of the gradualness of nature (Siebert 48). *Seasonal Forests* describes the Taiga forest as “a silent world where little stirs”. This sequence begins gradually by showing Arctic fox and polar bear tracks in the Taiga before becoming a fast-paced succession of a lynx, moose, crossbill, and a “gluttonous” wolverine eating a caribou carcass.

Consider my film, *Pine Rockland Composition*, for comparison. It might seem a stretch to compare a low budget, independent student film with a big budget, blue-chip co-production like *Planet Earth*. But, it is not the image quality nor budget that is under analysis; rather, it is the representation of humans as part of nature and showing humans and nature with respect.

The subject of *Pine Rockland Composition* is the human and nonhuman interrelationships within the pine rockland natural community. I begin with a brief background to the pine rocklands. The subtropical and globally imperiled pine rocklands occur exclusively on the Miami Rock Ridge limestone⁶ in South Florida and predominantly within Everglades National Park⁷. The pine rocklands underwent rapid agricultural and urban development with the advent of the rock plow in the mid to late 20th century. Today, the pine rocklands consist of fragmented remnants as a result of habitat development and degradation, fire suppression, nonnative species, and alterations to hydrology. At the same time, there exists multiple cooperative human relationships including beneficial prescribed burning, the reintroduction of extirpated birds like Eastern bluebirds, and the restoration of the pine rockland by landowners. Pine rocklands host the highest plant diversity of any natural community in Florida with a rich herb, palm, shrub understory and a Slash pine overstory. Pine rocklands require prescribed or lightning-ignited fires to control the growth of understory hardwood shrubs and to facilitate nutrient cycling in a nutrient-poor environment. The subtropical climate of South Florida roughly divides the year into a wet and a dry season. Daily thunderstorms and occasional tropical storms or even hurricanes characterize the summer wet season.

Pine Rockland Composition is approximately thirty minutes long. My film begins at night during the wet season in the pine rocklands within Everglades National Park. The first three minutes excludes human subjects and human exposition to introduce the pine rockland from a nonhuman perspective. In fact, my film omits all anthropocentric

narration and instead, represents a range of human perspectives embedded in nature who each relate to being part of rather than separate from the pine rocklands. The viewer sees the first human, an Everglades fish biologist, from an underwater, nonhuman perspective as he pulls a fish trap out of a pine rockland solution hole. Later, the person responsible for reintroducing extirpated birds responds to my question about whether humans are part of intact ecosystems. He says “I definitely like it when there is not as many humans. But, I mean, I think we are certainly a component of it. I think we are, as a species, trying to figure out how we fit into that.” *Pine Rockland Composition* minimizes anthropocentric constructions by including both *spectacular* nature such as time-lapsed photography of plant growth after a prescribed fire, and less *spectacular* nature such as roads and urban development. A range of shots showing current land use of historic pine rocklands represents the development and degradation of the globally imperiled pine rocklands. As a result, my film does not lose its subject to gain an audience. For example, I show a family planting a native garden of pine rockland plants adjacent to their house. *Pine Rockland Composition* encourages viewers to apply equal value to spectacular nature or nature as wilderness as to nature with humans and nature in our backyards and local communities.

Pine Rockland Composition begins with a representative nocturnal, wet season natural soundscape of rainfall, thunder, frogs, mosquitoes, and bird calls. In fact, every film sequence incorporates a rich soundscape of both synchronized and nonsynchronized sounds that sometimes includes human sounds like an airplane. The exclusion of

background music for most of the film encourages the viewer to hear and respect the pine rocklands. Music clips from an instrumental song compliment the interaction between nature and humans rather than manipulate human emotions. *Pine Rockland Composition* represents the gradualness in nature by showing some slow-paced nature. For example, a field biologist listens to and watches an Eastern bluebird for about fifteen seconds, and, an ambush bug stalks prey on a pineland croton for about twenty seconds. Overall, *Pine Rockland Composition* removes non-diegetic anthropocentric narration, incorporates human and social context, removes emotionally manipulative music, and adds more representations of gradual nature, all of which is more consistent with a partnership rather than anthropocentric representation.

PARTNERSHIP

What would a partnership film look like? To begin, it would not represent only magnificent and homogenous nature, nature without humans, or even humans without nature. A partnership film producer might begin each project as an exploration into multiple perspectives considering the nonhuman, human, cultural, social, and other contextual factors present before attempting a representation. *Pine Rockland Composition* attempts to construct such a partnership film. The entire film production process to represent just one natural community on our planet takes two years. It is a time-intensive process for a single filmmaker to research human and nonhuman interrelationships within the complex pine rockland natural community both inside and outside Everglades National Park. In contrast, *Seasonal Forests* lacks any kind of partnership ethic. It represents no less than ten different forests around the world within a fifty-minute episode. As such, it avoids an exploration of nature partnerships within any complex, interdependent seasonal forest natural community.

Partnership filmmakers would deconstruct dualisms like human-nature and nature-culture by showing humans as part of nature and nature as an active not a passive agent. Humans that live in Western cultures and urban environments often lose track of remote nature and fail to see themselves as ecological and embedded beings (Plumwood 19). This monological environmental ideology creates multiple dualisms like subject-object, human-nature and nature-culture. Dualisms and binary thinking translate through a cultural reification process into a human perception of nature as not only other, but also separate,

manipulable, instrumental, homogeneous, and having less agency. Human-nature hyperseparation blocks human identification, respect, and critical questions that address inequalities between humans and nature (Plumwood 102).

A partnership film would balance human and nonhuman perspectives and voices.

Pine Rockland Composition entirely alternates between a human and nonhuman perspective and between human voices and natural soundscapes. In my film, I generally introduce each pine rockland interrelationship, or sequence, from a nonhuman perspective before integrating the human perspective. For example, a sequence about a solution hole begins from an underwater fish and wet season perspective before integrating the human perspective. In another example, the fire sequence begins with a long take of a fire burning the pine rockland understory on a small island within Everglades National Park. Next, the sequence incorporates the fire crew perspective, nonhuman perspective of a lizard and rodent escaping the fire, plants responding to fire, fire responding to the environment, fire ecologist perspective, plant regeneration after a fire, and then numerous animals thriving in a fire-maintained pine rockland including Eastern bluebird and White-tailed deer. The camera shots alternate between a human perspective, such as filming at eye-level, and a nonhuman perspective, such as filming through a pine tree snag cavity.

Pine Rockland Composition alternates between humans explaining nature to letting nonhuman images speak for themselves. In other words, my film encourages greater respect for nature by explaining some, but not all, nonhuman organisms and processes. In contrast, *Seasonal Forests* not only explains all nonhuman organisms, but it does so from

an anthropocentric perspective.

Pine Rockland Composition features at least seven partnership relationships between humans and pine rockland nature. In one such relationship, a research biologist responds to the road collision and mortality of two bluebirds by erecting a bluebird memorial sign. The memorial sign increases respect for bluebirds and nature. It also emphasizes the lack of partnership when humans drive too fast on roads bisecting the home of nonhumans. “Living with and communicating with nature opens the possibility of nondominating, nondualistic interaction between humans and nature” (Merchant 229). My film shows each human subject interacting with and describing different aspects of complex pine rockland nature as an equal subject and active agent. The Everglades Fire Management Officer perceives fire as an active agent when he says,

When I am looking at fire, I am watching combustion at work, so to speak, and that physical process. But also, you are watching an ancient process at work. Watching a fire graze, so to speak, through the pinelands, depositing its ash and changing the landscape, opening it up for more sunlight, putting more nutrients down. And, I know that there is going to be a beauty after this place is blackened.

Pine Rockland Composition culminates with a partnership between humans and pine rockland nature at the Pine Ridge Sanctuary where a married couple live on a fifteen acre pine rockland remnant adjacent to Everglades National Park. They represent an enigma in South Florida for their dedication to habitat restoration following the devastation of Hurricane Andrew⁸ in addition to their respect for pine rocklands as an active agent. They make a living by growing orchids in a greenhouse and leaving the rest of their land

for conservation. Overall, *Pine Rockland Composition* exemplifies a partnership nature film because it interprets and positions pine rockland nature and humans as equal, mutually responsive partners (Merchant 25).

REDUCTIONISM

Nature is a human cultural construct. It is also a real, material and active agent (Merchant 216). Nature is more complicated than any human system of representation. “The ecosystem is not more complex than we think, it is more complex than we *can* think” (Cronon 247). If nature is so complex, it is also more complex than any film can represent it. Nature film producers and writers are more or less aware that they choose which science theory to inform the film text. They base their choice on their personal history and the dominant cultural ideology. Individualism, or reductionism, is the common choice for nature filmmakers in Western cultures.

Reductionism describes the main issue for science as the study of individual species by separating out parts from the complex whole. A reductionist biologist rejects the holistic concept of natural community as a human construct. Instead, the landscape consists of an assemblage of species that spread out depending on competition, chance, and life history traits. Filmmakers, like scientists, can choose whether to see more holism or reductionism and more competition or cooperation in nature. The reductionist and competitive perspective of nature typifies contemporary nature films.

Seasonal Forests pretends to represent the seasonal forest as a habitat or ecosystem⁹. It is a reductionist representation, however, that extracts individual species from the environment. As viewers, we do not learn about nature as complex and adaptive or about geological and climate processes. For example, we learn about the Bristlecone

pine being the oldest organism on the planet. But we do not explore why it is the oldest. To do that, the film would need to incorporate the surrounding harsh and adaptive natural community of which it is part. Extreme close-up cinematography further extracts individuals from the surrounding forest community. The most significant reduction is to lump together ten distinct and diverse forest communities ranging from coniferous to broadleaf and the Arctic to the tropics into a single category of seasonal forest. The text in *Seasonal Forest* uses reductive and competitive terminology like “survival of the fittest”, “dominates”, “winners and losers”, “hunting”, and “species adaptations”. Even the seasonal forests compete with each other for the most wildlife, productivity, edible leaves, and hospitable climate. I propose that a nature film with a linear, reductionist and competition perspective fails to represent nature with respect. A partnership nature film pursues representations with a science perspective that is nonlinear and process-based.

I choose dialectical biology as a postmodern science to influence my partnership representation of nature in *Pine Rockland Composition*. “A postclassical, postmodern science is a science of limited knowledge, of the primacy of process over parts, and of imbedded contexts within complex, open, ecological systems” (Merchant 216). It emphasizes nature as complex, nonlinear, and as a process of continuous change. Dialectical biology describes the main issue for science as the study of unity and contradiction, or cooperation and competition. “These are the properties of things that we call dialectical: that one thing cannot exist without the other, that one acquires its properties from its relation to the other, that the properties of both evolve as a

consequence of their interpenetration” (Levins & Lewontin 3). A dialectical biologist would view the pine rockland natural community in terms of dynamic interrelationships between organisms and the environment which interpenetrate on multiple material levels such as food availability, predator population, species competition, cover and nest availability, nutrient cycling, weather, hydrology, disease, vegetation structure, fire, humans, and so on. These levels are only a few of the givens and constraints within that the pine rockland dynamics change and function.

How might a filmmaker construct a representation of the dialectical unity and contradiction of a natural community, considering the spatial and temporal invisibility of many organisms and processes to the human eye and camera lens? For example, imagine the difficulty in representing the limestone geology and erosion process in the pine rocklands. Translating and representing the complexity in nature confronts “vexing limitations of film and video as media of analysis” (Nichols 147). One approach that reconciles complexity with technological limitations is to select and film representative interrelationships in a natural community¹⁰. This selection process is both dialectical and reductionist since it extracts parts, or interrelationships, from the whole, or natural community. It is unavoidable that the film production process necessitates a reduction of nature into shots and even frames of video. However, this process is also dialectical because every single nature shot, or part, exists in the context of a competitive or cooperative interrelationship.

Pine Rockland Composition incorporates representations of dialectical interrelationships beginning underground in a limestone solution hole showing geological, hydrological and subtropical climate processes before moving progressively upward to the pine rockland understory showing vegetation structure, fire, and nutrient cycling processes, and then up to the overstory showing pine tree snags as nest substrates and pine cone fertilization before moving progressively outward beyond Everglades National Park to the pine rockland remnants showing human development, hurricane process and social, economic, cultural contexts. *Pine Rockland Composition* features interrelationships that represent humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect. Interrelationships are both cooperative, like insect-plant pollination and habitat restoration, and competitive, like herbivory and human development. My film favors wide-shots rather than the telephoto shots to position individual subjects within pine rockland interrelationships and the natural community. So far, my thesis proposes a multidisciplinary nature *film* incorporating the environmental philosophy of partnership and the nonlinear science of dialectical biology. As such, it requires a film perspective to turn my idea of a partnership nature film into a representation of my reality.

HYBRID OF DOCUMENTARY FILM MODES

In Representing Reality, Bill Nichols describes the most common documentary film modes as expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive. Each mode offers a different perspective of reality in our semiotic natural world. While many social documentary films are a hybrid of modes, the majority of nature documentary films embrace the expository. I propose that a partnership nature film should incorporate a hybrid perspective from the expository, observational, and reflexive modes to better represent humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect.

Pine Rockland Composition is a hybrid of expositional, observational, and reflexive documentary filmmaking. It is observational because it eschews narration and an exclusively didactic argument. Instead, it incorporates indirect, somewhat extensive, observations of humans and nonhumans within a social context. This perspective shows humans as part of nature with greater context or culture, and consequently, more respect. Like a fly on the wall, the observational mode represents present-tense interactions to reveal nonlinear interrelationships and processes. For example, my film shows long takes of present-tense human observations, such as the bluebird and fire crews, with synchronous sounds in pine rockland nature. *Pine Rockland Composition* encourages the viewer, but does not tell the viewer, to engage in nonlinear readings of the text. For example, the viewer must understand earlier representations between nonhumans and fire to understand a later representation of fire. The observational mode encourages more

voyeurism, gradualness, and multidimensional space in nature. While voyeurism might reinforce dualisms by showing nature as a scopophilic object, my film counters voyeurism by including reflexivity, minimizing close-up cinematography, and excluding private animal behaviors, such as mating. As a hybrid nature film, *Pine Rockland Composition* incorporates observational techniques consistent with showing humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect.

The non-didactic, open text characterizing the observational mode represents the present-tense human perspective in partnership relationships very well. However, the open text and lack of exposition might fail to adequately represent some nonhuman perspectives. “Documentary is a fiction unlike any other precisely because the images direct us toward the historical world, but if that world is unfamiliar to us, our direction will just as likely be toward a fiction like any other” (Nichols 160). A representation of complex nature like a dialectical interrelationship without human exposition may increase respect for the agency of nature, but it may also decrease respect with a false interpretation. For this reason, a hybrid nature film necessitates some expository techniques.

Pine Rockland Composition is expository because human voice-over text, rhetorical organization and titles direct the viewer towards my indirect argument about the world, which is that humans are part of nature and nature is a dialectical natural community. My film uses voice-over from expository field interviews with contextualized humans rather than decontextualized voice-of-god narration. The rhetorical organization of an indirect

argument represents nature with respect by maintaining spatial and temporal continuity rather than argument continuity. In other words, the continuous representation of spatial and temporal pine rockland interrelationships takes precedence over an anthropocentric didactic argument. *Pine Rockland Composition* also incorporates expository titles like “Fire”, “Partnership”, “Interrelationship”, and “Wet Season” to substantiate the tacit argument of a dialectical natural community. The expository ranges between a direct to a more indirect, poetic argument.

By contrast, *Seasonal Forests* exemplifies one mode, the expository, rather than a hybrid of modes. It employs a direct argument because voice-of-god narration and evidentiary editing directs the viewer towards a dominant ideological argument about the natural world. An unseen BBC filmmaker maintains rhetorical continuity instead of spatial or temporal continuity. It also employs an indirect, poetic argument with aerials and close-up shots showing expressive patterns of trees and forests. In another example, computer generated time-lapsed photography shows seasonal foliage and flower transformations. Nichols offers a poignant critique of the expository reaffirming my proposal for a multidisciplinary approach. “Though bodily and ethically absented, the filmmaker retains the controlling voice, and the subject of the film becomes displaced into a mythic realm of reductive, stereotype as powerless victim” (Nichols 91). Nature in *Seasonal Forests* becomes both a passive object and a BBC stereotype.

Pine Rockland Composition is reflexive because it reveals the production process and cinematic apparatus. Reflexivity challenges both the process of a nature

representation and the constructed impression of nature as an epistemological reality. Reflexivity counters the voyeurism implicit in the expository and observational modes. The title reflects my composition or construction of nature on film. I reveal myself, the filmmaker, and my video camera with an introductory, reflexive montage. The montage shows me cleaning the camera lens, asking an interview question, filming from a tree stand in over-exposed video, and repositioning my camera. My film includes some, but not all, of my questions as a filmmaker. The questions are an off-screen commentary to show my exploratory thought process. Too much reflexivity like on-screen commentary or constantly showing the cinematic apparatus might reduce viewer empathy for and immersion with pine rockland nature. Reflexivity is critical to a partnership film hybrid because it reinforces a representation of nature as a social and cultural construct. “This questioning of its own status, conventions, effects, and values may well represent the maturation of the genre” (Nichols 63).

As I said earlier, *Seasonal Forests* is poetic expository; however, *Planet Earth* includes a ten minute behind-the-scenes featurette following each fifty minute episode. Entitled *Planet Earth Diaries*, it shows footage of the BBC production crew and cinematic apparatus. This reflexive device succeeds in showing humans in nature in addition to the BBC cultural construction of nature. However, it fails as a device to represent humans and nature with respect for at least two reasons. First, it separates, or extracts, the featurette from the main feature. Second, the local humans remain silent as object and other, similar to nature. We see locals gather to watch the filmmakers deploy a

balloon rig for filming, but there is no verbal interaction between them. Instead, the narrator speaks for them by saying “puzzled locals take the ring side seats.” The surrounding cultural and social context of Madagascar is one-dimensional and remains in the background. I sense an anthropocentric motivation rather than a reflexive process.

Planet Earth Diaries satisfies viewer epistophilia for a behind-the-scenes perspective.

NATURE FILM STYLE

The style of a nature film reflects the cultural, technical and moral perspective of the filmmaker. A more self-aware and personal style increases film authorship with a unique cultural construction of nature. Different motivations for style, or the relationship between object and text, include realism and formal (Nichols 22)¹¹. While realism characterizes the majority of nature films, it is difficult to detect authorship in large production nature films due to an overreliance on formulaic styles to satisfy viewer expectations and ratings. Realism in conventional nature films embraces objectivity under the pretense of being professional and unbiased. There exists a myth of objectivity and neutrality in science and nature films (Crowther 297). And yet, objectivity is antithetical to representing both humans and nature with respect. Nature film styles, like any other art, may range between realism and expressionism, objectivity and subjectivity. A partnership film incorporates more formal expressionism and subjectivity to make nature films more *cultural* and less *natural*.

A nature film embracing realism, formal poetic expository, and the myth of objectivity will not produce a multidimensional representation of a complex, interdependent natural community. How might a partnership filmmaker incorporate more style and subjectivity to produce a multidimensional representation? The filmmaker might explore an expressive style reflecting her culture and personal engagement with nature. This style would not satisfy the viewer's expectation for spectacle and

conventions but rather would satisfy the filmmaker as an artist. In *Pine Rockland Composition*, I develop my own formal style using expressive colors and forms, superimposed images, and illustrations to show humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect.

I compose each shot in *Pine Rockland Composition* with an expressive bias for bright colors, contrasting warm and cool colors, and distinct forms. A bright color palette best expresses my emotion for the pine rocklands. I perceive each pine rockland interrelationship in terms of colors and forms. A solution hole is a circle whereas a pine tree is a line. A sequence about fire in the pine rocklands is green with vegetation, orange with fire, and black with char. *Pine Rockland Composition* encourages the viewer to see my perception of pine rockland colors and forms. For example, a blurred sunrise represents the bright orange circle of the sun rising behind the brown lines of pine trees and solid bright green understory. My film consistently alternates cool colors with contrasting warm colors to increase the formal rhythm and cohesion of color.

Pine Rockland Composition incorporates two kinds of superimposed images. Firstly, my film cross-dissolves two video clips from different times. For example, I film a pine rockland space during a prescribed fire without a human. Then, I film the same pine rockland space after the prescribed fire with a human subject. When I cross-dissolve the two video clips, the human appears to walk into the fire. In another example, a pineland croton plant exuding red sap from caterpillar herbivory cross-dissolves with a human bleeding from a mosquito bite. Secondly, my film overlays two video clips that

play simultaneously. For example, video of the fish biologist at a solution hole overlays video of fish in the same solution hole. I superimpose every human subject with an interrelated pine rockland subject. The motivation for both kinds of superimposed images is both formal and ideological to represent humans as part of nature.

Pine Rockland Composition incorporates expressive illustrations to represent a perspective of the pine rocklands impossible to represent with video. Two illustrations show an aerial perspective of the Miami Rock Ridge before and after development. I commissioned artists familiar with the pine rocklands to facilitate a subjective perspective and formal aesthetic consistent with my film. The illustrations feature representative subjects from *Pine Rockland Composition* such as a solution hole, fire, bluebird, and humans. A third illustration shows a side-profile perspective of the pine rocklands with a human part of and observing nature.

Pine Rockland Composition incorporates greater subjectivity by representing subjective human and nonhuman perspectives in addition to slow motion shots of processes and animal behaviors. My film represents both the exterior and interior of each human subject to increase empathetic identification. For example, the fish biologist reveals an interior perspective when he says, “I just like to look in the water, to see the fish. It goes back to when I was a little kid and getting dropped off, getting dropped off at the river while my dad was working in the fields.” Overall, the formal style and subjectivity of *Pine Rockland Composition* adds dimensionality and thus increases human respect and wonder for the pine rockland natural community.

CONCLUSION

Painters and filmmakers often create art to show the public a new way of looking at life (Wilder 17). My thesis essay and film, *Pine Rockland Composition*, represent a new way of looking at a natural community showing humans as part of nature and both humans and nature with respect. It incorporates multiple disciplines intrinsic to nature film constructions including critical studies, environmental philosophy, science, and documentary film theory. *Pine Rockland Composition* says as much about me and my culture as it does about pine rockland nature. I propose this multidisciplinary approach to contemporary nature films to encourage natural history documentary filmmakers to explore new ways to represent complex, dynamic nature as culture for conservation.

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END NOTES

¹ Nature film is short-hand for a natural history documentary film.

² Walt Disney Studios distributed the *True-Life Adventure* series in the 1950's. Each film "portrayed a fantasy of pristine nature far removed from the commercial world of modern, industrialized America" (Mitman 110).

³ Conservation goals are an attempt to "restrain shortsighted exploitation of natural resources, while supporting a utilitarian philosophy of wise use" (Merchant 137).

⁴ *Wikipedia* is an online social encyclopedia. To visit, go to:
<www.wikipedia.com>.

⁵ A soundscape is any human or nonhuman acoustic environment. A natural soundscape refers to the natural sounds that organisms generate in a habitat revealing acoustic interrelationships and auditory niches (Krause 154).

⁶ The Miami Rock Ridge elevation ranges between one and twenty feet. It is the highest elevation in South Florida.

⁷ Everglades National Park is the third largest national park in the United States of America. It contains a mosaic of upland and lowland habitats with both tropical and temperate species. It is adjacent to extensive urban and agricultural development.

⁸ Hurricane Andrew was a powerful Category 5 hurricane that hit South Florida in 1992. The result was devastating to South Florida, Homestead, and the pine rocklands.

⁹ "Central to the ecosystem concept is the idea that living organisms interact with every other element in their local environment."
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecosystem>>.

¹⁰ "A natural community is defined as a distinct and recurring assemblage of populations of plants, animals, fungi and microorganisms naturally associated with each other and their physical environment."
<<http://www.fnai.org/descriptions.cfm>>.

¹¹ "Formal motivation occurs when we justify the presence of an image by its contribution to a formal or stylistic pattern intrinsic to the text" (Nichols 26).