

PERSPECTIVE
IN WILDLIFE FILMS

by
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DEDICATION

To Mike Kasic, for his unique perspective on life.

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of perspective rarely occur in analyses of wildlife films perhaps because of the near neglect of the genre itself as well as the fact that most analysis focuses on content, rather than structure and style. Perspective has long been a part of narrative film criticism, however, and it is essential to a complete examination of a film genre. I define perspective here as the cognitive view of the mind that commands the subject. In documentary and wildlife films, credibility is vital and the film's perspective or point of view establishes this through the use of the camera apparatus and narration. The very use of these tools of perspective may add to a scientific perspective, but inevitably prevent an objectively scientific representation, the pivot of a fact-driven, wildlife film. Although credibility is established by evidence and facts, a tendency toward anthropomorphism can jeopardize claims of objectivity and scientific credibility.

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING PERSPECTIVE

“Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception” (Brakhage 1).

Imagine an eye looking at wildlife. Discussions of perspective in wildlife films rarely exist in academic journals and books. In general, wildlife films appear to avert themselves from the lair of scholarly analysis (MacDonald 4; Bousé, *Wildlife Films* xi), but even in their limited limelight, content tends to drive any aesthetic analysis of such films. Structure and style take the backseat (Bousé, *Wildlife Films* 12). Furthermore, scientific wildlife films can give the false appearance of being data gathering records (MacDonald 5). According to Nichols, “The voice of science demands silence, or near silence from documentarian or photographer. [Scientific] documentary flourishes when it gains a voice of its own” (*Introduction to Documentary* 85). The claims of science are most credible when they are enshrined in objectivity. Science may demand silence, however, documentary demands a voice. Many wildlife films pander to the demands of science, straying away from overt, subjective perspective and usually opting for the objective perspective. Usually such a voice is omniscient, a voice of an objective God, such as in *Planet Earth*, who takes us on a scientific journey to the unseen marvels of the

world. In rare cases (as in *La Marche de l'Empereur*), wildlife films may take a subjective perspective.

Film theorists who do analyze wildlife films may regard perspective as absent, perhaps owing to the films' claims of objectivity. Discussions of perspective are limited among wildlife filmmakers since first and foremost they must tackle the difficulty of filming the often-elusive wildlife. Regardless, perspective is far from absent in wildlife films since filmmakers must develop a filmic structure, which ultimately leads to a specific conclusion (MacDonald 5). Fiction film criticism, however, has a long history of analyzing narrative perspective (Mulvey 8; Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 5-7). As Bonitzer notes, "We know that politically and ideologically, the issue of the point of view a film reflects is a crucial question, and often becomes the arena of violent controversy" (319). This kind of analysis of perspective is thus essential to fulfill an inclusive examination of a film genre.¹

Perspective as a storytelling device has been a subject of discussion from at least as early as the Greeks in 400 B.C. (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 4) to the Chinese scroll painters of the 10th century (Noxon 35). Novelist Henry James sought to find a "center of consciousness" to motivate his stories. This central consciousness is "the mind that really commands the subject" (Lubbock 74). In this paper, I will use perspective to describe the overall cognitive view of the mind commanding the subject. Nichols describes perspective as an implicit point of view, a tacit argument and voice of the film apart from the explicit commentary (*Introduction to Documentary* 48). While I

¹ I will refer to wildlife films as a separate genre from documentary, according to the argument presented by Bousé in his book, *Wildlife Films* (24).

do agree that perspective refers to the “voice” of the film, I do not treat it here as separate from the commentary or narration. The historical use of the word perspective refers to an overarching view—that of the frame and of the space of the story, not exclusive of the commentary and its point of view (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 5).

Wildlife films develop narrative perspectives that convey significant amounts of anthropomorphism. This is often not by accident, as attributing human characteristics to animals is a storytelling device that widespread audiences apparently need in order to identify with wildlife (Harok 473). Occasionally, wildlife films may develop a scientific perspective with little anthropomorphism (*Blue Planet*; *Planet Earth*); however, this is rare, as wildlife films tend to be produced for major television channels, who push to broaden the scope of viewers as an effort to boost ratings (Harok 473).

Even with a relatively objective narration, the film may take on anthropomorphic attributes through its use of the camera and editing, as in point-of-view and close-up shots of wildlife (Bouse, *Wildlife Films* 29). The very use of a camera can lead to an anthropomorphic perspective. Wildlife films often attempt to show an animal’s point of view using the camera and the point-of-view shot. The camera is just a device and not really how the animal sees, as the camera is an average of the human eye. Even a frog’s sensory receptors are highly species-specific. In fact it is likely that every single species constructs a different visual world (Hayles 413). In a world of millions of species that all view the world differently, who can say what animals really see, what the “truth” is? Once a wildlife film uses this point-of-view shot, it is no longer absolutely objective.

Wildlife filmmakers also inadvertently use the camera's gaze to develop an anthropomorphic perspective. Laura Mulvey discusses the predominance of the male perspective in narrative film, which she refers to as the 'male gaze' (203). The camera 'gazes' on the female body and the point of view follows that of a heterosexual man (207). In wildlife films the gaze is genderless; however, since people can only look at wildlife from a human standpoint, the gaze then attributes human characteristics to wildlife and becomes anthropomorphic. This gaze allows the viewer to take pleasure in the "look" at wildlife.

Science itself relies on objectivity to maintain credibility. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that objectivity within the discipline of science is problematic (Kuhn 4) and although many ways have been devised to skirt the issue of human and cultural bias, ultimately science is a human endeavor and therefore cannot be perfectly objective. The study of biology is far more objective than wildlife films; however, the problem of human bias in science only expands when it comes to making such wildlife films, perhaps in part due to the initial problem of scientific bias.

In documentary and wildlife films, credibility is vital to success, and the perspective of the film can affect its credibility through the inherent conflict between perspective and objectivity. According to Nichols, "Once the viewer can infer a perspective, then even observations, descriptions, and 'objective' reports or records can no longer be considered mechanical replicas or value-free reproductions of the historical world" (*Representing Reality* 127). Although Nichols was referring to social documentaries, the same is also true for wildlife films. Once a film imparts a perspective,

it loses some degree of objectivity. For wildlife films, the degree of objectivity a film loses can depend on the degree of anthropomorphism in the film, especially if it is attempting to convey the perception of impartial, scientific knowledge. Whether anthropomorphism really affects credibility depends on whether it is disguised. The camera apparatus provides the easiest way to disguise anthropomorphism while the voice of narration tends to reveal it openly.

The following sections will detail the basic tools for imparting perspective to wildlife films and their eventual descent into anthropomorphism. I will first discuss the point of view of the narration and how it may be used to impart a more scientific perspective than the other tools of perspective. I will then examine the camera apparatus as a means to create perspective and will argue that the very use of a camera implicitly develops an anthropomorphic, human perspective. I will also discuss how the camera's "gaze" in wildlife films ultimately results in an anthropomorphic perspective. The tools of perspective, while they may sometimes add to a scientific perspective, they inevitably prevent an objectively scientific representation.

POINT OF VIEW AND NARRATION:
FROM THE WILD TO THE UNRELIABLE

“Perspective is the way in which a documentary text offers a particular point of view through its depiction of the world” (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 118).

Point of view furnishes the standpoint from which the filmmaker tells the story, building the perspective of the film. According to Bordwell, “In cinema, the concept of ‘point of view’ has usually been loosely employed” (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 60). It could refer to the point-of-view shot, the point of view of the filmmaker, or the point of view of the character. I will use “point of view” as Bordwell does—to refer to the optical or auditory vantage point of a character. Point of view in narration refers to the auditory vantage point. The “point-of-view shot” therefore refers to an “optically subjective shot” (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 60). The point of view may be in first person (I), second person (you), third person (she or he, i.e., the omniscient narrator) or first person plural (we). As films rarely use second person, I will restrict the discussion to first and third person. The wildlife filmmaker may tell the story using narration from either the human (e.g. David Attenborough) or the non-human point of view (e.g. an animal character, as in *La Marche de l’Empereur*). In wildlife films, the implications for choosing a particular point of view are quite different than most other modes of filmmaking. The omniscient narration is much more likely to impart a scientific perspective than the personal, first person narration.

Unreliable Omniscience

While the choice of point of view is important, the content of that narration is critical. According to Bordwell, “When critics speak of a character’s point of view, they are usually referring to the range and/or depth of knowledge which the narration supplies” (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 60). The value of commentary to the film can vary depending on this depth of knowledge, which is broken down into the following four categories: degree of knowledge possessed by the narrator, subjectivity, self-consciousness, and communicativeness. (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 57-61). If all of these concepts operate at a relatively low level, one can think of the narrator as “unreliable.” In wildlife films, unreliability detracts from scientific accuracy and credibility. The more reliable the commentary is, the more omniscient the narration.

One could also argue that it is impossible to have an “all-knowing” narrator in documentary or wildlife films. Such films are meant to be a depiction of reality; a depiction of what is factual and true. If reality is truth and if our truth is “literally nothing but the shadows of the images” (Plato 253), then we cannot know the truth of reality. It is therefore philosophically impossible for a person to have an omniscient knowledge, unless it is in a fiction film. While some wildlife films claim to be data gathering records, it is generally accepted, however, that documentary films (and hence wildlife films) are, according to John Grierson, a “creative treatment of reality” (Austin 811). Even an objective wildlife film must treat reality “creatively”, through the use of the use of the camera (see page 17 “The Camera Apparatus in Wildlife Films”) and through the

development of a story. A “creative” reality has less to do with truth than it has to do with fiction. Documentaries and wildlife films should be placed in the context of fiction, thereby allowing for the idea of “omniscience.” For the sake of this thesis, therefore, I will refer to the omniscient narration as that which is “all-knowing”, as one would use to describe narration in a fiction film.

Point of View

Wildlife films use the first person point of view in most cases with on-screen hosts or presenters. Presenters relate the events to the viewer, much like an omniscient narrator would, but they become the central character of the story, rather than a voice of God. They tell the story from their own point of view. “On-screen narrators and hosts look into the camera lens, at us” (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 130). The most successful hosts address the camera directly and animate their delivery, perhaps because expressive individuals increase the viewer’s empathy and involvement with the story (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 121). In most cases, the presenter’s delivery seems improvised. According to Nichols, “In documentary we have the desire for performance stripped of the training, rehearsing, and directing that normally accompany it” (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 122). Improvisation further enhances the feeling of involvement with the story, since it appears as though it happens in real time. Steve Irwin in the *Crocodile Hunter* was one of the most widely known, interactive and expressive hosts who played the character of an enthusiastic naturalist searching for ‘wild’ animals. The film imparts an observational perspective, as Irwin invites us to observe nature while he

provokes animals to the point of attack. We observe in primordial, scopophilic curiosity what the animal would do, without consequence (*Ocean's Deadliest*, *Tigers of Shark Bay*, *Crocs in the City*).

A single character may also drive the story in first person. In *Mississippi: Tales of the Last River Rat*, we see the river through the eyes of Kenny Salwey, a man who lived all his life in a log cabin along the banks of the Mississippi. He speaks only briefly to the camera during an interview. During the rest of the film, he goes about his daily existence and his speech becomes a monologue as if in his own mind. It is almost as though we observe the man as we would an animal, with the advantage, in this case, that it is his own voice that drives the story, rather than a personification. Salwey has a personal, limited point of view. It is a human point of view and presents an unimposing human perspective of a man living in the woods.

The third person, omniscient point of view is most commonly known as the voice of God. Jacques Cousteau narrated his films, *Pacific Explorations* or *The Jacques Cousteau Odyssey*, without speaking directly to the camera, but relating spectacular events in the ocean, as an omniscient narrator. David Attenborough is perhaps the most well known contemporary voice of God, though he also speaks in the first person. His list of films is extensive and includes mostly "blue chip" productions such as *Planet Earth*, *Blue Planet*, *Life of Mammals*, and *Trials of Life*, to name a few. Blue chip films are those wildlife films that are high budget and lack a political, environmental, or historical context. They eliminate the presence of people and tend instead to teach the viewer about other wildlife species (Bousé 136), focusing on behavioral sequences like

predator-prey interactions and reproduction. “Blue chip” films have a basis in the relatively unscientific Disney films through their dramatic storyline and wildlife characters (Bousé, *Wildlife Films* 136). Typically David Attenborough may be one of the only humans in the film. In *Trials of Life*, “the film theorizes a planetary system in which every force is matched by an equally powerful counterforce, while human beings are depicted as a relatively insignificant element in this system” (Harok 469).

Attenborough’s soft but assured voice tells the world about itself. He is the quintessential voice of God narrator, and his God is the God of Science, even while a dramatic storyline humanizes the animals within. Attenborough’s narration provides the film with an all-knowing scientific perspective, objectively created by humans for humans. Such a perspective serves as a teaching tool, but it is television education complete with a dramatic narrative.

The impetus of wildlife films to teach has roots in the early years of cinema when people used film to study the motion of animals (e.g. Muybridge’s galloping horse in 1877) (Bousé, *Wildlife Films* 41; Mitman 638). Ethologists like Gladwyn Kingsley Noble, Nikko Tinbergen and Konrad Lorenz used film for the research and education of animal behavior. Their films are still taught in contemporary animal behavior courses (author’s personal experience). The desire to use film to exhibit science eventually led to a desire to teach human morals through wildlife, as in Disney films like *Bambi* (Mitman 58). The “Disneyfication”, or anthropomorphism, of wildlife films continues to this day (Harok 473) and permeates even the most scientific “blue chip” films. Thus the historical tradition of using film to teach collides with the more recent tradition of using of film to

entertain. Regardless of this collision, the third-person narration is quite often the most appropriate tool in developing a scientific perspective.

The Voice of God Versus the Voice of the Penguins

The highly acclaimed, *March of the Penguins* is a reformulation of *La Marche de l'Empereur*, or *The Emperor's Journey*. In *La Marche de l'Empereur*, the point of view takes a daring stance—that of the Antarctic penguins, telling the story in first person, non-human plural, alternating between a male and female penguin, with a small section with the penguin chick. It begins as follows:

Female Penguin: “Once upon a time, a garden, a fertile world where life was a given, a long time ago before winter.”

Male Penguin: “But one day, everything was white, plants, animals. Those who could flee did so, but our ancestors decided to stay, at any cost. And to resist to this frost which was taking everything.”

Female Penguin: “Time has passed. 100 times, Earth has changed its face. We are still there. We stand, light sentinels. Here is our story.” (*La Marche de l'Empereur*)

The narration is French and poetic, like a mythical novel, bringing to life all that is inanimate as a fairy-tale does: “Icebergs are like giant tramps. They sleep wherever winter catches up with them. Sometimes we have to make long detours. Going around these sleeping titans. But even the oldest amongst us cannot remember ever being lost” (*La Marche de l'Empereur*). The last line exemplifies an overt anthropomorphism that narration in first person, non-human generates. Do we really know what the penguin remembers? Anthropomorphism has its roots in mythological fables, dating as far back as 500 BC with the Greek storyteller, Aesop. *La Marche de l'Empereur* reminds the viewer

of a fable and somehow justifies a credible anthropomorphic perspective, as evidenced by the sweeping approval of this version amongst European awards (IMDB <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0428803/awards>) and Chinese audiences (Carvajal, *New York Times*). A film in first person, non-human speaks to the viewer through nature. The viewer has the chance then to “see” and “hear” the world through the mind of an animal, much like the stories of Aesop’s Fables or *Animal Farm* by George Orwell.

National Geographic distributors made the decision to reformat *La Marche de l'Empereur* to suit American audiences in third-person omniscient narration. According to Adam Leipzig, president of National Geographic Feature Films, if they had not repackaged the film it "would have been purely an art-house movie" (Carvajal, *The New York Times*). This is presumably owing to the fact that US audiences typically do not accept unconcealed first person anthropomorphic narration, with the exception of children’s films. Third-person omniscient typically lends itself to a perceived scientific perspective, thus avoiding the blatant subjectivity of the first person. Filmmaker Luc Jacquet says of the re-version of his film: "The American version is a little less creative. You design something with a special point of view, and this special point of view still exists, but less creatively" (Carvajal, *The New York Times*). Creative or not, repackaging the film gave birth to *March of the Penguins*, and it eventually grossed about 80 million dollars, the second highest grossing non-fiction film after Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Horak 460).

Although the music and some shots changed, the major difference between the two films is in the narration. Instead of relating events from the penguins’ point of view,

the English version tells the story through an omniscient narrator, Morgan Freeman. Despite the voice of God narration, the anthropomorphism continues in the American version (Austin 828). As the penguins search for a mate, for example, Morgan Freeman states, "They are not that different from us, really. They pout, they bellow, they strut and occasionally they will engage in some contact sports." Freeman assigns human characteristics to the penguins, all under the guise of an objective film, and the audience is apparently pleased. Austin states, "One can only wonder if the anthropomorphism will prove a greater impediment to the penguins than destruction of their natural habitat" (828). Among some scholars there is a fear that if humans only know how to relate to animals from a human perspective, it may end up being to the animal's detriment once they discover another reality- that penguins are very different from humans. The resulting film imparts a large amount of personification and anthropomorphism despite its claims of a scientific omniscience. A narrated film without personification tends to be dry and pedantic, echoing early ethology films like Noble's *The Social Behaviour of the Laughing Gull*. The alternative to this would be a film with little or no human narration (e.g. *Microcosmos*, *Winged Migration*), as the presence of language itself tends to lead descriptions of wildlife in human terms.

Critics deemed the *March of the Penguins*, with its subtle life and death insistence on monogamy, as a family film (Miller, *The New York Times*; MacDonald 18). Conservative film critic and radio host Michael Medved said of the film: "*March of the Penguins* [is] the motion picture this summer that most passionately affirms traditional norms like monogamy, sacrifice and child rearing" (Miller, *The New York Times*).

Interestingly, even Morgan Freeman states that the penguins only adhere to those cultural morals for one year at a time, hardly enough to sustain a human child. Just like an anthropomorphic tale, viewers found it imparted moral lessons of a culture. Thus, the American reversion, like its French counterpart, uses an anthropomorphic narrative perspective, in an attempt to allow viewers to identify with the animals. The internal perspective of the French version is overtly anthropomorphic, but is a creative attempt to branch out from the traditional wildlife film. The American version relies more on traditional, didactic narration and reverts to anthropomorphism according to the conventions of Disney's "True Life Adventures."

The point of view of the narration can overtly alter a film's perspective, especially when a voice is a constant throughout the film. While many films inherently impart an anthropomorphic perspective, other films strive to convey subtle anthropomorphism. According to Harok, "Anthropomorphizing animals is a simple strategy to further identification with the idea of animals... which, however, does nothing more than create a renewed desire for the continued consumption of animal images.... *Disneyfication* of animal images through extreme anthropomorphy continues unabated..." (473). Such a strategy is employed to further interest in the wildlife films. The taller our societal walls of humanity become, the more producers will think people need a way to identify with that which they no longer recognize.

Although potentially dull to some viewers, it is possible to shed anthropomorphic narration and develop a relatively scientific perspective using narration. While it is difficult to find a wildlife film that is purely scientific, there are some science films that

do accomplish such a perspective, most notably, *Cosmos*. Carl Sagan presents *Cosmos* in such a way that illustrates the complexity of the universe, while keeping the viewer relatively entertained with his enthusiastic narration. *Cosmos* has the advantage that the topics relate to the universe, rather than an animal whose basic life processes resembles our own (birth, survival, death). In some cases, camera shots can add to the scientific perspective, as in the aerial or wide-angle shot. The tools of the camera can, however, play against the scientific perspective, unraveling its objective claims into subjective anthropomorphism. *Planet Earth* may be said to be one of the few contemporary wildlife films that aims to educate the viewer scientifically, but the camera imparts a different perspective, using close-up and point-of-view shots.

THE CAMERA APPARATUS IN WILDLIFE FILMS

“Camera views, montage: reality is seized and worked through at a certain angle in order to render something on screen- to the spectators” (Bonitzer 320).

Wildlife films develop perspective in part by using the camera, replacing the eye as a visual sensor. We then see the work through the view of the camera, which essentially commands the subject matter. In the visual arts, the word “perspective” is often used to describe a visual or spatial layout within the frame of a static canvas. As film is a moving medium, each frame has the potential to change and, therefore, the visual perspective is two-fold. The static individual frame as well as the combination of multiple frames will lend perspective to the film.

The camera angle and placement, shutter speed or iris, depth of field, lens magnification, and camera placement all play a large role in building perspective in films. A low camera angle can bring power to the subject, imparting that nature or wildlife is powerful. Placement of the camera is also important in developing a certain perspective, whether it is in a low angle or a high angle, such as an aerial shot. The angle on the subject (e.g. head-on, left, or right) is another important component of perspective using the camera. If the animal is looking directly at the camera, it implies either interaction with the camera or the lead-in shot of the point-of-view shot. Camera movement may create tension or suspense (Johnson 49). Shutter speed can temporally alter the image, allowing for such effects as slow motion shots. The iris can alter the light within the frame, giving a brighter or darker tone to the film. Depth of field or deep staging creates

several planes of action, building tension in the process (Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* 59). Likewise, an out-of-focus background tends to direct the attention to the focal point of the frame (Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* 63). Lens magnification allows for close-ups, giving a sense of interiority and plays a large role in the point-of-view shot.

Despite the wide variety of means available to develop perspective using the camera, many wildlife filmmakers may find themselves without an option to use the camera in such a way. The subject may be at the base of a precipice or an animal may require a certain distance and, as such, the filmmaker may use a long lens, not to gain a depth of field, but simply to get the shot. The camera therefore often becomes a tool for filling the frame or for gathering scientific evidence rather than as a means to develop a certain perspective. Regardless, "...the moment a nature filmmaker begins to construct a particular film, there is no escaping point of view" (MacDonald 5). Rather than discuss the examples that do not successfully develop a perspective in this manner, I will focus on those examples that do impart a perspective through the use of the camera machinery, namely the aerial shot and the point-of-view shot.

The aerial camera, the camera that "sees" everything, is quite often responsible for developing the omniscient, scientific perspective. It is the eye in the sky. Perhaps the most widely viewed contemporary wildlife films that make substantial use of an aerial viewpoint is the BBC series, *Planet Earth*. This is the first natural history film that uses the Cineflex HD Heli-Gimbal, a tool originally engineered for the military, but ultimately only used in Hollywood narrative films and advertisements. The wildlife film genre had

never implemented this cinematic tool before— perhaps due to the genre’s propensity to have lower budgets. The Heli-Gimbal camera not only flies over some of the most beautiful and seemingly untouched landscapes, but it also captures full wildlife behavior sequences previously unattainable using traditional aerial methods. The Heli-Gimbal Cineflex camera system is mounted under the helicopter on a 360-degree rotational platform (Helinet Camera, <http://www.helinetaviation.com/cineflex.phtml>). The result is a gyro-stabilized shot, eliminating the evidence of the camera apparatus and allowing for a closer shot using greater magnification from further distances than before, leaving the wildlife relatively undisturbed. According to David Attenborough, for the first time, wildlife could be put “in context” (*Planet Earth: Planet Earth Diaries*). The use of the aerial shot was apparently not only to justify an omniscient perspective, but also to justify a scientific, educational one as well.

Perhaps the most relevant scene in its use of the aerial viewpoint in *Planet Earth* involves African hunting dogs pursuing their prey. Even the most experienced cameramen had never filmed a complete hunt by these wild dogs (Attenborough *Planet Earth Diaries*). David Attenborough states in his narration, “They start to hunt and the pack splits up. An aerial viewpoint gives a new insight into their strategy. As the dogs approach their prey they peel off to take up separate positions around their target.” The Heli-Gimbal provided for a novel scientific viewpoint on the hunting dogs’ ability to hunt as a team and even goes so far as to gather new scientific evidence in the process of filming. Without the Heli-Gimbal, the helicopter would have had to get very close to the

hunting dogs and would have disturbed their behavior. Through the use of this tool, *Planet Earth* demonstrates its scientific, objective perspective.

High angle shots are not the only way to achieve a certain perspective. Close-ups tend to give a sense of false intimacy or a para-social relationship with animals by promoting impossible closeness with the onscreen wildlife (Bousé, *Wildlife Films* 29; Bousé, “False Intimacy” 124). *Microcosmos: Le Peuple de l’Herbe* is from the point of view of a variety of insects. The perspective is driven almost entirely by the use of the camera, as hardly any narration exists to support it. The film shows each insect in striking macro-detail, as in the scene of the mating snails or the ant drinking from a drop of water. This creates closeness to these small beings that many people have never seen. Close-up shots of wild animals “leap across centuries of evolution by taking us within the fight or flight distances that normally separate wild individuals” (Steinhart 22).

Close-up shots may also be a part of a point-of-view shot. In the first shot, the animal looks at the camera (most likely due to the filmmaker’s presence), then the edit cuts to a shot of what the animal was looking at, which becomes the point-of-view shot (Bousé, *Wildlife Films* 31). Wildlife films often use the point-of-view shot as a storytelling technique. Whether used to incite fear of a predator or to show an animal looking around its environment, it invites the viewer into the mind of the animal. This sort of shot in a wildlife film inevitably imparts an anthropomorphic perspective since at our present understanding of wildlife, we really have no way of knowing what the point of view of a non-human being looks like. Furthermore, the camera tools we have approximate the human eye, not any other species’ eye (discussed below). Regardless of

the problem of anthropomorphism, many wildlife films (*Winged Migration*, *March of the Penguins*, *Planet Earth*, *Blue Planet*, to name just a few), find the point-of-view shot a useful storytelling technique.

The Eye of the Camera: Whose Eye Is It, Anyway?

“The eye of the camera is still assimilated to the human eye” (Wollen 21).

The “camera’s eye” inevitably creates a perspective, just as the mind finds a perspective on the world around it. But does the camera’s eye inherently allow for credibility? Optical physics designs all parts of the camera to represent a statistical average of the “normal eye,” the eye of a human being (Wees 75). The very idea, therefore, of making wildlife films from a non-human point of view using a camera (i.e. the point-of-view shot) is problematic. At best, what we see is a human perception of the animal’s vision.

Avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920’s regarded the eye of the camera as superior to the human eye. Dziga Vertov, to name one, claimed that the camera is “more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space (15). Vertov also believed that the “Kino-eye [the camera-eye] is the possibility of seeing life processes in any temporal order or at any speed inaccessible to the human eye” (88). We can alter our perception of time and space through the “Kino-eye”, and technological developments such as microphotography, x-rays, infrared photography, and thermal photography continue to expand what we are capable of viewing (Wollen 21).

While these developments do have bearing today, we are still incapable of seeing all this through any other lens than that based on an average human eye, improved or not. “The eye of the camera is still assimilated to the human eye, an eye whose imaginary is constructed around a range of differences within a basic unity, rather than a search for a fundamentally different form of vision” (Wollen 21). In fact, it is well understood now that every species perceives the world differently. A seminal article entitled, “What the Frog’s Eye Tells the Frog’s Brain,” reveals that the frog’s sensory receptors communicate with the brain in a highly processed, species-specific manner (Hayles 413). According to Hayles, “If every species constructs for itself a different world, which is the world? The implications of this question are radical, for they point toward the conclusion that we, like the frog, never perceive the world as it ‘really’ is” (413). Indeed, species-specific perceptions are almost limitless. This theoretically creates a quagmire for the wildlife filmmaker wishing to impart a non-human or a scientific perspective. Should the filmmaker estimate the possible view of the frog? Or should the filmmaker retreat back into the known, the average human realm? This makes it almost certain that at our present point of understanding, the point-of-view shot in a natural history film is nearly scientifically meaningless. So why is there this insistence on the scientific perspective? Perhaps film critics should accept the fact that wildlife films, like documentaries, are also “creative treatments of reality” (Austin 811).

Gazing at Wildlife

A discussion of the camera as a perspectival device would not be complete without an incursion into the idea of the ‘gaze.’ Narrative fiction film criticism has employed a significant amount of discussion about the distant gaze of the camera and the male perspective (Mulvey; Studlar; Baudry). In her seminal work, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey discusses the predominance of the male perspective in narrative film, which she refers to as the ‘male gaze’ (203). The camera ‘gazes’ on the female body and the point of view follows that of a heterosexual man (207). The viewer is then forced to watch the films from the visual and psychological perspective of a man. In narrative Hollywood film, the gaze may play a significant role by imposing the voyeuristic male perspective on the viewer; however, Nichols claims that the eroticization of the gaze does not work with the terms of documentary (76). Instead of delineating the curves of the female body, the genderless documentary camera’s gaze may instead illuminate the political and ideological perspective of the filmmaker. We see how the filmmaker views fellow humans, rather than the female sex in particular (Nichols 80). In wildlife films, the camera gazes at nature instead of humans, likewise through a relatively genderless view of the world. The viewer then gazes upon the animal as Mulvey finds the man gazes upon the woman.

Just as in narrative film, perspective in wildlife films panders to the viewer’s scopophilic tendencies. As Mulvey states:

The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish

to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world. (8)

Mulvey also describes the tendencies of narrative film to go further, “developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect” (Mulvey 8). Natural history cinema falls into this similar trap of narcissistic scopophilia. Wildlife films then become anthropomorphic, focused on the reflection of the human being in the animal’s eye. If the image halfway resembles the human, then we can only see our reflection, no matter the genetic and morphological distance. *March of the Penguins* plays on that narcissism at the very beginning of the film, showing the penguins at a distance, like people walking upon the ice. Perhaps this narcissism is what ultimately led to radio hosts like Michael Medved finding cultural morals of monogamy and child-rearing in a story about penguins who only adhere to those morals for at most one year at a time (Miller, *The New York Times*). And so, “...an image belongs to culture, not nature....” (Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* 24) and the film is nothing but a mirror through which we see ourselves (Metz 250).

THE USE OF PERSPECTIVE IN THE THESIS FILM, *RIVERINE*

My thesis film, *Riverine*, is shot, edited and narrated from the perspective of the river. It is an otherworldly look at the river over the course of one spring season and is broken up into the following three acts: The Power of Water, The Life, and The Rebirth.

The film begins with brief narration about the world of the river. The opening starts, “I am Riverine”, and immediately denotes the point of view. The voice claims to be that of Riverine, all entities related to the river. The narration aims to invite the viewer into another world, where the rocks act as mountains controlling the weather and where time is measured in another way. The voice says that “time is measured differently” in the river system and “passing only with the passing of water.” In the industrial world, the hours on the clock are the primary measurement of time, in part due to the development of the railroad and the resulting loss of temporal identity (Schivelbusch 42). The narrator suggests a new measurement of time— that embodied by the movement of the water, rather than that of the sun. This again embodies the perspective of the river, since such a water-based perspective would not see the measurement of time as fixed primarily by sunlight, but rather fixed by the movement of water. The narrator invites the viewer to a new perspective on the world— that of the river. At the end of the narration, the voice says, “This is my spring,” summoning the flooding river sequence in the first act and ending the narration for the rest of the film. The narration in *Riverine* imparts an underlying anthropomorphic perspective primarily because the voice is that of a human. It would be impossible to find the true voice of the

river using narration. It is likely that one could only use the sound of the water, but this would be difficult to capture the audience's attention. I used the voice, therefore, as an anthropomorphic means of entertainment.

The camera apparatus is vital to the perspective for all three acts in the film. Camera shots are either within the river, or at the river's level. Apart from the beginning and the end, no shots look down upon the river. I show the initial aerial shot because Riverine encompasses everything related to the river. She sees the river as one moving entity, part of the landscape as a whole, more than just water or fish. The desaturated treatment of dipper birds in the water creates the "memory" of the narration, as Riverine recalls the winter while she speaks of the weather and of sculpting the Earth.

The first act after the narration, *The Power of Water*, shows the water in the river system during run-off, when the water is at its peak flow. All shots are either at the level of the water or underneath as the water rushes along its course downstream. In this first act, I demonstrate the power of high water. In the second act, *The Life*, other organisms enter the scene. This act initially shows how the fish manage to deal with the peak water flow. The footage is slowed down to emphasize the movement of the water in relation to the fish. The fish, seemingly without effort, swim in the water currents. The ensuing shots show other organisms such as salmon flies, caddis flies, leeches, and salamanders all surviving gracefully in the water system. The third and final act, *The Rebirth*, shows fish spawning frenetically in the river. The shots change color in a trancelike montage to emphasize the otherworldly ritual of spawning. The film ends with a shot of a snow-

capped mountain, out of the water and deep in the dead of winter. The season is long over and all is quiet. We leave the perspective of the river.

The perspective in *Riverine* is anthropomorphic. As I detailed earlier in my thesis, it is first and foremost impossible for a non-human perspective not to be anthropomorphic. I assigned human qualities to the river. I used a camera that approximates the human eye, I used the point-of-view shot, and I used a voice of a person to narrate. What does the river *really* see? Does it even matter? The only reason why we even broach this topic is because it is a wildlife film, a film genre that prides itself on claims of scientific truth. Wildlife film defaults to a scientific perspective. Its credibility rests on its information. Everything must supposedly be accurate and objective. By taking the perspective of the river, however, it eliminates some of the dilemma of anthropomorphism. The fact the river has no eyes to begin with means I do not need to replicate what the river truly “sees”. The river does not see, it just is. The perspective is fictional, and therefore freed from the bounds of the “real”. By taking the perspective of the river and using little expository narration, I am freed of the bounds of Science and the constant threat of the anthropomorphic label and can enter more freely into a “creative treatment of reality.”

CONCLUSION

Perspective is an integral component of wildlife films. The assumptions an audience makes about a film are a product of its intrinsic perspective. If the audience believes the film to be scientific, the filmmaker likely intended to impart a scientific perspective. To use Baudry's words, "To seize movement is to become movement, to follow a trajectory is to become trajectory, to choose a direction is to have the possibility of choosing one, to determine a meaning is to give oneself a meaning" (291-2). Perspective gives meaning to a film, through the use of narration and the tools of the camera machinery.

Narration by a person may impart a scientific perspective, while narration from a non-human point of view cannot be scientific. Ultimately the non-human point of view is a fictional, personal account of the existence of an animal or non-living being. Because it is developed by a human being, this point of view tends to impart an anthropomorphic perspective, owing primarily to the use of a human voice and often the language assigns human characteristics to the being in question, the cornerstone of anthropomorphism. Science strives for objectivity, while the non-human point of view strives for subjectivity. Even if the narration imparts a scientific perspective, the tools of the camera may work against such a view. The very use of a camera apparatus develops an anthropomorphic, human perspective, as the lens approximates the eye of a human. Therefore, the use of both the point-of-view and close-up shots is not objective. Even the camera's "gaze" in wildlife films ultimately results in an anthropomorphic perspective. The very use of the

tools of perspective may add to a scientific perspective, however, they inevitably prevent an objectively scientific representation, the pivot of a fact-driven wildlife film.

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