THE PERSONAL ESSAY FILM AND LARGE CARNIVORES:

MOVING BEYOND SCIENCE IN SEARCH OF EMPATHY AND ACTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite their common usage in natural history documentary films, appeals based solely upon scientific facts, expert testimony, and rational arguments are not particularly effective at convincing audiences to change their opinions on controversial subjects. Psychologists argue that this is because humans tend to base our decisions on emotion and social affiliations; and therefore, working to find common ground and motive between opposing sides in an argument may be one of the strongest stances from which to start a useful discussion. This is a particularly important consideration when addressing large carnivore conservation because their management is so deeply rooted in our cultural beliefs and identities.

I propose that personal essay films, focused on immersing their audiences as much as possible in the authentic experiences of a compelling protagonist, may be an effective way to begin opening up a viewer's opinions on a highly charged subject without directly attacking all of their most strongly held beliefs. Through analyzing representative personal documentary films, I highlight the importance of certain structural elements when trying to connect with an audience on an emotional level; such as letting the passionate protagonist tell their own story, including surprising and mysterious instances in the film, and not oversimplifying moments of indecision or confusion. *Part of the Pack* (2017), my autobiographical thesis film, attempts to put these insights into practice by inviting the audience to join in my experiences of living closely with captive wolves. My hope is that personal essay films like this can foster the type of emotional connection and common-ground thinking necessary for viewers to start empathizing with and promoting the conservation of large predators.

INTRODUCTION

Large carnivores such as wolves, bears, sharks, and big cats, stalk through our collective subconscious, raising the hair on the back of our necks and making our hearts beat just a little bit faster. Whether manifesting as dreams or nightmares, they cannot escape the consequences of being seen through our, often all-too-human, eyes. The simple act of a tiger shark's fin piecing the still water evokes those two ubiquitous notes, and a moment of panic floods our bodies. A lion roars in the night, and we quake in the darkness. A wolf lowers her head as she peers through the trees, and we freeze in wonder or fright. We count on these animals to thrill us, and often, to give us a lens through which to view ourselves. Either we are the mighty hunter, or the meekly hunted. We are the protector, the wild spirit, the brethren. Or, conversely, we are the master, conqueror, and champion. Rarely are these animals seen for what they truly are – fellow creatures, individuals just trying to make their way through life. Instead they carry the burdens of our fears and aspirations. As Helen MacDonald points out, "we use animals as ideas to amplify and enlarge aspects of ourselves, turning them into simple, safe harbors for things we feel and often cannot express" ("Animals"). So, is the wolf to be shunned for its teeth and claws, or revered for its bravery and family values? These are the questions that define our relationship with the wild in the world, and within ourselves.

The animals we use in our stories and as allegorical reflections of ourselves are more than caricatures, archetypes, and human mirrors - more than dreams or nightmares. They are flesh and bone, and they are trying to survive in a realm dominated by humans. For those of us rooting for their cause, tired of their persecution and subjugation, the

question becomes how to lift the veil and reveal the true animals behind the shadows on the wall? The simplest answer seems to be giving people the opportunity to get to know them on a personal level. That is what happened to me. I spent six years living with and caring for nearly one hundred captive gray wolves – essentially becoming a part of their packs. Thanks to that familiarity I do not see them as representative symbols or as devils or angels, but as individuals with their own hopes, fears, and agendas. While this solution may be relatively straightforward, it is not particularly practical. Very few people have the desire, drive, or dedication to give their lives over to a large predator. So, how do you reach the vast majority of people and convince them to start thinking about their relationship with carnivores in a new light? As I explore in this paper, recent studies show that appealing to facts, statistics and scientific arguments does not reliably work (Sharot, "Mind"). I argue that personal essay films, focused on immersing their audiences as much as possible in authentic experiences like my own, may be an effective way to foster the type of emotional connection needed to start empathizing with and promoting the conservation of these controversial animals.

WHY REASON ALONE FAILS

Since the advent of the moving picture, documentary filmmakers have relied on the seemingly indexical nature of the medium to sway the thoughts and emotions of their audiences. What appeared on screen must be true, as the camera only records that which actually occurred. While today's audiences are much more sophisticated than the people who ran from the first moving images of a train speeding toward them (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat,* 1896), they still expect there to be an inherent kernel of truth in documentary films. Thomas Austin's study shows that many audience members associate this films genre with authentic, honest, and sincere representations of reality (40). Dia Vaughan insightfully states:

> What makes a film 'documentary' is the way we look at it; and the history of documentary has been the succession of strategies by which film-makers have tried to make viewers look at films this way… to see it, in a word, as signifying what it appears to record. (84-85)

So, despite our skepticism and supposed knowledge to the contrary, we have been conditioned to expect the content of a documentary to be both educational and possess some sort of intrinsic truth outside of the motivations of the filmmaker.

It is not surprising then that when natural history films are aimed at promoting conservation, they commonly turn to scientific facts, figures, and experts to frame their arguments. If an audience is exposed to irrefutable evidence that protecting large carnivores is beneficial to the larger ecosystem and thus eventually to ourselves and our pocketbooks, then it follows that the litany of PBS, BBC, and National Geographic specials we have been regularly exposed to will eventually have an impact on our actions.

This, at least, was the theory that shaped most of my previous work, and what inspired my 2013 film, *A Wolf's Place*. I wanted my audience to care as much about wolves as I did, and, after a lifetime of working in the hallowed halls of science where getting too personal with your subject is taboo, I defaulted to focusing on the ecology. My hope was that by mixing the pure science with snapshots from the life of one of Yellowstone's most famous wolves, I could help my audience understand the importance of protecting wild wolves. While the film was a success, going on to win several awards, I have always been frustrated that it did not seem to connect with viewers on a more visceral level. They enjoyed it while watching, learned some interesting tidbits, and may have carried some of the messages home with them, but it never awoke the same kind of passion in them as living with the wolves had for me. In retrospect, this response should not have been surprising. When examining our country's current rhetoric, policies, and headlines, it quickly becomes clear that this is not an isolated case. Despite the widespread popularity of other films, such as *Lords of Nature* (2009) and *How Wolves Change Rivers* (2014), debunking our culturally induced beliefs about blood-thirsty predators and touting the benefits and ecological necessity of protecting them, a large portion of our society still seems bent on their destruction.

Since 2015, several studies have emerged illustrating this disturbing disparity between rational, science-based arguments and enacted policy. For instance, ecologists at the University of Miami highlighted the problem that wildlife managers commonly set carnivore hunting policies without regard for the scientific validity of their claims (Creel et al. 1473). This disparity between science and policy, facts and "alternative facts," now

reaches far beyond conflicts over predator management and into our daily lives to such an extent that psychologists, political analysts, and even marketing experts are taking a closer look at the phenomenon (F. MacDonald).

Social psychologists Tarvis and Anderson argue in their book, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)*, that "most people, when directly confronted with proof that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously" (13). This often leaves all parties involved in the conversation frustrated and baffled, inevitably leading to a heated argument where both sides walk away angry and even more hardened in their own position. When confronted with ideas and information that conflict with our worldview, we tend to "minimize, distort, rationalize and even hallucinate our way to disregarding this information" (Storr 81). In essence, we cherry-pick what information we incorporate into our opinions, and what we disregard out of hand – most often based on how well that information conforms to our prior beliefs (Sharot, "Facts"). We instinctually hold any ideas that don't fall within our understanding of how the world works to a more rigid standard of scrutiny (Storr 87), and if they pass the test, we "don't necessarily deny the facts, but […] say the facts are less relevant" (F. MacDonald). This can happen at any level of seemingly rational thought – from the relatively simple matter of choosing our favorite restaurant, to what car we drive, to who we vote for in elections – and we are usually blind to these biases. Our minds' processes are so automatic and internalized that we rarely even realize that it is happening. As much as we like to think so, humans aren't primarily rational creatures.

The general consensus is that we throw up shields against new and challenging information because our beliefs and opinions are so tied up in our sense of identity (Kahan, "Art"; Hermann 627). As Will Storr argues, our beliefs and tastes "are markers, signs that display the culture and moral structure that we have adopted for ourselves to live within" (203). At the same time, humans are highly tribal by nature – constantly looking for ways to define ourselves in relation to others (Kahan, "Rationality"). We each identify as a part of various "packs": American, Caucasian, women, environmentalists, airline pilots, ice cream eaters, etc.; and each of these social groups typically comes with it's own set of corresponding and identifying beliefs. In a dangerous world, it is much safer to be part of a large, powerful pack of like-minded beings, than it is to be isolated on the outside, looking in. This is all perfectly normal – it is a part of our genetic and social heritage. The problems arise, however, in two ways. One, we become so wrapped up in our group identity that we start to see people outside of our tribe(s) as threatening or inferior. Or two, we let our membership in one tribe dictate our opinions and beliefs to such an extent that it prescribes our entire internal identity. For instance, according to Dr. James Garvey, to be a conservative in America today, you generally must identify as "anti-abortion, pro-guns, pro-death-penalty, small government, [and] no regulation," with little or no debate (Storr 203).

My assumption when making *A Wolf's Place* had been that laying out scientific facts and coupling them with a short story was not calling anyone's belief system into question. I was merely pointing out what was inherently "true." For some people it definitely worked; but for the audience members who defined part of their identity as

anti-wolf, I was speaking a foreign language. So, my question became how to start challenging someone's beliefs on one controversial subject without seeming to attack all of their identities. This is an especially important question to ask when talking about predators, and wolves in particular, as they have been likened to the "abortion issue of wildlife" (Milman). Wolf expert Brenda Peterson points out that in wolf management,

> You're dealing with a fault line between cultures... On either side, you have people who have a sense of righteousness about their cause…. There is a passion that goes deeper than politics. It goes to the sense of, I am in *this* culture. I belong to the anti-wolf culture, or the pro-wolf culture. And they don't speak to one another. (Worrall)

When dealing with such an extraordinarily polarizing issue, all the science, facts, figures, and arguments are not going to convince anyone to see past the conflict. As Will Storr aptly observes, when two deeply divided camps argue "it's not a matter of data versus data, it is hero narrative versus hero narrative… it is a clash of worlds" (311). But I postulate that maybe there is still hope for change, or at least a common starting point, if you can find ways to join one or more of the opposition's identifying tribes.

BECOMING A PART OF THEIR TRIBE

A plethora of recent articles, books, and news stories about how to talk to the "other side" offer the same general advice: step away from traditional argumentative encounters and, instead, work on re-framing the situation (F. MacDonald; Storr 84; Tali, "Facts"). You cannot sway opinions or start a conversation about beliefs if you approach it as an "us versus them" debate. It will inevitably devolve into that aforementioned "clash of worlds." Instead, you have to start looking for common ground and common motive. In all of his writing and lecturing about the science of effective science communication, Dan Kahan emphasizes the need to find ways in which to start the conversation about a controversial subject from the perspective that we are all in this together – that everyone has a shared, vested interest in the discussion ("Art"). In other words, that we are all a part of the same, up until now, unrealized tribe. Maybe that tribe is one of people who do not want their Southern Florida homes to flood during storms – that can at least start a practical discussion about how to deal with sea level rise, and is a step on the path to thinking about climate change. Or maybe the tribe is made up of fisherman and conservationists who all want to ensure wild salmon and herring runs do not collapse. By appealing to one set of the supposed opposition's core values and interests, you reveal your commonality and a mutual jumping-off point, without attacking their other firmly held beliefs. As was shown in a 2012 study of religious high school students that managed to both successfully understand evolution and believe in creationism, our brains and sense of identity are plastic enough to allow for a certain level of cognitive apartheid – or ability to compartmentalize pieces of ourselves and our beliefs

in the service of our immediate needs and situation (Hermann 619). So, we are, indeed, capable of adopting and inhabiting new tribes, new social communities, without having to let go of our prior beliefs.

Part of the Pack, my 2017 autobiographical thesis film about the realities of living with captive wolves, was my attempt at accomplishing this elusive feat. My goal was to invite the audience to join me in any number of mutual tribes and begin a dialogue. Perhaps this was a lofty aim, but community building and identity creation have long been a tradition in documentary films. In the 1920s, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov's films promoted the revolutionary aspirations and strength of the Soviet Union's new communist culture (Nichols, "Introduction" 142). Even John Grierson, the proverbial father of documentary, "persuaded the British government to […] make use of [the] art form to foster a sense of national identity and shared community commensurate with its own political agenda" (145). On the opposing side, generations of filmmakers have taken after the political avant-garde, using the medium to rally support and empathy for communities calling for action and changes to the status quo (148). Given its rather staggering ability to explore, express, and disseminate unique and often underrepresented points of view, documentary film can wield great power when it comes to creating new tribes and inviting unexpected members to join.

Imagine being drawn into a documentary film by staggeringly beautiful cinematography, a compelling story, and a clever hook – you are there to be entertained – but then the protagonist's outlook on the world or the details of their journey get you to start thinking about your own life. We have all felt it happen before, either with a good

book or an insightful fiction film. John Mepham argues that “stories are a form of inquiry to which people can turn in their efforts to answer questions [like] what is possible for me, who can I be… What is it like to be someone else?” (22). Stories and films are a way for us to explore experiences and open our minds to new possibilities. If the protagonist has enough in common with you, you may realize they are actually already a member in one of your many tribes; perhaps something as simple as the ice cream eater’s club, or as complex as the world’s pack of parents struggling to send their kids to college. If the viewers’ understanding of the protagonist’s identity alters enough to include even a piece of themselves, then we stand a chance. According to a study conducted by the Society for Neuroscience, people feel more empathy and emotional connection to others within their same social group (“Empathy”). And that’s a mighty place from which to start a conversation.

AN ARGUMENT FOR THE PERSONAL FILM

When I first considered making a film about the captive wolf refuge I had lived and worked at prior to changing career paths, it never occurred to me that it would end up becoming such a personal film. My entire goal was to tell the wolves' story and get my audience invested in *them*. Over the years the structure and story morphed through innumerable iterations. While some of the changes were due to uncontrollable circumstances – like highly social wolf puppies retreating from human contact as they grew, or the unexpected cancellation of the annual ambassador wolf tour – others were self-imposed. I found that no matter the approach I took to the story, none of them gave the audience the level of access and connection to the individual wolves as I had imagined. Then, after two years of filming and conducting interview after interview, I had to admit that none of it would give an audience who was not already invested in wolves a deeper understanding of the animals than any of the other wolf-centric documentaries already available. That was when I started reading about different strategies psychologists and marketers use to connect with people in opposing camps. It did not take long to realize that, put into practice, the tribe theory was an incredibly effective argument for the personal film.

Personal stories serve to invite audiences into the experiences of others. They ask people to step outside of themselves and, for a time, imagine what it is like to be somebody else. Whether they be autobiographical, like my film, or thoughtfully constructed by someone else, these films can be conduits through which viewers are led to the possibility of embodying new ideas, emotions, and actions. Jeremy S. Levine and

Landon Van Soest, directors of *For Ahkeem* (2017), a critically acclaimed film that follows the story of a marginalized 17-year old African American girl, eloquently express the motivations and techniques that inspired my decision to embrace the form. They could have chosen to follow multiple students that represented a greater cross-section of the community, but doing so would have diluted the intimate experience of being immersed in the day-to-day life of their main character. They wanted to give "audiences the opportunity to just live with Boonie… to get really close to her and experience her life through her eyes in a way that we hope will lead to radical empathy" (Rothe).

Jane Gaines argues that when we watch a body in motion on the screen – one that we identify with on a personal or political level – interact with spectacular circumstances in a filmic world that resembles our own, we can be compelled to action (92). In other words, witnessing the details of one of your tribe-member's lives and how they deal with challenging or unusual circumstances can inspire you to care on a personal level, and take similar action. Bill Nichols goes one step further, claiming that "viewing may even, on some occasions, precipitate a revision of understanding of self" ("Reality", 181). Truly, that is the intention of Eisenstein's "agit-cinema." He asserts that any film worth making strives tirelessly to put enough psychological pressure on its audience to emotionally influence them in your desired direction (99). Nearly one hundred years later, Will Storr brings together Eisenstein's observations with the theory of Plato's Cave:

> We experience the lives that we immerse ourselves in as if they are happening to us. We feel the hero's feelings, fight their fights, love their lovers. This is possible because stories mimic the illusion of consciousness. The novel's narrator, the films camera's eye – they are points of singularity in which sound, sight, emotion, motive and mission are combined. As we surrender ourselves to the tale, we surrender our own

> minds to that of our hero. We become infected by the tales that we expose ourselves to. (303)

Thus I was finally convinced to tell my own personal story. I never wanted to be the one in front of the camera, but I knew that the most effective way to potentially affect my audience's perception of a large, intimidating carnivore was to delve deeper into the visceral experience of living in such close quarters with the wolves than a more traditional documentary mode would allow.

SEARCHING FOR INSPIRATION

In the realm of existing personal documentaries about wolves, I did not have to look far for lessons in ways to alienate your audience. As a niche-genre, it leaves much to be desired. I attribute this mostly to the stereotypical personality type of people who both work with wolves and seek out the limelight. Most of the films I found were so driven by the same human-centric ego that I have come to associate with people who own 'pet' wolves as macho status symbols, that the stories quickly lost touch with reality. *A Man Among Wolves* (2007) serves as a disturbingly characteristic example of a larger-than-life personality taking over the story, disseminating pseudo-science, needlessly endangering oneself, and using the wolves as mere props in an obvious bid to win the tooth-and-claw market share of television ratings. While I admit that my rather intimate familiarity with wolf behavior undoubtedly contributes to my harsh reading of such films, I argue it also gives me authority from which to speak. These types of films only serve to distance audiences further from the animals they claim to serve. There are rare exceptions to this rule, but they are few and far between.

Growing up, I thought that one such exception was Jim and Jamie Dutcher's series of films about living with a pack of wolves in Idaho's backcountry, culminating in 2005 with the release of the final film, *Living With Wolves*. Even as a young adult, I tried to forgive the stilted performances and awkward love story subplot because, like everyone else, I was mesmerized by the footage and the insights it allowed into the daily lives of the "Sawtooth Pack." It was such a rare treat to witness, up close, the social dynamics of a wolf pack that the films went on to win award after award. I was so

enamored with the story that I regularly screened the films at events hosted by a wildlife advocacy group I directed, counting on them to recruit more people to the cause. So imagine my surprise, embarrassment, and anger when I eventually learned what had happened behind the scenes: several animals "inexplicably" died during production, others were cast off to be rescued and raised by other people, and the filmmaker not only neglected to plan for the future of the captive wolves after filming was finished, but contemplated drowning several pups born during the project in an unplanned litter. My trust in the stories presented by the films and any respect I had for the filmmakers were instantly crushed. Perhaps the saddest part of the situation is that I occasionally find myself holding my tongue when someone mentions how inspiring these films have been to them, because despite the horror story behind them, they are still some of the only personal films out there that even start to paint an accurate picture of the complex and largely gentle nature of wolf society.

The single beacon of hope I found in the genre was Rob Whitehair's feature-length documentary *True Wolf* (2012), about the life of Koani, one of the wolf pups cast off by Jim Dutcher and sister to several of the rescued wolves I lived with at Mission:Wolf. The film weaves the tale of Koani's life as an ambassador wolf who traveled to schools across Montana during the volatile period of Yellowstone's wolf reintroduction in 1995 and 1996, emphasizing the impact she had on the lives of the couple that dedicated themselves to her for over fifteen years. While I felt that the aesthetics of the staged interviews and some of the experimental editing techniques interrupted the flow of the story, Whitehair deftly plucked a compelling story depicting

the emotional rollercoaster ride Bruce and Pat found themselves on out of a lifetime's worth of archival footage. My own work organizing, digitizing, logging and building a cohesive narrative out of over a thousand hours of archival footage for *Part of the Pack* taught me well the challenges of such a task. I at least had the advantage of being able shoot my own current footage to construct the framework of my film, whereas Whitehair never had the opportunity since he was brought into the project years after Koani's death. Still, he was able to reveal the intimate moments of her life and the sometimes heart-wrenching decisions that Bruce and Pat often faced, inviting the audience into the all-consuming experiences of keeping a wild predator in your living room.

My only concern about the film was the protagonists' seeming lack of energy and delight while recalling their time with Koani. Dedicating your life to a wild animal is, understandably, fraught with worry and doubt, and I would never advocate for shying away from emphasizing the many reasons why wolves should not be kept as 'pets,' but, in order for an audience to truly engage with a film, they need to also witness some of the joy. This has always been my personal philosophy in storytelling, and, while I know all too well the difficulty of processing and putting those happy moments with an animal into words after their passing, the importance of the task cannot be overstated. In order for your audience to understand and identify with the depth of your emotion and your loss, they first need to experience the highs that created such a deep bond with that animal. From a psychological perspective, focusing solely on negative emotions serves to narrow our perspective, shutting out the harsh portions of the world they bring to mind. Whereas, positive emotions, like surprise, joy, and mystery, help us "want to get

involved, to learn new things, to tackle new experiences, [to] become more open to new ideas" (Heath, "Switch" 123).

FINDING THE FEELING

In watching *True Wolf*, the most impactful part of the whole experience was feeling the profound nature of Bruce and Pat's emotional connection to Koani, no matter how difficult it was for them to express. Chip and Dan Heath, professors at Stanford and Duke University, brothers who've spent their careers studying strategies to encourage our brains to make real-world connections, advocate for filmmakers and change-makers to focus on the emotion. According to them, and many other experts in both psychology and business marketing, emotion is the driver of human decision-making ("Switch" 7-8).

Imagine a tiny rider on the back of a huge elephant. Your reason and rationality are the rider, and your emotion is the elephant (Haidt 3-5). Given enough time, the rider can encourage the elephant to stay on a certain path, but ultimately the direction and rate of progress is up to the elephant. "Anytime the six-ton Elephant and the Rider disagree about which direction to go, the Rider is going to lose" (Heath, "Switch" 7). Think about just how much effort and willpower it takes to resist your favorite dessert if it is sitting right in front of you. You can hold out for a while - that's your rational rider pulling back on the reins – but eventually your emotional elephant's strength wins out and the next thing you know the plate is littered with crumbs. Now imagine speaking directly to someone else's elephant, encouraging them down an enticing path, and see how fast they follow.

Political analysts call for candidates who "elicit the right feelings" (Westen 123). Writers suggest focusing on "what feels meaningful to the heart" (Zimmerman). Dr. Veerabhadran Ramanathan, the scientist who first convinced Pope Francis to speak

publicly about the impact of climate change, says of the essential parking lot pitch that caught the pontiff's attention that, when he forgot all of the statistics and scientific arguments he had planned to make, "I went with my heart to [appeal to his moral and emotional core], and I think without any exaggeration, those three minutes were the best scientific moments in my life" (Murdoch). As Van Jones, co-founder of the non-profit Green for All, claims: "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care" (Murdoch). As the Heath brothers succinctly point out, "feelings inspire people to act" ("Made" 169).

When my search for inspiration and direction on *Part of the Pack* unsurprisingly fell so short in the wolf-centric genre, I turned to any type of personal documentary film that explored the relationship between humans and animals, looking for examples of the delicate mix of tribal identification and emotional appeal that can move an audience to act. This is where I found *Shark Girl* (2014), an Australian film that centers on Maddie, a passionate and engaging young woman, and her efforts to raise awareness about the dangers humans pose to sharks across the world's oceans. I was instantly struck by the magnetism and power of her personality, and drawn to her infectious enthusiasm for her terrifying "family" of seagoing apex predators. To say that I understood where she was coming from is an understatement. The film employs a deeply emotional appeal to both the characters in the film and in the audience to reconsider their views on sharks, and the director does a remarkable job of showing us just how much Maddie cares. Viewers are instantly ushered into her underwater world, and the surprising images of a girl interacting with gigantic sharp-toothed sharks with such obvious affection and ease are

unforgettable. As the Heath brothers argue in their writings about emotion, such surprise "jolts us to attention," and the constructed mystery of Maddie's quest to determine the level of toxins concentrated in commercial shark meat peaks our interest and curiosity to such an extent that we are driven to find an answer, to close that gap in knowledge (Heath, "Made" 67, 69 & 83).

Unlike the characters in most personal wolf films, Maddie's eloquent and earnest entreaties left little doubt to her sincerity and credibility. My main critique of the film is that it does not take enough advantage of such a relatable, reliable character. Every time the omniscient narrator intruded into the film, viewers were pushed out of the exclusive and impassioned world of Maddie's perspective. While the narrator never added anything to the story that would not have been more impactful if left to Maddie, it is not surprising that the large broadcast companies involved in the production did not trust that a young woman's voice alone could wield the power necessary to hold an audience's attention. In the end, I took it as a lesson in what the directors of *For Ahkeem* were referring to about the need to let audiences get really close to your richest characters and just sit with them, immersed in their experiences of the world. By trying to split the difference between this impulse and that of the all-knowing narrator common in more traditional documentaries, *Shark Girl* missed out on the opportunity to fully embody the ideal of a personal film.

EMBRACING THE WILD

Last on my list of films that deeply influenced *Part of the Pack* are a pair of PBS *Nature* episodes that follow the unusual exploits of Joe Hutto, an eccentric writer and naturalist who spends his life building remarkably close personal relationships with the wild animals he studies. *My Life as a Turkey* (2011) tells the story of the years he lived in the southern swamps raising a flock of wild turkey poults, and *Touching the Wild* (2014) follows his journey into the inner social circle of a herd of wild mule deer.

The most refreshing aspect about both films was that rather than using the animals as mirrors or doors into exploring human issues, they instead used Joe's perspective and voice as a conduit into the personalities and perspectives of the animals themselves. He was not necessarily interested in bringing the deer or turkeys into our world, but in bringing us into theirs. This fit exactly with what I had been trying to accomplish with *Part of the Pack*, and it was a relief to see that someone else had embraced the idea. Director David Allen largely achieved this feat by trusting Joe's ability to lead the audience down his winding, divergent paths of emotional reflection about the animals and his place in their lives. Both films take a contemplative, paced approach to storytelling that allows the audience to lose themselves in the tale and fall under the same spell that must have originally pulled Joe into the wilds. Unlike *Shark Girl* or *True Wolf*, neither breaks away from the carefully woven fabric of Joe's narrative, forcing viewers to fully inhabit the extraordinary moments he spends with the animals.

Where the films differ is perhaps even more instructive, with each facing its own set of challenges. Based on Joe's book about his time with the birds, the producers of *My*

Life as a Turkey had to find a way to tell a unique story that had already happened. Where *True Wolf* chose to do this using a library of archival footage, *My Life as a Turkey* set out to create cinematographically stunning reenactments – wherein lies one of its strongest suits and its downfall. The film pulls its audience into the story by offering up unexpected and exceptionally private moments between man and turkeys in the most gorgeous of settings, providing us access to every emotional plot point any Hollywood writer could imagine. The short disclaimer at the beginning tries to warn us that what we are about to watch is a well-crafted reenactment with an actor standing in for Joe, but it is easy to forget… our ingrained expectation that a "documentary" depicts "real life" is difficult to overcome. So, as we watch the story unfold, the fact that it is all staged fades into the background and we get invested in the lives of Sweet Pea and Turkey Boy. Yet, each time I have watched the film, about half way through I start to feel uneasy – the storytelling is too smooth, the images too perfect – and even though a part of me already knows that it is a recreation, the other part of me that gets caught up in the magic of the characters starts to feel betrayed. By the end of the film, when all of the plot points are neatly wrapped up and the story has come full circle, I cannot deny that Joe's narrative has brought me closer to understanding the world of a wild turkey, but I am also left with a niggling sense of suspicion and inauthenticity.

Touching the Wild was PBS's second film centered on Joe Hutto, which made it possible to produce as a more traditional documentary. The original story unfurls before the cameras as it happens, and we are taken along for the adventure. This gives it a more authentic and genuine feel than *My Life as a Turkey* and makes the marvelously intimate

footage of Joe and the wild deer interacting with each other even more remarkable. I found myself in complete awe of the bond between Babe, Blossom, Raggedy Anne, and Joe; and in tears when Joe helps the hunters haul away Babe's body. Once again, the producers allowed the audience the time and space to slip fully into Joe's perspective and get swept along on his journey, leading us to ponder the role of humans in the mule deer's lives. The only place the film stumbles, and what stands between it and the critical acclaim achieved by *My Life as a Turkey*, is the end. As is the case for so many people who dedicate themselves completely to a wild animal, Joe struggles with the pain and frustration of loving someone so deeply, yet having no control over their fate. I give the filmmakers enormous credit for not simplifying the answer, and allowing the audience to see Joe's indecision as he first proclaims that he has to move away and take a step back from the deer in order to protect his broken heart, but then changes his mind when a new fawn show up in his yard and pulls him back into the herd. It is the same complicated conflict I faced with the wolves, and one that it extremely difficult to even put into words, much less depict on film. While most viewers criticize *Touching the Wild* for its confusing conclusion, I appreciate the attempt and merely wish that it was more successful at helping its audience understand the depth of the emotion that led Joe to his indecision.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: *PART OF THE PACK*

My thesis film, what eventually became *Part of the Pack*, really began taking shape nearly 18 years ago when a petite, reserved black wolf named Rami first touched her nose to mine and licked my cheek. It was my very first experience with Mission:Wolf, and a few hours later Kent Weber, the refuge's founder, and I were sitting in their "Wolf Bus" watching Rami sleep and discussing what it would take to bring that same experience to a much wider audience. As the years went on and I joined Kent and the ambassador pack on the road, it became clear that there just was not enough time in the day to fulfill all of the program requests – there was no way we could ever make it to every school and every classroom where children and teachers were waiting to meet the wolves. That is where the spark was born for a film that might help spread the message. Even after moving away from the refuge and going back to school, I had envisioned someday making a film about the ambassador tour itself, tagging along and filming the adventures of a new set of wolf pups meeting the public for the first time. Little did I know the drastic evolution that vision for the film would go through during production. In retrospect, I am grateful for all of the stumbling blocks life threw in my way during the first two years because they forced me to go back to the drawing board and come up with what ended up being a much more heartfelt film.

My intent all along was to find a way to engage my audience to such an extent that they felt an emotional connection to the wolves themselves. After my research into different methods of reaching viewers and seeing the intense reactions people had when they sat down and listened to my crazy stories about living with the wolves, I realized

that holding back and making an observational film was no longer an option. If I wanted to stand a chance of pulling viewers deep enough into the story to get past their prior opinions about large carnivores, I was going to have to dig deeper myself and take them on a much more immersive and personal journey.

Each film I watched along the way gave me insight into how I might accomplish my goals. *My Life as a Turkey* taught me the importance of authenticity, pacing, and the dangers of smoothing over too many of the complicated details. In *True Wolf* I saw the importance of finding the joy in a story even in the face of loss, which became ever more meaningful to me as the wolves featured in my film started passing away. *Shark Girl* showed me the power that a single, passionate voice can have; and gave me the strength to fully acknowledge and share the depth of my connection to my family of wolves. And *Touching the Wild* gave me a model upon which to base my hope of telling a personal story that is more about what it is like to be a particular animal than it is about how humans see that animal. All of the films served as stepping-stones on my path to finding a way of inviting an audience into my worldview to such an extent that the wolves and I could both become a part of their tribes.

Ultimately, the nature of the footage I had to tell my story, and the successes and failures of *Touching the Wild* to connect with its audience on an emotional level inspired me to take all the lessons and advice I had gathered about the personal film one step further and venture into the realm of personal *essay* films. This relatively unknown genre focuses on taking the audience on a journey where a conceptual exploration of ideas or emotions becomes tangible (Alter 50, Yeung). According to Phillip Lopate, an essay film

presents the personal views of a filmmaker on a subject, and is a "continual asking of questions – not necessarily finding 'solutions,' but enacting the struggle for truth in full view" (445). This process, through visual montages and a personally reflective narration, can achieve a level of intimacy not normally reached by more traditional films because the "freshness, honesty, self-exposure, and authority [makes the audience] feel included in a true conversation" (Lopate 445). Much like more traditional performative documentaries, essay films work to draw a conclusion from the viewer, not for the viewer (Nichols, "Boundaries" 95-96).

These ideas fit particularly well with my goals for *Part of the Pack* because I was not necessarily setting out to teach my audience specific facts about wolves. I was more interested in finding a way to initially open up the discussion and get people to start thinking and reflecting on things with which they are not normally comfortable. The characteristic spiraling and digressing structure of the essay film allowed me to explore different tangents and stories about my time with the wolves in the hopes of individual viewers being able to key in on different details that might usher them into experiencing at least a part of my emotional journey. If I could do this, then maybe we could find some common ground, and they would allow themselves to be swept along as I explored the complicated nature of my relationship with the wolves, and their relationship with us.

Perhaps the most challenging and controversial choice I made in my film was relying solely on narration to communicate with my audience rather than including an interview like the ones in *My Life as a Turkey* and *Touching the Wild*. I now know why interviews are such standard practice in documentaries: they provide structure to the film,

a way for audiences to visually connect with the main character, define limits to your editorial choices, and visual cues for audiences in emotional moments. I considered changing my mind time and again, as having someone else conduct an interview with me would have solved many problems, but it also would have created a different type of distance between the audience and myself. By skipping the classic interview, I wanted to push viewers into experiencing the whole film as if it was from an internal point of view – as if they had stepped into my head, heart, and memories, and were witnessing first hand my reflections on a life spent with wild animals. At first it seemed like an extreme step, but in watching Cindy Stillwell's personal essay film *Mating for Life* (2012), I realized that it was possible. Stillwell manages to engage her audience and immerse them in her thoughts with only the sound of her voice and a few lingering silent shots of her meaningfully gazing into the camera. Those shots from the "blind lessons" added emphasis to the film that *Mating for Life* was indeed Cindy's story, and more about her perceptions and ruminations on life through the lens of the cranes than it was about the cranes themselves. In contrast, I decided to give those scenes to the wolves. Rather than directly confronting the audience myself, I purposely stepped back from the camera and let the wolves make that lingering eye contact… it was *their* story, and I wanted to be a lens through which the audience accessed *them*.

The other aspect of *Part of the Pack* that goes against traditional wisdom is how long I hold off on showing the wolves interacting with people after the opening scene. This, too, was a conscious, crafted, and difficult decision. I knew that I risked losing the audience's interest and engagement with me as a character, and it meant that I couldn't

include some of my favorite shots of the puppies playing with people, but I felt it was important to the story's structure. Building on the Heath brother's arguments about mystery being the ultimate long-term motivator ("Made" 69), I wanted to build a sense of mystery, anticipation, and aspiration into the film that mimicked my own experiences when I first met the wolves. My theory was that by using shot choice to create a progression of lessening distance from the wolves, the audience would be subjected to similar emotions of reward, satisfaction, and connection as they would if they earned the wolves' acceptance in person, thus pushing them ever further into embodying my own experiences.

It will be interesting to see how these unconventional choices play out with audiences in the long run, but my ultimate hope is that they allow viewers to interact with the often-overlooked notion that individual animals have identities outside of what we humans hoist up on them. It is important for filmmakers to experiment with the capabilities of our art form and strive to find new ways to affect our audiences. I am happy to say that I am not naïve enough to believe that *Part of the Pack* will change the minds of people squarely in the anti-wolf club, but hope that it falls far enough into the purview of Eisenstein's "agit-cinema" that maybe it will help begin a dialogue between the two cultures. In the end, I believe the exact form and structure of a film about human-animal relationships, whether it's considered an esoteric essay or the basest of tooth-and-claw ratings vehicles, does not determine it's success. What matters is whether the filmmakers respect the animals, and the depth to which the story inspires emotional engagement in its audience.

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