

SPECTACULAR NATURE: APPLYING THE “CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS” TO
THE NATURAL HISTORY FILM GENRE

by

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ABSTRACT

The natural history film genre has long been reliant on the commoditizing of nature's beauty as visual spectacle. Associating Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions" to the nature film genre therefore is an appropriate way to dissect the techniques that maintain its popularity. After understanding the basic rhetorical traditions that nature films employ, it is revealed how the same outdated and over-idealized portrayals of nature continue to be recycled as new technology in methods of production and exhibition continually reinvent the nature film experience.

INTRODUCTION

The phrase “nature’s beauty” elicits images of waterfalls and sunsets, of lions on the Serengeti and blue whales deep in open ocean, and more nationalistically of purple mountain majesties and amber waves of grain. American society has been encultured to standard images of nature’s splendor by countless National Geographic spreads, scenic paintings of the west that define our national consciousness, and the science museum IMAX film, a standard of any child’s primary education.

The popular concept of natural beauty, however, receives little scrutiny. Though many are aware of the environmental issues of the day, most people rarely link their ideals of nature to an unrealistic media portrayal and the production techniques that make capturing these images possible. They think even less about the origins of their standards of natural beauty and the potential negative effects of such standards.

Central to the matter, nature films often rely heavily on spectacle, on the pictorial power of the beauty itself to entice the audience. Because of this tendency, film theorist Tom Gunning’s “Cinema of Attractions” has significant relevance when reapplied to films in the nature genre.¹ New technology in formats of production and presentation have proven to be acutely beneficial to nature films, allowing producers to tell the same stories again and again in a larger, “prettier” format. This tendency damages the opportunity to further narratives

within the films. Ultimately, the reliance on natural beauty alone ignores and diminishes ecological and conservation issues, avoiding the very stories that would otherwise be beneficial to the community and to the subjects of the films themselves.

The paper begins by describing a few of the original mythologies that are central to the American nature aesthetic. The importance of these explanations is to unravel how deeply rooted popular standards of idealized nature are. Though the brief history is by no means complete, it gives an important context about the attraction to certain images of nature and helps illustrate the portrayals as superficial and fictitious. The Eden myth is the foundation upon which the most pleasing human nature experience is built. In addition, two specific popular art movements in American history that exemplify the basic rhetorical strategies employed by nature filmmakers in the contemporary era, upon which the “cinema of attractions” have been applied. The Hudson River School is considered by many to be the first truly American art movement and defined a nature aesthetic that is still dominant in depictions of wilderness. The Hudson School landscape paintings were immensely popular and sell for huge revenue both when they were painted and now. Disney’s *Bambi* provides a turning point for nature art and nature storytelling by bringing animals front-and-center. Like the Hudson School, it was and is an economic and popular success, garnering huge profits for Disney and spawning a natural history unit that would act as a model for the later nature filmmakers such as the BBC and Discovery. The popular and economic

achievements of these two cultural institutions is worth mentioning because it is their success in the market that cemented their rhetorical techniques and all future “nature artists” would be pressured to use and grow these techniques.

After one understands how similar the subjects and aesthetics of natural history media have remained, it is more simple to expose how much the genre relies on what Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” by advancing technological spectacle for the viewer both in methods of production and exhibition. This bonding of technology and art finds an easy fit with nature films and disguises what is otherwise an often worn-out tradition. The Hudson School and Disney traditions grow by way of technology, but their overly-idealized interpretations of nature remain. Instead, technology continues to outpace criticism. In production methods technology has allowed filmmakers to tell the same stories without the staging that was once necessary. In exhibition, technology fuels new modes of viewing that impress the audience with novelty and visceral experience rather than telling a new story.

The purpose of this thesis is not to demonize the genre of nature films, but rather to scrutinize it. Filmmakers should ask if it’s possible for films to remain compelling while telling a more honest story about what the concept of nature really means.

DEFINING NATURE'S BEAUTY

Beauty has many connotations for many different people, but for the purposes of this discourse the “beautiful” is meant as images with a dictionary definition, “having a combination of qualities that delights the aesthetic senses.”² The key to the definitions is a stimulation of the visual senses that attracts one to certain imagery. Laura Mulvey describes this stimulation as it applies to narrative cinema and how in many cases “looking itself is a source of pleasure.”³ In nature films, Mulvey’s theories on visual pleasure, what she often refers to as “scopophilia,” help to describe the relationship between the subjects and the spectator. Her descriptions of how film puts the viewer in the role of voyeur are of particular relevance. Though Mulvey focuses on the male gaze and its subjugation of the female, it is useful for the nature genre to consider the *human* gaze and its subjugation of the animal. Many standards of beauty span cultural boundaries, but for this thesis, the interest is mainly in Western perceptions, and specifically the standards unique to American culture. Beauty in nature, then, is meant to refer to the aesthetic value Americans place on certain images of the natural world.

Though we have exhibited many actions to the contrary, I do assert that humans placing aesthetic value on the natural world is, at least to some degree, a biological response. There are certainly those for whom this response is stronger than others, but in general there is a base reaction to viewing some scenes of

wilderness that is not rooted in culture. That said, many of the specific scenes we place significance on are largely, if not entirely, the product of culture. This distinction is an important one. To use a metaphor, there is a biological imperative driving men to find women beautiful and vice-versa. However, different cultures have different ideas of what is beautiful about the opposite sex. The biological attraction is not damaging—to the contrary, in fact. The cultural ideals however, have the potential to be, and therefore deserve inspection.

NATURE AS THE GARDEN OF EDEN

The strongest cultural reference to nature's beauty is found in the book of Genesis. Everyone has his or her own idea of what Eden might look like, but by any description it was beautiful. Carolyn Merchant begins her book *Reinventing Eden* with a classic sort of depiction:

A lush garden. Pathways wander invitingly among rolling lawns and fragrant flowers. Lilies, roses, and herbs send forth a sweet ambrosia. The air smells continuously fresh. Peacocks strut among the trees in the near distance and doves make their distinctive three-note coo. A cottontail, appearing unconcerned, nibbles at grass nearby, while lambs suckle at their mother's teat. Nearly hidden among the taller and more distant cedars, a doe and fawn munch at the undergrowth. A small grove of fig trees can be glimpsed down a side path. A couple strolls arm in arm toward a fig grove near the middle of the garden, where a waterfall gushes over rocks fed by a clear bubbling stream. At the garden's very center are two trees known simply as the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁴

Merchant concludes her opening with the revelation that this is actually not a description of a natural place, but rather of a "downtown square on the promenade in Anytown, California."⁵ The important distinction is that our thoughts of Eden are of a garden, a sort of nature that could only be created and managed by man. This idea of man being able to construct the perfect nature becomes a central myth of Western culture and our relation to wilderness.

The Garden of Eden myth is crucial background in looking at what our culture sees as ideal nature settings. It is useful to note three central qualities in Eden that can only be achieved through simulation or construction of natural scenery. The first is purely aesthetic and is my major focus. Eden is an impossibly beautiful natural setting and sets an unachievable standard for real-

world wilderness. The second is an interaction with wildlife. Adam and Eve lay among the creatures, at total peace with animals large and small. The last is a level of comfort. Eden seems to have no rain or cold, its beauty can be experienced without distraction from bodily discomfort. Looking at these qualities, we begin to see how setting the bar for nature at this mythic level requires human intervention to meet the expectations. It provides a subconscious justification for human construction of natural paradise and it may help us understand the gap between media portrayals of nature and realistic ones.

DOMINANT RHETORICAL STRATEGIES FOR PORTRAYING NATURE IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

The Hudson River School and the American Nature Identity

American ideals of nature have a unique frame to them. On one hand, the nation prides itself on a rugged spirit of freedom and independence, yet it also claims to be a beacon of civilized society for the rest of the globe. This was certainly true of John Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill" and the earliest colonists who embraced the freedom of the new world despite the perils of surviving the harsh environment. Perhaps it came into maturity however, with Westward Expansion, illustrated in 1893 when Frederick Jackson Turner concluded in his "Frontier Thesis" that the American identity was defined at the battlefield of civilized society and savage wilderness.⁶ Historian Stephen J. Pyne describes this period as one where, "natural history and national history proceeded in sync, a cultural fugue to Manifest Destiny."⁷ In essence, the country grew up on the idea that taming the environment is what made America great.

Romanticism of nature in these early periods of American history was a central part of the culture of the day and paintings from the Hudson River School were some of the earliest popular art attractions in America. Their depictions of nature were very realistic but heavily idealized and look strikingly similar to popular nature art from current times (see Figure 1). Unlike today though, many of the artists were actually explicit in trying to evoke biblical themes such as the

Garden of Eden. Crossed with themes of exploration, discovery, and settlement the paintings create a uniquely American version of natural paradise that is still prevalent in contemporary natural history art.



Figure 1: The natural aesthetic of Hudson River School painting (left) and modern photography from National Geographic (right) bears a remarkable resemblance.^{8,9}

The importance of the Hudson River School is not only their beautiful nature portrayals, but also their emphasis on a false realism that closely parallels the methods of more current nature film productions. In fact, the paintings translate nature's beauty in much the same way an IMAX film might do today. The paintings are incredibly detailed and their emphasis on light is one notable connection to film. They present waterfalls, sunsets, and the very same things that are by now cliché. But the paintings were not necessarily presenting real settings. Many of the painters combined different scenes they liked, perhaps added a deer or a well-placed mountain peak. Ansel Adams was quoted saying that Hudson River School artist Albert Bierstadt (who painted the picture on the left in figure 1) had, "tarted up the supremely beautiful natural world with inaccurate geography and scale, in some instances literally moving mountains to better fit his canvas, and that he had imposed overly dramatic lighting."¹⁰ Though

photography and film as reproductive mediums boast a semblance of realism that even the most detailed paintings cannot, whether their representations of nature are truthful is a different matter. This was an early example of staging nature to accomplish an aesthetic, but it was not the first and nor would it be the last. Adams's criticism against exaggerated light and scale could be easily applied to the heavy amount of effects and post-production applied to nature programs in present time. The Hudson School painters succeeded at creating natural spectacle in a manner not unlike most successful science documentary filmmakers do today.

Though their landscapes precede the technological age, their paintings used two techniques that continue to be emblematic for depictions of natural beauty. First, the paintings were typically large in size. This becomes a staple of nature portrayals and IMAX is the most obvious extension of this. Second, the nature artists seem incredibly compelled by detail. In modern terms, the television screen is not only large, it also has a high resolution. Combined, the two techniques reveal the artists attempts to break down the barriers that keep their spectators rooted in reality. This proves to be a successful aesthetic recipe that will get further discussion later.

Disney's *Bambi* and Animals as Actors

Bambi is an iconic example of idyllic nature that was, and continues to be, a formative film in many childhoods. The images of the wilderness it draws are

of deer playing with rabbits, skunks, and songbirds. The nature in the film is greatly idealized and the animals are completely anthropomorphized.

Bambi, however, is not itself a film to blame. It is, after all, an animation with talking animals; one would be foolish to equate its depictions of nature with reality. The importance of *Bambi* though, is that it took the familiar Edenic imagery of nature and crossed it with the narrative tradition of animal fairy tales. From an aesthetic standpoint, this brought the animals to front-and-center and left the spectator staring eye-to-eye with them.

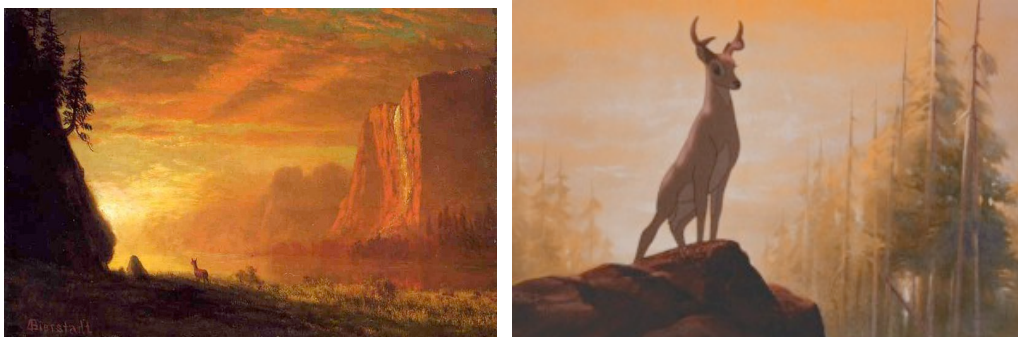


Figure 2: Two images of a deer at sunset. Comparing the Hudson River School art (left) to Disney's art from *Bambi* (right) shows a similar aesthetic but a radically different emphasis.^{11 12}

The images in the second figure show two different beauty scenes of a deer at sunset. The first is another painting by Albert Bierstadt of the Hudson River School. It is quite typical of the movement: a sunset, the canyon walls, and a lone deer staring off toward the horizon. One actually must look quite closely to see the deer as it only takes up a small portion of the frame. The second image is pulled from *Bambi*. One might notice a similar color palate and some familiar pines, but here it is clear the focus is not on the scenery. By taking a nature

aesthetic that was proven and making the animals into anthropomorphized characters, Disney hit on a formula that struck audiences deep in their psyche.

A basic description of what Disney did, beginning with *Bambi*, was to bring cinematic narrative tradition to a familiar natural setting. The film was a huge success and audiences were fascinated by it. This becomes an essential turning point because *Bambi*'s anthropomorphizing of animals, giving the audience a view into "what it's like to live as an animal," would become the second key rhetorical strategy for all future nature films. David Piersen writes about this human impulse to seek out humanlike companions in the most unlikely places, analyzing evidence of it during a week of programming on the US Discovery Channel.¹³ He concludes that while the themes engage the audience both dramatically and emotionally, applying moral and normative terms to the animal world ultimately serves as an obstacle to understanding animal behavior. A similar thing happens on a larger scale with nature as a whole. By engaging the audience using the natural world as a clichéd spectacle, there is a cheapening of it that impedes a better understanding of ecological complexity.

The Hudson River School and *Bambi* reveal two basic aesthetic strategies to draw humans into nature. It is worth relating these back to the three central qualities of Eden. The Hudson River School paintings are iconic of impossibly beautiful natural settings. Their perfection of a landscape aesthetic ripples through all future representations of nature that are meant to be picturesque. *Bambi* exemplifies human interaction with wildlife. By taking animal characters

and giving them human stories, the audience has the impression of living alongside them. The third quality of nature is comfort, and this is achieved through a simulation of nature, rather than an actual experience. I use landscape paintings and *Bambi* because they also provide the settings for nature appreciation that are most common to audiences: museums, theaters, and living rooms. With these strategies in mind, one is much more prepared to dissect the role technology has played and see how the last fifty years of nature portrayals have relied on spectacle and novelty rather than a development of stories that would correspond with the ecological enlightenment of the 21st century.

NATURE'S CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS

In 1990 Thomas Gunning coined the term “the cinema of attractions” to describe the tendency of early films to rely more on visual spectacle and novelty to attract an audience than narrative. Gunning summarizes that “the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle.”¹⁴ He notes that in the first years of film, it was a spectacle just to see moving images and the subjects of the films took a back seat to the novelty of the new medium. As film gradually grew more common, Gunning sees a divergence in style. While some of the films developed a cinematic narrative approach, other films used oddities and tricks to bring in audiences. Some of the earliest nickelodeon films were of acrobatic vaudeville acts, circus sideshow strongmen, or peak moments of famous plays.¹⁵ These sorts of films are what Gunning calls the “cinema of attractions.”

Of special significance is the Georges Méliès film *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Gunning notes how often theorists have analyzed the film’s influence on narrative tradition, but quotes Méliès himself saying:

As for the scenario, the ‘fable,’ or ‘tale,’ I only consider it at the end. I can state that the scenario constructed in this manner has *no importance*, since I use it merely as a pretext for the ‘stage effects,’ the ‘tricks,’ or for a nicely arranged tableau.¹⁶

This example and quote show evidence of a tendency among theorists to analyze narrative structure more quickly than aesthetic techniques when in actuality the filmmakers themselves often take the opposite approach.

Gunning also applied his “cinema of attractions” to modern cinema, and other theorists have taken it much farther, particularly in terms of the Hollywood blockbuster. Today the largest grossing films are often the ones with the highest special effects budget. Filmmakers feature huge spectacles in their movies that promise to astonish an audience no matter what the actual plot is. Gunning calls it the “Spielberg-Lucas-Coppola cinema of effects.”¹⁷ We’ve reached a point where most moviegoers have in mind whether they’re going to the theater hoping for a good story or if they’re just going for the explosions, the roller-coaster action, or in other words, the “cinema of attractions.”

While Gunning’s theory is most often applied to narrative genres such as the musical and the action film, nature films have a tendency toward the “cinema of attractions” that deserves much greater inspection. As Gunning noted about early film, the “cinema of attractions” often relies on technological tricks to arouse surprise and awe from the audience. And if the tell-tale signs of this type of rhetoric are the quick adoption of new technologies and special effect “tricks” to astonish audiences, nature films are likely some of the greatest offenders. This can be seen both in the production methods of nature programs, as well as the exhibition methods, extending to museum attractions and unconventional theater schemes like Omni and IMAX. Indeed, the natural history genre is not only quick to adopt Hollywood techniques of spectacle, it’s reliance on the form and intrinsic link to science means it often outruns narrative cinema in embracing new technologies.

The connection between the terms “beauty” and “attraction” also plays an important role in the application of Gunning’s ideas to nature film. The words have similar meanings; both are defined by an appeal to stimulate the visual senses and an effect of inducing arousal. The difference in the vocabulary is that while the former is quite frequently used to describe nature, the latter seems less comfortable to apply to the natural realm, perhaps because of its connotation with amusement parks. Whatever the reasoning, it is useful to keep in mind the link between the terms.

The convenience of the “cinema of attractions” and the rhetoric of spectacle to the nature film lies first and foremost in the established cultural traditions of aesthetic nature appreciation. Demonstrated by the Hudson River School, beautiful landscapes are a lucrative commodity. Also proven were the animal close-ups made popular by Disney films. With these traditions firmly established, an artist’s goal is to make the images more spectacular and more realistic. This is demonstrated in the history of the genre, as producers continue to push toward formats that are larger, more detailed, and give the audience a sense of a third dimension. With each technological advancement in realism, the audience seems to get a renewed sense of nature’s beauty as if they never expected its majesty could be experienced in such a manner. There is also an emphasis on the strange, the exotic, and the rare, all hearkening back to “cinema of attraction” films.

On the contrary of the tradition of spectacle, it should also be noted that the narrative tradition has long been problematic for the nature film. Alexander Wilson explains of one Disney film *Nature's Half Acre*, "Today that movie could not be made. Its intimacy with its subject now seems naïve, its science bogus, its ethics dubious."¹⁸ Though audiences enjoy *Bambi*-like portrayals of nature, there is an awareness of their constructions that often draws the audience out of the films. This pressure comes from educators, scientists, and more recently conservationists, who are quick to point out narrative inaccuracies or exaggerations. Bousé explains that Disney originally tried to include scientists and educators in the process but soon gave up when he found they were obstacles toward creating an entertaining and profitable film.¹⁹ The cinematic techniques Disney applied to nature films were entertaining but when put under a scientific microscope, their accuracy quickly falls apart.

Unlike Hollywood movies that rely heavily on suspension of disbelief, nature films usually purport themselves to be documentary and sometimes even educational, so therefore have some burden of truth, often a hindrance to the cinematic narrative approach. Of course, the cinematic techniques are powerful at capturing audiences, and the abilities of the ecologically educated to hinder the Disney narrative tradition in nature documentary are limited. As a result, practices like anthropomorphism are still common in nature films. Nonetheless, the criticism of the scientifically enlightened does serve as a significant obstruction to this type of storytelling. This is especially true because education,

science, and conservation organizations are often the funders of wildlife films. In the end the combination of pressures that are both economic and societal have resulted in a stunting of narrative tradition in the nature film genre.

This impediment by science on narrative strategies may actually have the effect of redoubling the power of the aesthetic strategies. Unlike the Disney wilderness narratives, nature films that rely more on natural beauty to hold an audience do not run up against science. To the contrary, their depictions of nature, even outlandish ones, are generally considered to be making the case for education and conservation. The psychological connections a viewer makes from certain images do not come under fire unless the narrative is explicit in its inaccuracies or the method of capture of the images seems suspect. In consequence, the “cinema of attractions” becomes the perfect answer to entertain audiences without violating an ethical code that important niche audiences and even sources of funding might take exception to.

The Dialectic of Exhibitionism and Voyeurism

Another important point of Gunning’s theory is that the dialectic between spectacle and narrative has fuelled much of classical cinema. As a way of defining human attraction to the medium, he refers to Mulvey’s previously mentioned “pleasure in looking” and relates spectacle to the exhibitionist and narrative to the voyeur.^{20 21} For modern nature film, this seems an apt formula. On one hand you have nature’s pure splendor, the panorama, the waterfalls and

sunsets. These are nature in its most exhibitionist majesty, laid out for all to take in. On the other hand, you have nature's characters, the animals, especially those that are big, strange, rare, or most human-like. Nature hides these and any close-up glimpses we get are privileged views, hence the thrill of the voyeur.

Even the modes of capture reflect these comparisons. The wide-angle lens of the panorama reflects the wide eyes of the viewer while the intimate shots of animals must be captured by a sneaky filmmaker with a long lens, lying in wait and squinting to get the good shot. The formula for nature films then becomes a sort of game of hide-and-seek with the natural world, going back and forth between scenic shots reminiscent of the Hudson River School and close-up shots of animals reminiscent of the *Bambi* version of nature. Both are their own unique type of spectacle and cut together, the two serve to reinforce the Eden myth.

The comparison to exhibitionism and voyeurism forms the basis for a comparison of nature films to pornography. As the ultimate exploitation of a female's beauty, it is not an exaggeration to consider that this is the extent to which human's views of nature have come. The perfection of wish-fulfillment nature aesthetics with the help of technology puts the images we would never otherwise see into a readily available medium that we simply can't tear our eyes from. It is even more successful when it does the best job breaking down the barriers that keep the audience rooted in reality. Like in pornography, the aesthetic is intensely stimulating, sometimes to the point of overwhelming rational thought. The nature filmmaker's goal is for the audience to leave the

theater short of breath, in awe at what they've seen and aware that it struck them somewhere deep.

Case Study: *Beavers* (1988)

The film *Beavers* (1988) provides a good example of how this exhibitionist/voyeur duality plays out in modern nature films.²² *Beavers* remains one of IMAX's greatest successes and takes a classic structure for a blue-chip nature film. A "making-of" feature included on the DVD provides insight into the techniques that made the film possible.

The piece takes place on a beaver dam somewhere in the north woods set beneath a breath-taking mountain vista. The beauty of the area immediately enraptures the audience and the filmmakers boast in the "making-of" about the crane shot that creates a transition from the beautiful scenery down to the dam where beavers are busily at work. Cutting in tighter, the audience is treated to close-ups as the beavers chew down trees and drag them toward the dam. When the beaver dives underwater, the camera goes along. Following it home, the audience even sees what is going on inside the beaver lodge (it's "home"). The most memorable scene of the film comes when two beavers, according to the narration a male and a female, cavort in the moonlight, rubbing and grooming while a classic romantic score plays in the background. One cannot help but feel the scene ranks with *Casablanca* and *From Here to Eternity* in the great kisses of Hollywood.

Like most nature films, *Beavers* ends with the audience believing they have important new insight into the lives of the animal subject. Of course, in the “making-of” it is revealed that all of the beavers were trained (“we knew right from the start we would use trained beavers” says the director). In addition, it is learned that all of the scenes were carefully lit and a sculpture artist constructed the beaver lodge as a cross section so that the enormous IMAX camera could film inside. Throughout much of the “making-of” the filmmakers actually complain how difficult it was to get the behaviors they desired out of the beavers and how in the end only one of the trained beavers would even work on building the dam while the others “just sat around.”

Dissecting *Beavers* provides an excellent example of the interplay of the exhibitionist and voyeur, as well as bridges into the specific production and exhibition techniques that call upon Gunning’s “cinema of attractions.” The crane shot and IMAX format illustrate traditions of spectacle, of the exhibitionist, and of the Hudson River School. The anthropomorphized beaver “kiss” and the views underwater and inside the lodge demonstrate voyeurism, the Disney rhetorical style, and the role of ethics in relation to production techniques. Worth noting, Disney produced a nature film in 1950 called *Beaver Valley* about a “family” of beavers. It shares many commonalities with *Beavers* (1988) but it is noticeably more anthropomorphized in its narrative and less majestic in its production value. This provides further evidence of the trends the natural history genre has taken.

The Cinema of Attractions in Nature Film Production Techniques

As argued previously, the expanded criticism and pressure natural history production units feel from science and conservation have led to today's nature stories being written and produced within a tighter sense of moral duty to their subjects than they once were. Yet despite the criticism of staging and faking nature, the aesthetic content of the images hasn't changed much. Instead, new technology has made the shots possible without trained animals and built sets.

The 2006 BBC series *Planet Earth*, for example, made heavy use of cameras on gyroscopes hanging from helicopters. Even with extremely long lenses, the filmmakers could get a steady shot, allowing them to find and capture hard to gather footage by covering lots of ground with minimal intrusion. New video cameras also have the feature of being able to continuously record but only save the footage for a few minutes unless the record button is pressed. This allows the camera operator to capture back several seconds or even minutes and neither miss events nor waste film, a common barrier in the past. *Planet Earth* producer Alastair Fothergill asserts that due to these advancements in particular, the series absolutely could not have been made even five years earlier.²³ So in many ways the battle of ethical production of nature film is being won with technology. Technology acts as an enabler, reducing one consequence, but ultimately allowing misguided ideals of nature to persist.

Indeed, with new technology that removes barriers and allows filmmakers to capture wildlife behavior in a more ethical manner, the Disney aesthetic becomes a new kind of spectacle, one that sometimes borders on novelty. These new “tricks” of nature films run parallel to the production methods of early “cinema of attractions” filmmakers. Perhaps most notable among them is Percy Smith, who captivated audiences with early time lapse in *The Birth of a Flower* (1910) and macrocinematography in *The Strength and Agility of Insects* (1911). Technological advancements like these in macrocinematography, as well as underwater cinematography and computer-generated imagery (all areas where Disney also did early experimenting), paved the way for contemporary natural history successes like *Microcosmos* (1996), *Blue Planet* (2001), and *Walking with Dinosaurs* (2000).

Case Study: *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914)
and *Walking with Dinosaurs* (2000)

The last of these titles, the BBC’s *Walking with Dinosaurs*, provides a good case study for looking at how technology in natural history production methods mirrors back to Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” and one of the earliest animated pieces, Windsor McCay’s *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914). Karen Scott refers to *Walking with Dinosaurs* as emblematic of what she calls a recent “proliferation of computer-generated extravaganzas” and has done an analysis of how it and programs of its type relate to the concept of spectacle.²⁴ The program boasted itself as “the world’s first natural history of dinosaurs” and its extreme

reliance on high-end computer animation drew huge ratings. Scott concludes her analysis saying:

New technology and the demand for a more immersive, interactive experience have led to the development of series that use cutting-edge equipment previously limited to use on Hollywood blockbuster film productions. However this in turn brings its own problems, as the spectacle of the visual image often overshadows the very history being explored.²⁵

Scott's examination of *Walking with Dinosaurs* relates strongly back to Gunning's "cinema of attractions" but a specific example of an early film makes this case even more notable.



Figure 3: *Gertie the Dinosaur* (left) and *Walking With Dinosaurs* (right) show a direct match between the "cinema of attractions" in early film and in contemporary natural history film.^{26 27}

Windsor McCay was one of the early pioneers of animation and *Gertie the Dinosaur* was one of his most popular works. He used *Gertie* as part of his vaudeville act and later added a shot of himself and intertitles to tell the story.²⁸ Compared to *Walking with Dinosaurs*, the two pieces have very notable similarities, yet were created with opposite technological capabilities. McCay and an assistant painstakingly made a drawing for every single frame while the BBC employed state-of-the-art computers. At the time however, McCay's animations were a new technology. The draw of *Gertie* was to see the animation or really to see animation period. What looks crude and rudimentary now, was magical in

1914, and elicited much the same response from audiences as *Walking with Dinosaurs* did when it was released eight-six years later. *Gertie*'s association with vaudeville makes it a clear example of the "cinema of attractions" and both works fit the model Gunning describes as, "a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema."²⁹ In terms of rhetorical devices, *Gertie* employs almost purely an anthropomorphic style that is a precursor to Disney while *Walking* employs a style that places it quite firmly in the natural history realm, mixing in spectacular scenic shots filmed in real locations with animated environments that are designed to simulate a similarly picturesque setting.

The Cinema of Attractions in Nature Film Presentation

A crucial part of the success of nature films is their novel use of new forms of exhibition. Even the Hudson River School paintings emphasized scale and detail to enhance realism. Contemporary nature presentation has taken this trend well beyond any other genre. One good example is again the BBC's 2006 series *Planet Earth*. The retail version of *Planet Earth* was released in 2007 amid the battle between BluRay and HD DVD for supremacy as the "next-gen" high definition home video format. In May of that year, *Planet Earth* topped the list of "next-gen" DVD sales taking both 1st and 2nd place, one spot for its HD DVD sales and the other for its BluRay sales.³⁰ In other words, against all Hollywood releases past and present, viewers wanted to experience *Planet Earth* on their new state-of-the-art televisions. The reason was not that the program was the most

popular program available to buy, but rather that people believed it was the best way to show off the new technology of HDTV and the beautiful pictures it is capable of.

Karen Scott argues that the popularity of nature film as spectacle rests on not only its visual quality, but also its *visceral* quality.³¹ Unlike genres where a viewer is content to sit in the audience, the natural history viewer wants to *experience* the subject. This desire is likely at the root of what drives producers toward ever larger, ever more engulfing methods of exhibition.

André Bazin makes a case in his “myth of total cinema” that the very invention of the film medium and its guiding principle ever since has been the mechanical reproduction of reality.³² As evidence, he points out how quickly early filmmakers attempted to incorporate sound and color, attaching a phonograph to the projector or tinting the film by hand with stencils. Like the developments of sound and color in classical cinema, with each bit of progress toward “total cinema”, Bazin claims there is an initial novelty to the spectator. This concept seems to have particular relevance to the nature genre and producers of the media have been quick to capitalize upon it. The visual and visceral qualities of natural history “total cinema” experiences are certainly present in film, but it is also worth looking at how its exhibition extends to technological novelty beyond the film medium and the strong role museums have played in this trend.

Case Study: IMAX and the Diorama

IMAX productions provide a good case study for technological spectacle stretched to the point of novelty. Especially early in their history, IMAX has mainly been a format associated with museums. As such, there is a pressure for their films to have at least some degree of educational value. To pass the evaluations of both scientists and audiences, IMAX heightens the film experience to one that fascinates almost purely on the level of spectacle. The audience members may be served some educational content, but that is not what is keeping them in their seats. Rather, Charles Acland describes the attraction to IMAX as a reignition of the early experience of filmic realism, “the shock of movement and the sensation of ‘being there.’”³³ Those who remember their first time in the audience of an IMAX film can relate with this feeling of being immersed in a radically new media experience with a visceral sense of reality unlike the typical cinema experience.

The pictorial portrayal of nature in IMAX films, however, is certainly anything but new. With an aesthetic hearkening back to the long American tradition of landscape art, it makes sense that most IMAX theaters, especially the oldest ones, are set in museums. The IMAX feature of today becomes what the panorama was in the past. The same exact clichés of natural beauty apply. Rather than “painting in” humans, however, IMAX puts *the audience* inside the image, hence furthering Bazin’s “myth of total cinema” and simulating some of the most comfortable and visually realistic Edens to date.



Figure 4: Disneyland's Grand Canyon diorama and National Geographic's Grand Canyon IMAX theater are fine examples of nature's beauty being commoditized as technological spectacle.^{34 35}

Acland traces this practice back not only to panoramas but also to dioramas.³⁶ This point is illustrated in figure four, showing how both diorama and IMAX take the same aesthetic portrayal of nature and exhibit it as a tourist attraction, the only difference being their technological mediums. Presumably one step between a flat landscape painting and the total engulfment of an IMAX one, is the third dimension a diorama offers. They are a technique for showing natural beauty that exists somewhere between landscape painting, theater set design, and the modern nature film, with a particularly close relationship to IMAX. Like most nature films, dioramas give the public an opportunity to be “in touch” with the beauty of nature, to stare straight into the eyes of animals we would likely never see in the wild. Dioramas, like IMAX films, act as a sort of educational novelty and are used largely in museums and especially for natural history. Their subject matter is often similar: lions, bears, scenes of the mysterious deep, or like in figure four, a Grand Canyon sunset. IMAX's frequent adoption of 3D still further connects the two mediums, though even the 2D IMAX film gives the perception of a third dimension by surrounding the audience's field-of-view.

Interestingly, Louis Daguerre, a man most well known for his invention of the daguerreotype, an early type of photography, was also a panorama artist and the inventor of the diorama. Daguerre is not a name found in most film histories because his work predates moving pictures by a half century. Still, his work is seminal in binding art to science, the natural to the technological, and in changing human relationships to the image. His legacies in photography and diorama developed along separate paths, but seemingly run parallel. When they converge with portrayals of nature, the rhetoric exemplified by the Hudson School and Disney is clearly present in each. On a visit to the American Natural History Museum in New York, it is fascinating to consider the extent to which Daguerre's techniques of the mid-19th century have been developed and directed towards nature.

The images in figure four make one last connection between the "cinema of attractions" and the role of technology in natural history film exhibition. The caption mentions that the figure on the left is a diorama from Disneyland. Gunning explains that his use of the term "attraction" comes from the coinage of Eisenstein, who was associating an analysis of the theater to an amusement park ride.³⁷ The correlation of an actual amusement park ride to an IMAX portrayal cements one last time how aptly suited the "cinema of attractions" is for speaking about the nature film genre.

The continuous re-emergence of Disney throughout this discourse is not an accident. Disney is known for its expertise in wish-fulfillment fantasies and

acts as evidence of how much more the popularity of the genre is tied to an idyllic portrayal of nature than to a scientific one. Announced in April 2008, Disney is preparing to re-invest itself into nature film production for the big screen under the new film label Disneynature.³⁸ With the producer of *Planet Earth* already signed on, the tradition of a clichéd, over-idealized nature hidden behind technological advancements and the “cinema of attractions” can be expected to continue. Though they will likely further unhealthy paradigms about nature, it can be hoped that the discourse resulting from their wide release will help to expose some of the mythologies inherent in their portrayals.

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