IMAGINATIVE EMBODIMENT: A STRATEGY FOR INCORPORATING

NONHUMAN AGENCY IN NATURE FILMS

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis paper and film to Sarah Sydney Lane and Sherry and Horace Roqueta.

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ABSTRACT

The natural history filmmaking genre is the primary strand of documentary cinema that features narratives about wildlife, the environment, and nature issues. However, the genre has adopted storytelling and filmmaking conventions that express anthropocentrism, a hierarchical worldview that values human rationality and morality as superior to nonhuman nature. Natural history films tend to either negatively anthropomorphize animals by projecting uniquely human emotions or morals onto them (anthropomorphic error) as a way to increase view identification, or avoid anthropomorphism altogether in favor of objective human-perspective narration that depicts nonhuman nature as mechanistic and void of any creative, intentional, or active experience.

In this paper I argue how imaginative embodiment, or anthropomorphizing a nonhuman with an informed and expressed attentiveness to their biology and sensory capacities, can be a useful strategy that gives agency to animals in film while committing minimal anthropomorphic error. I use the films, *GREEN* (2011), *Bear 71* (2012), and my thesis film *SUN BEAR* (2015) as case studies to explore how cinematic language and voiceover narration imaginative embodiment strategies can be crafted in ways that express the point of view, intentionality, and agency of nonhuman others in an ethical manner. Imaginatively embodying an animal through cinematic language and voiceover narration allows viewers to ethically consider the moral status of a nonhuman other without having to negatively anthropomorphize them, describe them as being human-like, or lose their agency and intentional stance in objectifying scientific language. An ethically important aspect of using imaginative embodiment to tell stories of the natural world is that it supports an environmental ethic that appreciates the vast entanglement of agentive life forces and helps to abolish repressive human-animal or culture-nature binaries in favor of an environmental ethic expressive of biocentric sensibilities. As the natural history genre of documentary filmmaking continues its evolution as the major media outlet representing, educating, and telling stories about nature, wildlife, and environmental issues, imaginative embodiment can be a useful tool for incorporating agentive first-person nonhuman experiences in non-fiction cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The natural history filmmaking genre is the primary strand of documentary cinema that features narratives about wildlife, the environment, and nature issues. A film's narrative can be told through the use of narration (omniscient narrator, on-screen character, text), formal cinematic techniques (cinematography, editing, sound), or a combination of both (Bordwell 58, 79, 117). Therefore, since narrative can only be communicated through spoken language, which animals do not have, or through the cinematic apparatus which has been modeled after the human eye and must be operated by humans (Corbett 129), it can be argued that nature films are inherently anthropocentric and any animal's appearance in them will have at some point been humanized or anthropomorphized (attributing human characteristics or behaviors to nonhumans). Primarily produced for television, nature films evolved over the last century into an entertainment-based industry that incorporates animal-storytelling techniques that negatively anthropomorphize animals, or in other terms commit what Fredrik Karlsson in his article *Critical Anthropomorphism and Animal Ethics* refers to as anthropomorphic error: the projection of uniquely human emotions or moral values onto nonhuman others to explain their behavior (709). Interspersed between facts about a species' ecology, a voice-of-god omniscient narrator or onscreen presenter will use animals, similar to fables, as stand-ins for human actors that reaffirm Western notions of family and work ethics (Bouse 163). The problematic projection of Western cultural values onto wildlife is believed to increase viewer identification amongst general television-watchers (Bouse 1; Horak 462). In fright of loosing viewers, nature films regularly sacrifice an honest

depiction of nature for one that is more entertaining, appealing, and generally relatable to humans. As the natural history film genre continues its evolution as the primary source of nature representations in film, it becomes increasingly important to adopt new storytelling and filmmaking strategies that embody the experiences of nonhumans without committing anthropomorphic error in order to portray a more accurate rendition of an other being's life.

One such tactic for deciphering the stories of nonhuman nature without carelessly projecting uniquely human emotions or morals onto them is through a practice of imaginative embodiment. Imaginative embodiment is an ethical practice of keen attentiveness that allows for "'empathetic access to the meaning implicit in an animal's postures, gestures, and behavior'" when combined with a background knowledge of the animal's biology and sensory capacities (Kenneth Shapiro qtd. in Warkentin 109). When practicing imaginative embodiment, anthropomorphism is only used to make the nonhuman's experience communicable. If various practices of anthropomorphism were laid out on a spectrum, there would be unethical uses of anthropomorphism that result in anthropomorphic error on one end (such as how animals are depicted in fables or animated Disney movies) and on the other end there would be more ethical uses of anthropomorphism, such as imaginative embodiment, that can be valuable for communicating a nonhuman's experience more honestly. When practicing imaginative embodiment, the human/filmmaker becomes a vehicle for communicating the other's approximated experience without committing anthropomorphic error. Whereas traditional nature films promote an anthropocentric ethic where "animals can only be given moral

consideration if they are shown to be human-like" (Warkentin 104), imaginative embodiment gives agency to nonhumans, allows them to represent themselves, and uses film language and narration as empathic devices allowing viewers to place moral consideration on nonhumans without a film's human-character committing anthropomorphic error or projecting uniquely human emotions and morals onto the animal.

To better understand how the technique of imaginative embodiment can be practically applied to the documentary genre of natural history filmmaking, I will analyze how film language is wielded to embody an orangutan's subjective flash-back experiences in *GREEN (2011)*, directed by Patrick Rouxel, and how imaginative embodiment can be used to voice the experience of a grizzly bear trying to survive in a modern world in the interactive documentary *Bear 71 (2012)* directed by Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes. I will also explore how I used cinematic language and voiceover narration to imaginatively embody a sun bear in my thesis film, *SUN BEAR (2015)*.

CHAPTER ONE

AN EXERCISE OF IMAGINATIVE EMBODIMENT: USING FILM
LANGUAGE TO APPROXIMATE THE EXPERIENCE
OF A NONHUMAN IN GREEN (2011)

Falling into Bill Nichol's "expository mode" of documentary filmmaking, natural

history films have developed a number of storytelling conventions that rely on third-

person omniscient narration or on-screen expert interviews to provide narrative rather

than utilize classic film language to tell the film's story (Nichols 107). In other words,

nature films are nothing more than commentary making sense of disparate shots of nature

and wildlife (Horak 462). While an objective stance can be useful for explaining animal

behaviors, concepts, or ideas, it sacrifices the transformative power of cinematic language

that allows us to see and hear from the other's perspective. As Michael Rabiger

eloquently discuses film's transformative power in his book *Directing the Documentary*:

"[film language] exists so we can vicariously experience realities other than our own and

connect emotionally with lives, situations, and issues otherwise inaccessible" (Rabiger

51). Rather than being told from an outside perspective, cinematic storytelling techniques

can place us into the mind of a film's character so we can empathize and experience their

subjective reality. Similar to how fiction films use cinematic language to aid our

understanding of other people and cultures, *GREEN* extends film language's empathetic

reach to a nonhuman and allows viewers to consider its sensorial experience not as lesser

than or inferior to our own human experience, but on the same level as we human

animals experience our world.

GREEN (2011), directed by Patrick Rouxel, is a documentary about the devastating impacts deforestation and land clearing for palm oil plantations has on wildlife in Indonesia. Rather than utilizing expert interviews, human-perspective omniscient narration, or other storytelling conventions common to natural history filmmaking to tell this story, Rouxel exercises imaginative embodiment through the sole use of cinematic language (cinematography, sound, editing) to approximate the experience of an orangutan suffering from habitat loss. The film abides to a rigid form where sensorial stimuli (such as natural objects, sounds, and physical contact) in a wildlife rehabilitation center provoke Green, an adult female orangutan suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, to be reminded of a life once lived free in a rainforest and the process of its ultimate destruction. In this chapter I will provide examples of how the cinematic techniques of point-of-view cinematography and continuity editing are used to create subjective flashback sequences from Green's perspective, why these flashback sequences express attentiveness rather than anthropomorphic error, and the ethical importance of considering a nonhuman's perspective in film.

Despite the fact that the camera apparatus has been designed to mimic the human eye and must be operated by humans, it is still possible to imaginatively embody a nonhuman's experience through cinematic language. Similar to how classic Hollywood films use point-of-view shots and continuity editing to provide access into a character's mind or experience (Brown 10), *GREEN* applies these same techniques to an orangutan. The first example of how point-of-view cinematography and continuity editing techniques are used to simulate an orangutan's subjective flashback experience occurs

just 35 seconds into the film and can best be explained through a shot by shot analysis. An establishing shot, from a voyeuristic perspective, shows green lying on a cot hooked up to an intravenous therapy (IV) machine in a fairly empty room of a wildlife rehabilitation center. The following shot is a close-up of Green's face waking up and looking around at her new, unfamiliar, surroundings. We see Green's eyes look upwards at the ceiling just before the film cuts to a slanted composition (dutch-tilt) point-of-view (POV) shot where we now see the room from Green's perspective. In traditional Hollywood films the close-up, POV, reaction shot formula would be enough to situate the viewer from the on-screen character's perspective, but because it is uncommon to see from the perspective of a nonhuman, I would argue the filmmaker used dutch-tilts to emphasize the switch in point of view due to its out-of-the-ordinary composition. Following this initial POV shot there is a quick succession of other tilted shots to further emphasize Green's perspective followed by upright, more-traditional, well-composed shots for a better viewing experience. We see a shot of a gecko half-hidden behind a clock and liquid slowly dripping within the tubes of the IV machine. The flashback occurs when the dripping IV is juxtaposed with a shot of water dripping from a mushroom in the forest. Since we are seeing from Green's perspective, this match-cut (when a shot is replaced with a similar looking shot) tells us that the dripping IV has in fact made Green recall what life was like in the forest before the habitat was destroyed and before she ended up at the rehabilitation center. Following the mushroom shot is a multi-minute montage of scenery and wildlife native to Indonesian rainforests that visualizes Green's memory and provides the viewer with a visual representation of what

"virgin" rainforests look like. Abandoning the conventional and objective techniques of natural history films and cultivating a bit of anthropomorphism, the film's director was able to use cinematic language to imaginatively embody the subjective thoughts and experience of an orangutan suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder using point-of-view cinematography and match-cut continuity editing techniques.

However, imaginatively embodying a non-human other is more than just cinematically telling the story from their perspective; it requires full attentiveness to their biology and sensorial capacities in order to present their perspective ethically without committing anthropomorphic error. Wild orangutans typically exist in places void of any development or human-made structures, so when filming from Green's perspective in the rehabilitation center it makes sense that we would see images that appeal to what an orangutan would seek out in an unfamiliar and unnatural setting. For example, we are shown natural objects such as the gecko and the dripping liquid in the IV, images similar to what Green would see in the forest. If the filmmaker was filming inattentively, or anthropocentrically, he might have chose to film other details in the room that would mimic a human's experience in a similar situation. For example, doors, windows, technological equipment – objects a person feeling trapped, or taken advantage of, in an unknown place might look for. The filmmaker appeals to the sensory capacities of the orangutan versus that of the human. Another example of embodied attentiveness can be understood by analyzing the shooting style of the pre-deforestation montage that Green recalled after observing the dripping IV. Most natural history films employ specialized camera moves, effects, or "never before seen footage" when filming wildlife and scenery

to make it seem more interesting or explosive of action (Bouse 4). However in Green's recollection of the forest, none of the shots have specialized movement or unique animal behaviors. The shots themselves are not necessarily POV shots from Green's perspective, but since they are relatively mundane, showing the quotidian life of the forest compared to the shock and awe of traditional wildlife filmmaking, the montage is attentive to what an orangutan's memory of the forest might in fact look like.

Another example of how point-of-view cinematography, continuity editing, and attentiveness to orangutan biology and sensorial capacities are used to imaginatively embody the experience of Green recalling life in the forest takes place at 08:40. From a wide-shot voyeuristic perspective, we see a male veterinarian in the rehabilitation center gently scratching and rubbing Green's arm, nurturing her during her last days. A close up of the scratching reveals that Green is relaxingly holding onto the wrist of the veterinarian. Still being filmed from an objective perspective, a medium shot shows Green focusing on her arm being rubbed. The next shot is then matched and juxtaposed with a shot of a wild mother orangutan gently rubbing the face of her child in the forest, followed by another non-eccentric montage of wildlife and rainforest scenery. Without the use of a POV shot, the match cut is able to suggest to the viewer that Green might be recalling her life once lived wild in the forest due to the similarity between human-orangutan and orangutan-orangutan body contact. The filmmaker anthropomorphizes Green using classic Hollywood film language to suggest orangutans recall memories based on sensorial stimuli similar to how sights and sounds trigger humans to remember past events.

The cinematic techniques used to embody Green's memory in the above example remain attentive rather than exhibiting anthropomorphic error. Because adult orangutans in the wild experience minimal body contact with other wildlife besides their young (National Geographic), it makes sense the veterinarian's rubbing would trigger Green to recall a past experience when similar physical contact was made with her offspring. In this scene, viewers are presented with an opportunity to relate and consider orangutans as agential beings in an ethical manner based on the expressed attentiveness to an orangutan's sensorial experience. A human spectator might sympathetically project that Green is yearning to be reunited with her offspring, but this would be anthropomorphizing Green's experience with our own human-created moral attributes of motherhood. It would be anthropomorphic error to assume that Green "misses" her child in this human way since it is unknown whether orangutans miss or long for their offspring at all. However, imaginative embodiment, an ethical practice of anthropomorphism, can reveal isomorphisms, or the revelation that there are similarities that echo between the human and nonhuman world (Bennett 99). In this example, cinematic language with an expressed attentiveness to orangutan sensorial capacities and biology allows viewers to draw their own conclusions on orangutan emotional complexity based on its similarity to our own but without the blind, unethical, projection or assumption that they are completely the same.

The embodied flashback sequences in *GREEN* are not only created using match-cuts of visual images but also that of sound. The first flashback sequence that uses sound-based match-cuts develops at 10:41 at the end of the previous forest recollection

sequence. The natural sounds of the forest are crossfaded with sounds of a weed-whacker followed by an abrupt cut where we see Green laying on her cot from an objective perspective. After waking up from the harsh sound, her head tilts back so she can get a visual of the weed whacker. The film cuts to a dutch-tilt POV shot where we see a maintenance worker trimming grass outside of Green's rehabilitation room. The film cuts back to an objective shot of Green stressed out wrapping a blanket around her head and covering her ears with her arm to block out the noise. There is another dutch-tilt POV shot of the maintenance worker followed by a close-up of the weed whacker. The sound of a chainsaw slowly fades in and a match cut replaces the close-up weed whacker shot with a chainsaw cutting through an old growth tree. We then experience a 4-minute montage showing the complete process of big timber turning into wood products that are eventually sold to consumers around the world.

When exercising imaginative embodiment, paying close attention to the non-human's gestures and actions is important for an ethical representation of the other's experience. Showing attentiveness to Green's uncomfortable reaction to the weed whacker's unfamiliar sound allows for an ethical stretch to assume that an orangutan would also be discomforted by the sound of chainsaws and other aggressive machinery. Having evolved in a forest for thousands of years without such obtrusive-mechanized sounds, it would seem biologically accurate that orangutans would be sensitive to such abrasive sounds. Once again, without objective voice-of-god commentary or on-screen interviews, the filmmaker used film language aided by an attentiveness to gestures and actions to showcase the troublesome effects deforestation for palm oil expansion has on

wildlife through the imaginatively embodied subjective experience of an orangutan character.

Overall, *GREEN* demonstrates how natural history films can incorporate classic Hollywood cinematic storytelling techniques to imaginatively embody and portray the subjective experience of a nonhuman. Whereas traditional nature films tell us what to think about animals and their experiences from an objective stance, *GREEN* allows viewers to consider the experience of a nonhuman subjectively. Despite incorporating a certain amount of imagination, or empathetic reach, imaginative embodiment allows viewers to better connect and understand animals at a level of complexity than biology, ecology, or ethology terminology can make possible (Karlsson 711). Imaginatively embodying an animal through cinematic language allows viewers to ethically consider the moral status of a nonhuman other without having to negatively anthropomorphize them, describe them as being human-like, or lose their agency and intentional stance in objectifying scientific language. Imaginative embodiment provokes viewers to acknowledge the intentionality of nonhuman nature without the narcissistic projection of uniquely human emotions or morals. However, imaginative embodiment isn't restricted to non-verbal cinematic language and can be used to voice non-human other's experiences as well. In chapter two I will analyze how imaginative embodiment is used to give voice to a grizzly bear in the interactive documentary *Bear 71*.

CHAPTER TWO

AN EXERCISE OF IMAGINATIVE EMBODIMENT: USING VOICEOVER
NARRATION TO APPROXIMATE THE EXPERIENCE OF
A NONHUMAN IN *BEAR 71* (2012)

Bear 71 (2012) directed by Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes, is an interactive

online documentary narrated from the perspective of a grizzly bear who communicates

the difficulties wildlife experience trying to survive amidst an expanding human

civilization. The cinematic form of the film breaks conventions of traditional

documentary filmmaking in that there is no *film* to sit down and watch. Instead, viewers

enter a website where they can explore a digital representation of Banff National Park,

also known as "The Grid" as the film's narrator, Bear 71, likes to call it. Using your

computer mouse and keyboard you can explore 'the grid' and follow Bear 71's

movements while also clicking on webcams that allow you to see other human users on

the website (Hutter). However, despite its interactive elements, *Bear 71* uses a narrative

storytelling device that is common to documentary films: voice-over narration. The 20-

minute narration track in *Bear 71* isn't interactive like the rest of the film and "behaves"

like a traditional film. You can pause, fast-forward, and rewind without changing the

narrative structure of the film. *GREEN* was an excellent case study to show how

cinematic language can be used to imaginatively embody a nonhuman animal since it was

free from narration, on-screen interviews, or other narrative devices. In contradistinction,

Bear 71 lacks cinematic elements and is therefore an excellent case study to examine how

imaginative embodiment can be used to *voice* the experience of nonhuman others in film.

This chapter will analyze how incorporating information outside a grizzly's mental

awareness and attentiveness to biology and sensory capacities can be used to voice an

embodied experience of a nonhuman other while minimally committing anthropomorphic

error.

In order to paint a more vivid picture of what life is like for a grizzly bear trying

to survive in an expanding human world, the narration in *Bear 71* provides traditional

expository information alongside grizzly bear idiosyncrasies. Rather than only voicing

thoughts and behaviors a grizzly bear would experience, outside information is used to

place the grizzly bear experience into an understandable context. For example, the first

use of incorporating outside information takes place when a user enters the website and is

forced to watch a sequence of video clips documenting the capture and collaring of a

grizzly bear:

> That snare had a breaking strength of two tons. The dart was full of something
> called Telazol, brought to you Pfizer, the same people who make Zoloft and
> Viagra. Next thing I know, I'm wearing a VHF collar and have my own radio
> frequency. They also gave me a number. I'm Bear 71. (Allison, *Bear 71*)

To put these thoughts into human language is anthropomorphism, but rather than

sensationalize the grizzly bear's experience, the narration remains sensitive to the

bewildering experience a grizzly bear must feel when being tranquilized and tagged by

scientists. To imaginatively embody this experience, the narration includes information

that a grizzly bear would not be able to know, but information that makes the situation

relatable since it is bewildering, for us humans, to learn that the company that makes

sexual stimulants and anti-depressants also makes a wildlife tranquilizer. Another

example of incorporating expository information that is outside of a grizzly bear's ability

to know is when Bear 71 describes the story's setting: "This is Banff National Park, in the heart of the Canadian Rockies. At least, that's one way you can look at it. I call it "The Grid." Bears and humans here live closer together than any other place on earth" (Allison*, Bear 71*). Once again, it is not likely that a grizzly bear would be cognizant of the fact Banff National Park has the highest density of humans and grizzly bears compared to other places. However, since human-wildlife interactions are some of the most life-threatening experiences a grizzly bear could have, this fact helps voice a very real concern a grizzly bear would have when living in such dense situations. Providing added information outside of a grizzly bear's ability to know doesn't distract from Bear 71's embodiment, rather it helps place her experience into a greater context.

Another technique that is used in Bear 71 to further embody the experience of a grizzly bear is incorporating grizzly bear biology and sensory capacities into the dialogue. The first example of incorporating biology into the dialogue is when Bear 71 discusses the difficulty of existing in such a populated area:

> My own home range is around a town called Canmore. Now, that town has doubled in size over the past decade, and it gets about five million tourists a year. It's not like I can tiptoe around it all. I need 500 square kilometers just to find enough food to raise my cubs. (Allison, *Bear 71*)

Using appeals to a grizzly bear's ecological behavior helps visualize what a grizzly bear's life experience is like. Many people may be under the assumption that grizzly bears can simply adjust to expanding development, but because of geographically determined food availability, large mammals need to occupy vast areas to support their necessary caloric intake. Without framing a grizzly bear's experience biologically, a human viewer might not fully understand the challenges a grizzly bear is faced with when trying to survive in

a heavily developed area. Imaginative embodiment, or anthropomorphizing a grizzly bear with a human voice and access to factual information, allows the grizzly bear experience to become communicable in an ethical manner as long as there is an informed and expressed attentiveness to a grizzly bear's sensorial experience and biology.

To further explain how grizzly bear biology is used to make Bear 71's embodiment understandable is when she discusses how human encroachment has effected grizzly bear behavior: "We've been pushed into the mountains. Thing is, you can take the grizzly out of the prairie, but you can't take the prairie out of the grizzly. If you take us by surprise, we don't look around for a tree to climb. We take what's coming, head on" (Allison, *Bear 71*). This statement is used to place the "aggressive" behaviors of grizzlies into a historical context while also contributing to a more complex embodiment of modern grizzly life. Due to thousands of years of evolution in relatively open areas, grizzly bears have adapted behavioral response to "fight" in a flight-or-flight situation (Paige). These ecological and biological appeals create a compounding effect when trying to embody the heightened experience of a modern grizzly bear. In *Bear 71*, imaginative embodiment isn't used for the sole purpose of making a grizzly bear understandable, but to also communicate its current active experience of having to modify millions of years of evolution in order to exist in an ever-growing and expanding human world.

In order to imaginatively embody the heightened experience of grizzly bears learning new behaviors in order to survive in a rapidly changing environment, *Bear 71* uses appeals to grizzly bear sensory capacities in a context that explores their intentional stance. Embodying the nonhuman other as an intentional agent while also incorporating

grizzly bear biology and appeals to sensorial capacities is made clear in the following

example:

> A human being can't smell a baby elk, because a baby elk has hardly any smell at
> all. That's how they protect themselves. But I can smell them. A grizzly bear can
> smell a baby elk about as well as you can hear a pin drop. The trouble is, I have to
> hunt those baby elk in a valley full of smells that were never here before,
> deodorant and dog food and marshmallows and antifreeze. Every morning the
> smell of hash browns rises up like a mushroom cloud. Do you see what I'm
> saying? The first rule of survival is, don't do what comes naturally. Of course it's
> not going to be easy. (Allison, *Bear 71*)

In the above example, imaginative embodiment makes a grizzly bear's sensorial

experience tangible and her reaction to it intentional. Humans are a visual species

whereas grizzly bears are an olfactory one. Since it would be very difficult to express

through language what a grizzly bear's olfactory experience truly is like, the use of

analogies makes it contextually understandable do to its comparison against our own

sensorial experience. Notwithstanding thousands of years of evolving an acute sense of

smell, the above example embodies the fact that grizzly bears are now tasked with

actively modifying their instinctual behavioral responses to assimilate into a rapidly

growing and dynamic world. This example unveils the ideological transformative power

of imaginative embodiment because it undermines the anthropocentric notion that

animals are unintentional instinctually programmed machines. The intentionality of a

grizzly bear's modern experience living in an exponentially growing wildland-urban

interface is made increasingly understandable in the following byte of narration: "what I

really want you to understand is this: I was a good bear. I didn't knock over anyone's

garbage cans. I didn't break into anyone's mobile home. I raised three sets of cubs eating

berries and hunting invisible elk in a valley that smells like hash browns" (Allison, *Bear*

71). In the past, grizzly bears were top predators with no other animal serving as a limiting factor, however, in modern times grizzly bears are forced to learn new behaviors: "They'll have to learn not to do what comes naturally, and I wonder. Maybe the lesson is too hard," says Bear 71 talking about her cubs (Allison*, Bear 71*). These examples demonstrate how attentiveness to grizzly bear biology and sensory capacities can build off another, creating a more complex approximation of a grizzly bear's active experience of trying to adapt to a modern world.

Bear 71 exemplifies how imaginative embodiment can be used to narrate a story from a nonhuman other's perspective. Imaginative embodiment is by no means the only method that could have been used to inform audiences of the ramifications an expanding modern world has on grizzly bear populations. However, using imaginative embodiment and presenting nonhumans as active creatures can help modify an anthropocentric worldview into one expressive of biocentric sensibilities. *Bear 71* turns grizzly bears, which would have been abstract passive victims into active creatures trying to find their new place in a developing landscape. As Jane Bennett discusses the potential benefits of an ethical use of anthropomorphism in her book *Vibrant Matter*:

> Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and [animal], and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman "environment." (120)

The human-twist of embodying a grizzly bear's experience using voiceover narration helps the film's human audience to see outside of oneself and identify with the struggles, lifestyle, and body of another being without human emotional, ethical, and moral prejudices. The directors of *Bear 71* chose to utilize a prose-based pragmatic narration in

order to make a grizzly bear's experience easily understandable and approachable. Nonetheless, as imaginative embodiment grows into a common filmmaking device it would be interesting to see a poetic rendition of an animal's experience presented in voiceover narration which may more-closely resemble a nonhuman other's thought pattern than that of prose due to a greater appeal to senses and visual experience. Chapter three will analyze how I used voiceover narration to imaginatively embody a sun bear based on their sensorial experience without the incorporation of human facts and other expository information.

CHAPTER THREE

APPLYING IMAGINATIVE EMBODIMENT STRATEGIES IN *SUN BEAR* (2015)

Ethical theorists and a growing number of natural history film critics treat anthropomorphism as a universal problem and reject its practice when attempting to communicate or explain animal behavior for fear of misrepresenting nonhuman nature and misdirecting empathy away from the animal towards that of the human (Karlsson, 710) (Plumwood, 57). However, the complete avoidance of anthropomorphism, or the blatant disregard to see human emotions, behaviors, or intentionality reflected in nonhuman nature supports the rationalist and anthropocentric paradigm that humans are ranked as morally, emotionally, or intellectually superior to nonhuman nature. As Jane Bennett argues in her book *Vibrant Matter*: "Too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency" (Bennett 120). In support of this anthropocentric paradigm, natural history films represent animals as objects operating mechanically under "natural instincts" with no creative, intentional, or active experience. Animal agency is lost in the objectifying language of the objective scientist or human-perspective voice of god narrator. However, as discussed in chapter one and two's analysis of *GREEN* and *Bear 71*, practicing imaginative embodiment in natural history films has the power to represent nonhuman others as agential, intentional, and non-mechanistic creatures. Imaginative embodiment, also commonly referred to as critical anthropomorphism, is "necessary in order to study animals as living subjects rather than machines" (Karlsson

711). Imaginative embodiment, an ethical form of anthropomorphism, can undermine the anthropocentrism wrought throughout the genre and replace it with biocentric sensibilities that promote a relational ontology of interconnected coexistence. The application of a human voice, or the rendition of an animal's experience using cinematic language, "is not necessarily the sign of an anthropocentric and hierarchical vision but can be a narrative expedient intended to stress the agentic power of [nonhuman nature]" (Oppermann, 82). Imaginative embodiment, or anthropomorphizing a nonhuman with an informed and expressed attentiveness to their biology and sensory capacities, can be a useful strategy that gives agency to animals in film, allowing viewers to see and hear their perspective without committing anthropomorphic error, or projecting uniquely human emotions or morals onto them.

My thesis film, *SUN BEAR,* explores the detrimental effects palm oil expansion, traditional Asian medicine, and the illegal pet trade have on sun bear populations in Southeast Asia. Instead of following traditional natural history film conventions such as relying on interviews with scientists and conservationists while sun bears appear in the film as objectified backdrop images, I chose to tell *SUN BEAR*'s story from the imaginatively embodied first-person perspective of a sun bear in an overall attempt to give agency to the species. As explored in *GREEN* and *Bear 71*, there are multiple strategies that can be used to imaginatively embody and tell the story of a nonhuman in film – cinematic language used to simulate an orangutan's memories of the forest in *GREEN* and voiceover narration that includes a certain level of human knowledge in order to embody the life of a grizzly bear in *Bear 71*. In order to imaginatively embody

the experience of a sun bear in my thesis film, I chose to utilize voiceover narration that strictly adheres to a sun bear's sensorial experience, avoids the inclusion of expository information outside a sun bear's mental capacity, and incorporates instances of point of view continuity editing techniques to further enhance the subjective embodiment of the bear.

The strategy of using an imaginatively embodied first person narration in present tense allows viewers to witness firsthand what it may be like for a sun bear to experience poaching, the highly unnatural event of land conversion, and captivity. Based on Traci Warkentin's *Interspecies Etiquette* article, the purpose of imaginative embodiment is to translate an animal's experience into a communicable human form as a way for us to better understand and empathize with the experience of the other (110). In order to imaginatively embody and portray a subjective sensorial experience of sun bear experience in film, I had to emotionally, mentally, and physically try to "become," or bodily comport into a sun bear. With attentiveness to sun bear behavior, biology, and sensory capacities, I abandoned my human-perspective biases (to the best of my ability) got down on all fours (figuratively) and imaginatively embodied the life of a sun bear so my voice could become a vehicle for communicating a sun bear's experience. The anthropomorphized first-person voiceover narration in *SUN BEAR* allows viewers to enter the mind of a sun bear and experience what poaching and other unnatural events may be like through their eyes, ears, and memories, which gives the sun bear more agency in the film than traditional storytelling conventions make possible.

Largely due to the fact that there was no traditional film or video element to *Bear 71*, the voiceover narration often included expository information outside a grizzly bear's ability to know in order to add more depth and context to the embodied grizzly bear experience. As analyzed in chapter two, including "outside information" can be a useful strategy for imaginatively embodying the experience of a nonhuman, however, I wanted to experiment with the opposite in *SUN BEAR*. Since *SUN BEAR* has a visual component that can help communicate information, I chose to portray the life of a sun bear based solely on their sensorial experience while avoiding information outside of their mental capacity. Since a sun bear would not know what the illegal pet trade is, what palm oil production is, or what traditional Asian medicine is, this type of terminology was avoided in the film's voiceover narration. Aside from the opening and closing informative text slides, the film's narration strictly adheres to the sensorial experience of a sun bear. There is a text slide in the beginning of the film that tells the viewer the film's location and what type of bear species the film is about. At the end of the film there are a few statistical text slides that specifically address the rate at which palm oil expansion, the illegal pet trade, and traditional Asian medicine practices affect wild sun bear populations.

An example of how I attempted to depict a conservation issue through the sensorial experience of a sun bear rather than use traditional conventions of sit-down interviews or human perspective objective language occurs at the 2-minute mark when we see a sun bear walking through the forest searching for food. The narration in this sequence reads:

> I didn't always walk the forest alone. I had a mother and brother once. We used to rip open logs and dig for earthworms together. But one-day mom's foot got stuck in a snare. I was off eating fruit when I heard gunshots ricochet through the trees. I saw my mom leave the forest in a bag that day and my brother in a small metal cage. (Roqueta, *SUN BEAR*)

In this constructed recollection of a poaching event, the sun bear is obviously anthropomorphized; I gave the sun bear a human voice and there is an inherent projection of sadness and mourning. However, the anthropomorphism used to imaginatively embody the sun bear experience in this scene remains ethical due to an expressed attentiveness to sun bear biology, sensory capacities, and behavior from personal experience. Biologically this example remains attentive since sun bear cubs are usually born two at a time and walk alongside their mother for up to two years learning how to forage and survive before embracing a solitary lifestyle (Wong). With regard to sensory experience, I incorporate descriptions of how a sun bear may experience a poaching event auditorily (startling gunshots) and visually (seeing the brother and mother taken away). The embedded sadness and feelings of loss projected onto the bear are not uniquely human emotions based on personal stories from my experience helping to reintroduce a young sun bear cub back into the wild. The primary caretaker of the bear I was helping to reintroduce initially went into the forest with two sibling cubs. The caretaker felt the cubs had established a territory after walking with them through the forest for a few months and decided to let them roam wild at night rather than cage them. Unfortunately, the caretaker discovered the male cub disemboweled in the morning, most likely from an encounter with a territorial male bear. The sibling cub was found in a tree above the carcass and refused to come down or eat food for over a week. Based on the situation and

the behavioral knowledge learned by coexisting with another species in a wild setting, it can be argued the bear was mourning the loss of her brother. When cubs are taken from the wild the mother is usually shot in the process and the innocent, non-aggressive cubs are caged and taken as pets. The bear I helped to reintroduce had experienced the loss of her mother and brother and was feeling an emotion we humans can only understand as some sort of mix of sadness, fear, depression, or mourning. When any sort of emotion is projected onto nonhuman nature, an alarm will sound and critics will be fast to claim anthropomorphic error. However, as I explained in chapter one's analysis of *GREEN*, imaginative embodiment has the potential to reveal isomorphisms, or similarities between human and nonhuman nature. In this example and throughout the film, I imaginatively embody how a sun bear may experience various conservation issues through an anthropomorphized first-person perceptive voiceover narration based on an expressed and informed understanding of sun bear biology, sensory capacities, and behaviors stemming from personal experiences. My intention for imaginatively embodying sun bears through their sensorial experience without incorporating an additional layer of human knowledge, as described in chapter two's analysis of *Bear 71,* I believe more realistically portrays the sun bear experience in film which in turn allows viewers to more honestly and ethically empathize with sun bears.

To further the *SUN BEAR*'s empathetic potential, I chose to employ instances of point of view continuity editing. As discussed in the analysis of *GREEN* in Chapter one, POV continuity editing enables viewers to temporarily become the character in the film and witness events through that character's eyes and ears. One example of POV

continuity editing in *SUN BEAR* is just after we see a sun bear climb a tree to eat honey.

We see the sun bear finish with the hive and look at the camera. A POV shot reveals a red

leaf monkey jumping onto a branch also looking at the camera. The use of POV

continuity editing temporarily transports us into a sun bear's subjective world where we

experience the interaction sun bears may have with other animal life in the forest.

Another example of how cinematic language was used to further the imaginative

embodiment of a sun bear takes place during the deforestation for palm oil sequence.

Accompanying an aerial shot of a forest surrounded by palm oil plantations the voiceover

narration reads: "The forest is too small now. Fruit is scarce. I am forced to leave or

starve" (*SUN BEAR*). We see a sun bear walking in the forest followed by a steadicam

reaction shot that simulates a sun bear walking through a palm oil plantation while the

voiceover reads: "But can I live here…" (*SUN BEAR*)? The combination of voiceover

and match-cut POV continuity editing techniques creates the illusion that we are

experiencing the inside of a palm oil plantation for the first time similar to how a sun bear

would. The transformative power of imaginatively embodying a nonhuman through

cinematic language is that it allows us to transcend the self and enter a relational ontology

of being with the nonhuman. The camera apparatus creates an illusion where the

constructs of human and animal are conflated. The collapsing of human-animal and

human-nature binaries temporarily abolishes constructed power dynamics and enables the

viewer to consider animals as active agents rather than passive and victimized objects.

I believe *SUN BEAR's* strategy of combining highly subjective voiceover

narration, avoiding objective or scientific discourse, and incorporating instances of

classic film language editing techniques results in a practice of imaginative embodiment that depicts the sun bear experience in an ethical and realistic manner. Despite the obvious anthropomorphism of giving the sun bear a human voice and rendition through a humanized camera apparatus, the strict adherence and attentiveness to sun bear biology and sensory capacities enables viewers to acknowledge, appreciate, and understand the struggles sun bears face in a rapidly changing environment.

CONCLUSION

As the natural history genre of documentary filmmaking continues its evolution as the major media outlet representing, educating, and telling stories about nature, wildlife, and environmental issues, imaginative embodiment can be a useful tool for incorporating first-person nonhuman experiences in non-fiction cinema. Since filmmaking was first created just over a century ago we have primarily told human stories, or stories from a human's perspective, when there are billions of other species co-habiting and affecting this planet with us. With proper attention to gestures, behaviors, and reactions combined with an understanding of the species' biology and sensory capacities, imaginative embodiment can be a useful tool to help express those stories without carelessly projecting uniquely-human emotions and morals onto nonhuman nature. An ethically important aspect of using imaginative embodiment to tell stories of the natural world is that it supports an environmental ethic that appreciates the vast entanglement of agentive life forces and helps to abolish repressive human-animal or culture-nature binaries. Whereas traditional nature films have a scientist or environmentalist speak on behalf of silent nature, imaginative embodiment attempts to give agency to nonhumans allowing them to represent themselves. "In something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs" (Bennett 109), imaginative embodiment can be a useful strategy for trying to accommodate nonhuman agency and perspective in nature films. The more we include nonhuman perspectives in film the more we can learn, open ourselves, adapt, and progress as a species that acknowledges and welcomes the multiplicity of interconnected and intentional life forces

that co-create our experience on earth. In this paper I analyzed how cinematic language and voiceover narration can be used to imaginatively embody an orangutan, grizzly bear and sun bear. As imaginative embodiment grows as a practice, it would be worth extending its use to non-charismatic, non-human like, animals and even plants or entire ecosystems in order to fully represent nonhuman nature in film.

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