

ANTHROPOMORPHIC EXPRESSION IN FIRST-PERSON
NATURAL HISTORY DOCUMENTARY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. EARLY NATURAL HISTORY FILMMAKERS AND DISCUSSION OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM.....	5
3. ANALYSIS: MARCH OF THE PENGUINS	10
4. ANALYSIS: OF PENGUINS AND MEN	15
5. ANALYSIS: MY LIFE AS A TURKEY.....	20
6. ANALYSIS: IN THE LAND OF SEA TURTLES	25
7. CONCLUSION.....	29
REFERENCES CITED.....	31

ABSTRACT

This paper argues a case for the first-person mode of address in natural history documentaries to better frame anthropomorphic interpretations by the viewer and enhance the filmmaker's creative potential. Four documentaries are analyzed to illustrate how forms of narration can influence anthropomorphic effect. I will evaluate *March of the Penguins* (United States release) and discuss how the filmmaker's use of third-person, expository narration conceals a human bias in the documentary's rhetorical construction. This narration forces anthropocentric moments onto the non-human beings that often result in "crude anthropomorphism," while at the same time over-generalizing the non-human animal experience and scientific knowledge. I will also discuss how first-person narration in documentaries is able to highlight the human bias of the author by allowing her or his subjective preoccupations to drive the storyline. In this manner, the first-person author brings emotional complexity to the documentary through the human subject, rather than uncontextualized human emotions projected onto the non-human animal. I will investigate the ways in which a first-person narration allows for different techniques to move between objective and subjective viewpoints to reveal current scientific knowledge about and behavioral understandings of the non-human animal. To this end, I will examine three first-person natural history works: *Of Penguins and Men*, *My Life as a Turkey*, and my documentary film *In the Land of Sea Turtles*. I argue that the first-person authors demonstrate greater conscientiousness to truth in the storylines chosen, values asserted, and scientific claims about non-human animals than the expository authors of *March of the Penguins*.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

An ongoing debate among natural history filmmakers is how to portray non-human animal behavior through film in a way that is accurate to the non-human animal experience yet engaging to human audiences. Studies suggest that humans create bonds with others not through altruism but through tribalism, the sense that another is “of the same stuff” as us (Ros et al. 236). To encourage this bond with the audience, natural history films may exploit the human tendency to anthropomorphize, defined in *Moving Environments* as the “projection of human emotions onto non-human beings” (Weik von Mossner 10). In many films, anthropomorphism “in its crude form...is really a way of not seeing animals in their own right at all” (Garrard 165). Today, the term *crude anthropomorphism* is used to encompass ignorant and insensitive depictions of the non-human animal (Weik von Mossner, *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film* 166).

Contemporary natural history filmmakers are often pulled between three desires: first, to be creative and entertaining (Welling 85); second, to motivate audiences to save a disappearing natural world (45); and third, to portray the non-human animal in a way that is accurate to the non-human animal’s experience of the world (Weik von Mossner, *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film* 167). The first two intentions can typically be combined into the goal of creating emotional ties between the audience and non-human animals, resulting in both profitability and action (Weik von Mossner 45). The importance of audience emotion to a film’s commercial success is described by Adam Leipzig, the president of National Geographic Films, on *Cultural Daily*. Among the lessons he learned when making *March of the Penguins* was this:

It can't be spinach. On my dinner plate, I love spinach, but people don't go to the movies to eat their vegetables. They go to escape, have an adventure, laugh, cry and experience something out of the ordinary. They go to see the world the way they want the world to be. We didn't craft *March of the Penguins* as a serious doc that would be good for you. We discovered the love story in the movie, the family story, and sold its romance.

The audience's emotional connection is also critical to their ability to apply meaning and value to the ecology of the landscape (Ingram 31). In *Moving Environments*, Weik von Mossner writes, "...filmmakers do well to engage the emotions of their viewers if they want to change their rational thinking about the ecological issues they present and encourage them to become active" (45). Establishing a strong human and non-human animal emotional connection for the audience often requires an anthropocentric anthropomorphic approach, which speaks about non-human animals through a rhetorical construction of humanity (Rowley and Johnson 828). By rhetorically portraying non-human animals as humans, the non-human animal achieves elevated status and the suggestion they should also be rights-bearers. This suggestion influences the audience to take animal rights seriously (830). Therefore, anthropocentric anthropomorphism can be used strategically in productive ways to evoke human societal action on the non-human animals' behalf (Blackfish 830).

Less understood is how these distortions may also produce negative outcomes for the non-human animal and the audience's understanding of the ecological landscape. Recognizing the dilemma, ecocriticism scholar David Whitley warns, "...one of the most vexed and complex issues within ecocriticism [is] the degree to which representations of nature that have the power to strike chords of affinity within humans tend to do so by occluding the real otherness of non-human life forms. The poetics of any art form that seem to engage imaginative empathy, as well

as understanding, at a profound level will almost inevitably have to cross and recross this boundary” (Whitley 150).

Therefore, guided by the “inevitable cross and recross” of this boundary, I make an argument for the use of the first-person mode of address in natural history films as a mode of storytelling that can more effectively reveal the anthropomorphic rhetorical construction at play in the film as well as the anthropomorphic framework that operates in human minds and cultures (Airenti 7). This paper explores and compares anthropomorphism through the lens of expository and first-person narration. *March of the Penguins* represents a voice-of-God, expository narration. *Of Penguins and Men*, *My Life as a Turkey*, and my documentary *In the Land of Sea Turtles* are first-person narrations that utilize the first-person documentary sub-frame. In *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*, Ros et al. explore the cognitive process of framing by the viewer. The first-person documentary is considered a sub-frame “which comes with its own unique set of viewer expectations and emotional affects” (225). In the first-person documentary sub-frame, the author’s perspective at times acts to guide the audience to understand that the material may be personally biased as well as performative. When used thoughtfully, first-person authors can appropriately highlight human bias in non-human animal interpretations by cueing the audience to the subjectivity of the author.

The focus of my argument is the unique ability of first-person narration to better frame anthropomorphic interpretations as those of a human author and reduce the reliance on anthropomorphic rhetorical construction within natural history films. Through the reduction in these distortions, the author may represent the non-human animal in a manner that is closer to the

author's situational as well as researched scientific understanding of the non-human animal experience while continuing to entertain audiences.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY NATURAL HISTORY FILMMAKERS
AND DISCUSSION OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The anthropomorphic debate among natural history filmmakers dates to the form's beginnings. Two early and influential practitioners of the genre are Jean Painlevé and James Algar (MacDonald 6). Painlevé, a graduate of the Sorbonne with degrees in physics, chemistry, and biology (9), created short films about natural history topics with his partner Geneviève Hamon (8) from 1928 to 1976 (Bellows, McDougall, and Berg 5, 184). Algar directed segments in several of Walt Disney's animated films (IMDb) and wrote and directed Walt Disney's first natural history film series, *True-Life Adventures*, produced between 1948 and 1960 (MacDonald 6).

Painlevé argued that to emote nothing on the natural world is a position of indifference (Bellows et al. 150). In *Science is Fiction*, Bellows et al. state Painlevé "...made a distinction between the research films created for the science community and films that popularized science for the public." Painlevé's work today would likely be described as hybrid or avant-garde, and his anthropomorphic inclinations as imbued in lyricism (Bellows et al. xviii). He modeled his approach after the avant-garde movement and was inspired by surrealist art (MacDonald 9). In Painlevé's early film *The Seahorse* (1930), the narrator explains the seahorse's mating actions: "What makes this fish even stranger is the exceptional fact that the male has a pouch on his front into which the female deposits 200 eggs in several batches. Here, multiple seahorses form a lovely balletic tableau." The narration offers scientific information with "deposits 200 eggs" then

uses the anthropomorphic phrase “lovely balletic tableau” to help the audience engage with the non-human animal, projecting ballerina dancing onto the movements of seahorses. Painlevé suggests that natural history films have a poetic license to transform reality that is beyond that of science (de Waal *Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial* 263).

In his essay *The Castration of the Documentary*, Painlevé argues that it is the filmmaker’s responsibility to “bring forth, with clear mind, your ideas and desires.” He writes, “it is unthinkable that a filmmaker would have nothing to say about his subject...are filmmakers completely devoid of new ideas or are they just spineless individuals in the pockets of producers whose sole concern is commercial?” (Bellows et al. 149).

Painlevé held close the definition of documentary formulated by the World Union of Documentary Filmmakers in 1947:

Documentary: any film that documents real phenomena or their honest and justified reconstruction in order to consciously increase human knowledge through rational or emotional means and to expose problems and offer solutions from an economic, social, or cultural point of view. (149)

Painlevé’s anthropomorphic projections led the audience members to question “ideas about how we view other species” (49). His films often look for connections between “lowly species and humanity” according to MacDonald, challenging notions that other species lack worth. MacDonald asserts that Painlevé’s non-human animal subject choices seem to “offer a challenge to conventional societal assumptions and values.” He cites Painlevé’s choice of a seahorse (where the males give birth to the young) as a means of representing that both males and females can be good parents (4–21).

In his final years, Painlevé wrote that science films were becoming commercialized, and their non-human animal construct became “artificial” and “exploitative.” He wrote,

Rivers, the sea, mountains, forests, animals, furry or fierce, are all slapped together to form a miniature eclectic bazaar, perfect for moviegoers hungry for shivers of fear or heroism while safe in their movie theater seats. Indeed, so artificial are these wild exploits, one expects them to culminate in an advertisement for a shirt that prevents rheumatism. (Bellows et al. 152)

The pushback against anthropomorphism arose as a reaction to natural history film practices as described by Painlevé and embodied in Disney’s *True-Life Adventures* series, a series of 14 short films and full-length documentaries, starting with *Seal Island* in 1948. In *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, Baker notes that Disney’s filmmaking techniques generated concerns regarding the ethical aspects of natural history filmmaking. He cites fabricated storylines about animal behavior, cruel filmic techniques, and narration that ridiculed the intelligence of the non-human, such as comical music when a polar bear cub bumbled down a steep, icy mountain slope. Baker notes that director and writer James Algar applied human viewpoints of the era to the animals’ lives, with less focus on scientific animal behavioral knowledge. For example, Algar’s 1948 film *Seal Island* includes the following narration:

But sometimes there’s trouble in paradise. For every now and then some fickle female manages to elude the watchful eye of her lord and master. This is what happens when an irate husband discovers one of his wives in a neighbor’s harem. Maybe she thought she made a mistake in her choice of master, but that makes no difference. Changing one’s mind is not a privilege up here.

The film then showed a male seal beating a female seal, picking her up by his mouth and flinging her body back and forth in the air. Algar crafts this anthropomorphic projection with human-specific words: the male seal is the female’s “husband,” the female is “one of his wives.” The

example highlights several troubling points of how representations of non-human animals can be used to “ignore seeing animals in their own right” and instead reinforce traditional values (Garrard 165). Animal rights activist Carol Adams argues that through anthropomorphism humans imagine the beast within, which can act as a “scapegoat for human wickedness” (Garrard 161).

Terminology to describe more extreme anthropomorphism (such as husband/wife when describing seals) began with a term from Steve Baker referencing Disney films, Disneyfication (Blauvelt 71). Baker describes Disneyfication as “[anthropomorphism that] seems somehow to incline towards the stereotypical and stupid, to float free from the requirements of consistency or of the greater rigor that might apply in other non-visual contexts.”

Primatologist Frans de Waal describes the naïve attribution of human qualities to animals as anthropocentric anthropomorphism. He writes, “In a tradition going back to folktales, Aesop, and La Fontaine, this kind of anthropomorphism serves human social purposes: to mock, educate, moralize, and recreate” (de Waal *Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial* 261). Both Baker and de Waal initially tied this type of anthropomorphism to misrepresenting animals as peaceful and pure. De Waal later distinguishes the innocent quality given to animals as bambification.

Anthropocentric anthropomorphism, Disneyfication, bambification, and “the beast within” are all terms coined to describe particularly problematic uses of anthropomorphism, with the term crude anthropomorphism referring to a greater extreme. “Superficial anthropomorphism” is a term used “when we interpret animal behavior as similar to human behavior based on surface appearances, predictions that are often wrong” (Lockwood 41).

Lockwood cites an example from the film *The Right Stuff*, when a chimpanzee appears to have a smile on his face once he returns from space, when it is in fact “the ‘fear grimace’ that usually accompanies an unsettling chimpanzee experience” (Lockwood 47).

Critical anthropomorphism was introduced as a term for “employing the language and concepts of human behavior carefully, consciously, empathetically, and biocentrally” (Garrard 158). In *The Cognitive Animal*, Rivas and Burghardt write, “Although it is true that we will never fully appreciate how another animal experiences the world, by doing our best to accomplish this through applying critical anthropomorphism, including the full range of available scientific data, we will get closer to understanding the life of the animal” (Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt 11).

Critical anthropomorphism is regarded as a more respectful approach to non-human animal life.

In his chapter in *Moving Environments*, Bart Welling writes,

However, as important as it is for ecocritics and animal studies scholars to attend to the damage caused by superficially anthropomorphic representations, there are good reasons for doubting that a completely ‘nonanthropomorphic relationality’ between animals is possible. If Jesús Rivas and Gordon M. Burghardt are right to suggest that anthropomorphism may be the “default condition of the human mind,” then the true challenge is not to purge ourselves of it, but to develop theories from within an inherently anthropomorphic framework that can adequately account for its powerful operations in human minds and cultures, and persuasively analyze the relationship between, on the one hand, anthropomorphic representations and perceptions of non-human beings, and, on the other, the minds and emotions of these beings themselves. (Welling 81)

Guided by current ecocriticism that sheds doubt that a completely “non-anthropomorphic relationality” between humans and animals is attainable (81), I next offer an argument for first-person narration in natural history films as a means of storytelling that can best balance the powerful anthropomorphic framework that operates in human minds and cultures.

CHAPTER THREE

ANALYSIS: *MARCH OF THE PENGUINS*

March of the Penguins, directed by Luc Jacquet and co-written by Jacquet and Jordan Roberts, was released in 2005 (IMDb). (In actuality, there was disagreement between cinematographer Laurent Chalet and Jacquet as to whether Chalet should be credited as a co-director [Most 2007].) Jacquet and Roberts create an anthropocentric rhetorical construction for the film, narrated in third person by actor Morgan Freeman. In this expository mode of storytelling, the narrator asserts an all-knowing, authoritative perspective.

In *Introduction to Documentary*, author Bill Nichols writes, “The expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and a well-supported perspective...like the authoritative manner of news anchors and reporters, strives to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as detachment, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience” (123). Nichols asserts that the expository mode implies an accurate portrayal of the non-human animal, suggesting a well-researched, authoritative perspective. *March of the Penguins* crafted human-relatable storylines for their non-human animal subjects. In *Cognitive Theory and Documentary*, Weik von Mossner quotes Stephen Rust’s article *Ecocinema and the Wildlife Film*, which notes that “familiar tropes and patterns such as the hero story, Darwinian survival plots, and sentimental human treatments of nonhuman family life have long been used to shape the narrative structures of films about such diverse animals as lemmings, dolphins, and dung beetles” (163). *March of the Penguins* utilized a Darwinian survival plot and sentimental treatments to engage the audience. The writers developed a story around the theme of love and the penguin’s tireless

effort to build and maintain the traditional family unit in the harsh environment of the arctic. As Morgan Freeman narrates, “In some ways this is a story of survival, a tale of life over death, but it’s more than that really, this is a story about love.” He elaborates, “Like most love stories, it begins with an act of utter foolishness.” A penguin then leaps out of the ocean onto the ice, sliding on the slippery surface as might be seen in a romantic comedy. Here the audience has been encouraged to form a projection of an anthropocentric love story for the penguins.

In addition to imagining an anthropocentric love story, the *March of the Penguins* narration also inspires the audience to draw moral lessons from the non-human animal’s behavior. The emperor penguin’s breeding behavior and parental investment in offspring lends itself to traditional human value systems. When a male and female arrive at the breeding grounds, both are shown having aggressive behavior. However, the female is described as fighting over the males, while the male is described as fighting for sport. The narrator states, “Because there are fewer males than females here, hostilities among the ladies are inevitable. A taken male instantly becomes an unavailable male, so occasionally a female will attempt to interrupt a courtship.” He adds, “The men don’t seem to mind, they just wait for the fight to end and take the opportunity to preen. They’re not different from us, really. They pout, they bellow, they strut, and occasionally they will engage in some contact sports.”

March of the Penguins omitted some less-endearing characteristics of penguin behavior. The featured emperor penguin is comparatively one of the more “peaceful” penguin species. While male emperor penguins depend on one another to form cooperative huddles to survive the arctic cold, king penguins are known to injure when defending their space, drawing blood, and potentially blinding other penguins (Joventin and Dobson 53). In the Adélie species,

female penguins mate indiscriminately with other males for the apparent sole purpose of distracting them so they might steal rocks out of a neighboring nest (295).

These omissions alongside documentary-style footage that appears as indexical documentation of penguin life, created audience misunderstandings that made their way into mainstream media. A newspaper article (*New York Times*, September 13, 2005) quoted conservative Michael Medved, who said the movie is “the motion picture this summer that most passionately affirms traditional norms like monogamy, sacrifice and child rearing.” Religious leaders encouraged their communities to perceive the penguin behavior presented as scientific evidence for intelligent design (Wexler 273). The penguins were assumed to showcase the religious leaders’ interpretations of God’s intentions for sexual orientation, gender roles, and abstinence. Lockwood uses the term “explanatory anthropomorphism” to describe “the trap of thinking” that occurs when there is “no attempt to verify that our explanation of a behavior is correct” (Lockwood 49).

Natural history filmmakers should consider how claims of accurate non-human animal depictions, with unacknowledged and unrecognized anthropomorphism, can be both harmful and inaccurate (Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt 10). In *Evolution’s Rainbow*, author Joan Roughgarden argues that “organizations who present nature to the public must start offering a more accurate picture” (126). She discusses scientific documentation of homosexuality found in nature, and states that “the dereliction of this responsibility has caused homosexual people to suffer persecution as a result of a false premise...and suffer low self-worth” (126).

Rebecca Wexler, in her article *Onward, Christian Penguins: Wildlife Film and the Image of Scientific Authority*, argues that the absence of scientific contextualization in *March of the*

Penguins acts to encourage anthropocentric projections. She contends that the authors framed these projections, then left certain moments intentionally ambiguous so that the viewer could affix the meaning for themselves (277). Regarding the filming style, Wexler writes, “the camera position is predominantly that of an invisible, third person perspective. Viewers easily may associate this perspective with notions of distance objectivity that often share the cultural honorific of science” (277). Wexler notes that expository natural history films about non-human animals may be stylistically indistinguishable from scientific films created for educational or research purposes. Therefore, the audience’s tendency to see natural history films about non-human animals as depictions of truth may be more deeply ingrained than in other documentary subsets.

In *March of the Penguins*, the implication that nature abides by traditional value systems may be amplified by the seemingly indexical documents captured of the penguins. The tendency of the audience to readily accept natural history films as indexical documentation is troubling, especially when films misrepresent scientific information for poetic effect. If Wexler’s observation is true, then I submit that the sub-frame of first-person films should be further considered by natural history filmmakers. The inclusion of a first-person perspective can offer a rhetorical and/or visual separation of the narration and footage from scientific objectivity and indexicality. The audience is more likely to interpret the film as coming from the author’s personal experience of the natural world, rather than established scientific facts.

The next analysis compares the expository mode of *March of the Penguins* with the first-person documentary sub-frame used in *Of Penguins and Men*, which uses the same footage of emperor penguins as seen in *March of the Penguins* to share the impressions of camera operator

Jérôme Maison. By contrasting the two films, one can better understand the difference in anthropomorphic assertions generated by the two modes of narration.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS: *OF PENGUINS AND MEN*

Of Penguins and Men (Jacquet and Maison 2004) is the perceived first-person perspective of camera operator Jérôme Maison. The paratextual description on IMDb describes the documentary as a “behind the scenes look at the making of *March of the Penguins*.” The documentary is in the “special features” section of the *March of the Penguins* DVD (United States release). The ending credits list: *Voice-Over Written by Sylvain Tesson and Story Teller, Douglas Weston*. Though the paratextual evidence does not specify a first-person author, the documentary’s apparent view is through the first-person perspective of Maison.

Of Penguins and Men opens with footage of camera operator Jérôme Maison walking toward the camera in a blizzard, with the following narration:

For almost a year now we have been living in Antarctica, lost and almost forgotten on the edge of a vast continent, with solitude, cold, and the wide-open spaces as our only companion. My story is not the easiest to tell. How do you describe an experience located out of time? Beyond words? How can I express everything that has changed in me since I decided to spend a year of my life with the emperor penguin?

A close-up shot of Maison’s face covered in protective snow gear is the visual for the narration, as he adds, “How can I darken the purity of the white continent with words? How will I manage to describe everything I’ve seen?” Here the visual of Maison serves as textual evidence for the point of view presented. The footage of him walking toward the camera and a closeup on his face imply that the words are his internal wonderings about his time in Antarctica. The narration uses the first-person “I” to express an opinion coming from the onscreen author.

The use of the first-person narrator offers advantages when engaging audiences in stories about non-human animals. In *Of Penguins and Men* the narration relies on personal perspective and lyricism, rather than crude storytelling tricks to entertain audiences. The use of first-person narration results in descriptions of non-human animals that are framed as personal to the narrator's perspective. The narrator's ownership for the words spoken and point of view presented result in a narration that avoids misleading stereotypes and a rhetorical construction that holds closer to actual events.

Maison's voiceover suggests the theme of determination for both the camera operators and the penguins: "We (Maison and the other camera operator, Laurent Chalet) are here to film the emperor penguins' incredible struggle against the Antarctic winter. We have crossed two hemispheres to live with this extraordinary bird. To spend a whole year at its side." The ship that brought Maison is shown departing. Shots of the landscape create feelings of isolation. Maison and Chalet look and pace, waiting for the penguins to arrive. A closeup of Maison's eyes is followed by a point-of-view shot of small black dots in a line, moving across the barren landscape. As they get closer to the penguins, Maison says, "It is a magnificent, breathtaking sight. Overcome by emotion we nonetheless have to work quickly and efficiently. I'm so moved that my hands are shaking, and I end up having to let go of the camera tripod to keep the image steady." As fixed shots follow of penguins walking toward the camera, Maison says, "We are impressed with their determination, and they need it. They measure the immensity of this continent with their tiny steps...we thought that they would be comical, but they are truly regal." The first-person mode allows the audience to place these perceptions as coming from the author. Maison sees the penguins as determined, partially because he is also determined. The initial

thoughts he shares help the audience assess the author and understand his unique perspective. The audience then knows to frame his narration of the penguins as influenced by his experience of being in the field filming them.

The camera operator's perspective as someone who is overcome by the experience of a lifetime, hooks the audience into the story and removes the need for anthropocentric anthropomorphic themes, such as love, to interest the audience in penguin behavior. Maison carries the human and comedic needs of the story, such as when he says, "I'm so moved that my hands are shaking." Compared to *March of the Penguins*, *Of Penguins and Men* doesn't require comical movements of sliding penguins, with Morgan Freeman jokingly explaining "how love makes one act foolishly." In fact, Maison says, "we thought they would be comical, but they are truly regal." Here the author is relying on himself to hook the audience and avoids anthropomorphic projections of penguins comedically in love.

As the documentary progresses, Maison further utilizes the lyrical abilities of a first-person narrator who is in the field, by including descriptions of his senses. These visceral descriptions would be less suited for a detached, expository narrator, while they play to the strengths of a first-person author who is attempting to connect the audience with the footage. Maison lets us know that today will be a bit different as he and the other camera operator will be getting closer to the penguins, filming just a half-mile away from the colony. Once Maison gets closer, he states, "at this distance the smell of the penguins is overpowering." He then details the filming conditions, "This morning the temperature is minus four degrees, the skin of our fingers sticks to the metal." He adds, "There are seven thousand penguins here all singing together. It is mid-April, the moment when the couples form." A wide

shot panning across the penguin colony as the penguins make their calls accompanies the narration, stressing the number of penguins and deafening loudness of their unifying calls. The narration descriptions and shots coalesce where the audience feels they are visually seeing the penguins through the camera operator's perspective as he physically pans the camera. It is only after guiding the audience visually and rhetorically into his personal perspective that Maison describes penguin behavior:

We are astounded by the paradox of these days, for even though time is short, the penguins devote almost two weeks to their mating dances, as if matters of the heart cannot be rushed into. We know that the penguin's song informs its possible mate of its gender and of its desire to pair off. The male announces himself with a distinctive call. When a female is charmed by his song she crosses the group, identifying herself with a more staccato song as she seeks out her suiter.

Maison narrates that the female must be “charmed...as she seeks out her suiter,” avoiding story tropes of females lacking power in mating endeavors. He uses anthropocentric anthropomorphic phrasing of “mating dances,” “matters of the heart cannot be rushed,” “desire to pair off,” and “she seeks out her suitor,” to invoke images of seduction, suggesting the Antarctic females have similar flirtation styles to what one might expect in a modern nightclub. Though Maison's narration of display behavior is anthropocentric, it is less problematic than *March of the Penguins*' use of story tropes to misconstrue female penguin aggression as humorously “fighting over the guys.”

Scientifically speaking, power dynamics between the sexes has to do with penguin sex ratios. When there are more females than males in a population, the females may act aggressively to secure a strong breeding partner (Jenouvrier et al. 739). Neither *Of Penguins and Men* nor *March of the Penguins* explains this cause of power dynamics between the sexes during penguin display and courtship behavior, but because the first-person author does not claim the

footage to be indexical evidence of penguin behavior, the anthropocentric projection is less of a misrepresentation. In *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*, it is suggested that the on-screen presence of the filmmaker is an “overt stylization that disrupts the viewer’s sense of perceptual realism” which “acknowledges a subjective perspective” (Ros et al. 233). Maison’s on-screen presence at the beginning of the documentary and implied presence through his interactions handling the camera act to abandon an indexical claim and admit the subjectivity in the story presented.

March of the Penguins’ depictions of a pure landscape contrasts with the landscape in *Of Penguins and Men*, which shows nature’s cruelty and senselessness. Maison’s initial impression of the snowy, white landscape as a reflection of nature’s purity quickly shifts to metaphors of isolation. At times its emptiness seems foreboding as if penguins have been abandoned in a barren land, devoid of all color and resources. He says,

May 5th, we weather another storm, winds at 80 miles per hour, a temperature of -22 degrees Fahrenheit. Filming becomes very difficult, each movement a huge effort. What must the penguins be going through? A few new eggs have rolled onto the ice where they freeze almost instantaneously, and so like a symbol of the harshness of the penguin’s life, the first egg that we see is one that is already dead.

Maison’s honesty about the first egg he filmed is unlike *March of the Penguins*, where the first egg seen by the audience is safely tucked under the belly feathers resting on the female’s feet. *Of Penguins and Men* does not conceal the cruelty of nature. It is somewhat counterintuitive that the narrator, who an audience may presume to have a limited and biased experience and as such may be given a greater allowance for error, is the narrator that is more attentive to the truth of the non-human animal experience.

The next documentary analyzed, *My Life as a Turkey*, explores this concept further.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS: *MY LIFE AS A TURKEY*

As in *Of Penguins and Men*, *My Life as a Turkey* has a first-person narrator and a rhetorical construction built around a first-person's perspective of events. It premiered in 2011 on PBS. The documentary was based on the book *Illumination in the Flatwoods: A Season Living Among the Wild Turkey* by naturalist and wildlife artist Joe Hutto and is told through interviews with the author. The documentary begins with the visual of the actor who plays Hutto, walking down a dirt road surrounded by pasture and turkeys. Hutto's non-diegetic interview audio opens the documentary: "For over a year I saw no one except for my family. It was a family like none that you know. But I'm a mother it seems, and these are my children and soon enough like all children they'll leave home and I suppose my heart will be broken. But for now, this is my life as a turkey." Just as the opening narration in *March of the Penguins* creates a crude anthropomorphic projection of penguins in love, *My Life as a Turkey*'s voiceover narration projects the relationship of mother and children onto Hutto and the young turkeys. However, Hutto's voiceover narration is framed through the first-person mode of address as a subjective anthropomorphic projection of how Hutto remembers and interprets his experiences with the turkeys.

In *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*, Ros et al. suggest that in first-person documentaries there is an awareness that the documentary is "both a non-fictional representation and a subjectively filtered narrative" (232). Hutto's story has themes of parenthood and devotion, like *March of the Penguins*, but it is crafted around a particular human experience with the non-

human animal. Hutto's voiceover narration explains how the trans-species relationship was formed: "I have been trying to get my hands on wild turkey eggs or young wild turkeys for decades. Then this local farmer was on his way to my cabin with a bowl of eggs. It was a delivery that was to change my life in ways that I could never imagine." Hutto describes his fascination with imprinting and that he always wanted to experiment with wild turkeys, to see if young turkeys would imprint on him as their mother, giving him an opportunity to see into their world. This contrasts with *The March of the Penguins'* anthropocentric love story. Hutto uses descriptions of imprinting that project an interpretation of their relationship that is within the turkey perspective, using critical anthropomorphic sensibilities. Hutto does not degrade or mock the non-human animal, and his inquiry serves to challenge many ideas about non-human animal cognition and the belief that humans are the only sentient beings capable of complex relationships and emotions.

Hutto does gain access, as he intended, to the natural world. Here he becomes almost empathic, interpreting the turkeys' experience through a critical anthropomorphic viewpoint and guiding the audience to do the same. Hutto is an engaging storyteller and sequentially provides the audience with the background needed to interpret turkey behavior using critical anthropomorphic sensibilities themselves. For example, by the time a scene arrives where the turkeys are evaluating a logged tree stump, he has established that turkeys are 20-million-year-old birds that are born (according to Hutto) with a memory of the world around them. He has told the audience that turkeys instinctively understand which bugs are good to eat and which species are friends and which are foe. Hutto has described how the turkeys react to dead animal bones, analyzing them in a way that Hutto describes as "obsessive" and "curious." The footage

then shows the turkeys as they circle a logged tree stump. The turkeys appear troubled and call out to one another. They seem to know the tree and recognize that it had an unnatural death. Hutto's buildup and momentary silence creates a merging of perspectives of the viewer and the filmmaker. It is only after the audience has had a moment to consider the scene that Hutto provides his own perspective:

...when we approached a very old stump of a tree that had been sawn down by loggers, something about that was very disturbing to a wild turkey. And I thought it was a fabulous and interesting response, but I don't know why. But here was a stump that had been cut 10, 15, 20 years before and yet there was something not right about that and the turkeys would find it very interesting and actually disturbing.

Hutto's narration shows the unique ability of the first-person narrator to frame statements as subjective or objective. He notes that his inferences come from a lifetime of studying wild animals, but his statements remain subjective, couching assessments with "I thought" and "I don't know." As a first-person narrator, he can make "I" assertions about animal cognition and emotional states that the expository narrator cannot. In *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*, Ros et al. describe this first-person advantage, noting that

first-person documentary has a specific affective dimension that sets it apart from the traditional documentary norm and enables an empathetic merging of the perspective of the viewer with that of the filmmaker. Two experiential properties appear to be essential to our selection of the first-person sub-frame: on the one hand, an awareness of watching a representation of historical or actual reality, and on the other, an awareness that this representation is "filtered" through the subjective perspective of the filmmaker. (232)

The authors discuss

the potential of first-person documentaries to immerse viewers in the subjective perspective of their authors and to trigger strong feelings of empathy for people who are not part of our immediate family circle or tribe, foregrounding the universally shared emotional dimensions of situations. (239)

Hutto has led the audience to adopt a turkey worldview and consider the logged tree stump through the turkey perspective. It is a powerful scene. From the turkey perspective, humans and our behavior are not understood, giving us a haunting presence in the forest.

When Hutto describes the turkeys' personalities and behavior he implies that the behavior is specific to a particular turkey, rather than make statements that are meant to extrapolate to the entire species. Hutto introduces Turkey Boy's personality by stating, "He's into everything. He's inquisitive and brave and he's going to be a handful. He's already beginning to display to the other birds, and he is only 5 days old." Footage of a tiny baby turkey flaring his feathers to his brothers and sisters accompanies the narration. Hutto describes Sweet Pea, "She is very little and likes to be held in the hand." Hutto's use of a nuanced, situational perspective, that is at times limited to a particular turkey, may be more accurate than *March of the Penguins*' sweeping claims about penguin behavior, leading an audience to inaccurate overgeneralization.

My Life as a Turkey proceeds through the turkeys maturing into mating animals and drifting apart. Sweet Pea, however, nests near Hutto's house. One day he finds that Sweet Pea has been killed in the nest, along with her eggs. The audience is left to wonder if Hutto's overstaying a turkey mother's natural time with their young might have encouraged a docile nature in Sweet Pea that led to her untimely death. His relationship with Turkey Boy ends in violence as well. Hutto's voiceover narration:

...But nothing could have prepared me for the ferocity of what came next. I happened to look up, and Turkey Boy's face was right next to my face. And he was just glowing with these vivid colors of purple and red and blue. And he had a fierce look in his eye, predatory look. I thought that was strange, and I reached out my hand and he pecked at the back of my hand and actually drew blood. And I didn't hit at him, I just pushed him back, with my hand on his breast. Get back! And that was the trigger. Suddenly he understood what our relationship should truly be as brothers. And he immediately attacked me.

The lack of human presence in *March of the Penguins* helps create a metaphor for the purity of the landscape and innocence of the penguins. In *My Life as a Turkey*, Hutto's presence creates a metaphor for the human relationship with the natural world, which at times is foreboding. This metaphor shifts throughout the documentary as Hutto moves from caregiver to visitor to enemy, all the while illuminating with his folksy, first-person narration, how the human place in the natural world has shifted over time.

CHAPTER SIX

ANALYSIS: *IN THE LAND OF SEA TURTLES*

The focus of my documentary *In the Land of Sea Turtles* is the plight and recovery of sea turtles in the waters and land of Cumberland Island, Georgia. I chose first-person narration over expository mode for many of the same reasons discussed in the analyses of *My Life as a Turkey* and *Of Penguins and Men*. For example, I believe any bias I might have will be better presented for audience examination in a first-person narrative, and anthropomorphic implications will have less authoritative interpretation as well.

In the Land of Sea Turtles allows the audience to not only follow my physical journey to Cumberland Island, but also my thought process while I examine the human relationship to the natural world. In a scene with an alligator, I confront notions of human dominance. Through the narration, “Am I like the alligator, a predator preying on images?” (Harvey). I compare the camera’s ability to capture images to a predator hunting prey, suggesting that I have dominance over the alligator. Footage of me adjusting my camera creates visual parallels to a hunter adjusting their weaponry. I narrate the alligator’s behavior: “As she choreographs herself to me it is not with fear that she waits, it is with hunger. It is with cool thought that she shifts her body in alignment with the setting sun striking my back. Hoping I don’t notice. Hoping I still dream in metaphors. Hoping I forgot the dance moves to her hunt.” (Harvey). Here the human body becomes a mixture of predator and prey, heightened by my crawling animalistically across the sand. As the sun sets, the alligator turns to me, and I, in a prey response, abandon filming and flee the beach. In this scene, I had to reconsider my bambification of the alligator, and

reprioritize my need for survival over self-expression. Throughout the scene, anthropocentric anthropomorphic views of nature, as well as notions of human dominance, are confronted, prodding the audience to question their assumptions (Manfredo et al. 2).

In another scene, I provide narration for a nesting mother sea turtle, using vocabulary to cue the audience:

As I wait for the moon to rise, I stare at the ocean and wonder if there is a mother turtle straining her eyes, staring back at me. I read that mothers gravitate toward the darkest spots on the beach, so just in case I keep my flashlight off...I wonder what she is experiencing, alone filled with eggs, hoping night's velvety darkness is enough to protect her. It's all different, the sand usually delicate against her flippers presses hard. The buoyancy of the ocean, gone. She heaves her left flipper forward, then her right. (Harvey)

My first-person "I" indicates that the statements are coming from a singular perspective, and the word "wonder" shows my musing frame of mind. The empathic merging of the author and subject slowly builds, leading to a blurred trans-species point of view in the statement, "It's all different." This blurring of human and sea turtle perspective is enhanced through the visuals, which go from distant images taken from my perspective to the point of view of the sea turtle as she comes on land. The fusion of emotional states is done through a critical anthropomorphic framework. When I state, "I read that mothers gravitate toward the darkest spots on the beach, so just in case I keep my flashlight off," I am indicating that I have done research about sea turtles and am using this knowledge in my interaction and narration.

In the documentary, I interview wildlife experts and learn about how the sea turtle population drastically declined due to industrialized fishing. During these interactions with scientists, I use the full capacity of first-person narration to help bridge the gap between what is

scientifically known and areas that go beyond current scientific research. There is no published research on the stress levels of sea turtles caught in industrial fishing nets, and yet I say,

She fights but she can't find a way out. She started out so determined but it's slipping, she's slipping. With her oxygen store long gone, her glottis and its muscles that normally stay tight when she is swimming give in. They want air so much that they pretend it and open. The ocean moves through her trachea into her lungs wrong, wrong, airless and wrong. (Harvey)

By presuming the nesting mother sea turtle will struggle to survive, and suffer if she dies, I am able to connect the audience with the non-human animal's plight. I mix scientific understanding with emotional pleas, using critical anthropomorphic narration to fill the gap where science is incomplete. Rivas and Burghardt suggest that using critical anthropomorphic principles

is no different from that of understanding another person who may differ in age, gender, sensory and motor abilities, profession, or wealth...although we can never obtain access to the full inner life and private experiences of another human being some people seem to be more successful at generalizing to the situations of other people and are thus considered particularly insightful, empathic, or privy to human nature [at] large (e.g., major novelists, playwrights, composers). Partial knowledge is possible and useful even if full knowledge is unattainable both in practice and principle. (Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt 11)

Through a well-framed narration, research, in-field experience, and artistic creativity, the first-person author can make assertions about non-human animal emotional states, where authors not using these principles should refrain.

In the Land of Sea Turtles showcases humanity's destruction of the natural world, where industrial fishing metaphorically represents humanity's indifference to the non-human animal. Here the audience must contend with contradicting public attitudes around "the perceived need for continuing economic growth and technical progress, set off against feelings of loss and detachment as environments become degraded and nature appears to shrink" (Whitley 145). Ideas of human destruction and indifference shift throughout the documentary as

conservationists, volunteers, and shrimp boat captains work to protect sea turtles. Similar to *March of the Penguins*, *In the Land of Sea Turtles* ends with footage of sea turtles completing their life cycle, momentarily soothing concerns in the audience. *In the Land of Sea Turtles*, however, only allows the audience this cathartic moment after telling a story where human indifference plays the villain, creating an understanding in the audience that human participation is now necessary for both human and non-human animals to continue our life cycles together.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

“... when we analyze the behavior of animals, we not only can but *must* deliberately put ourselves in the animal’s shoes; not doing so is potentially and truly anthropomorphic.” – Rivas and Burghardt

In the first-person natural history documentaries *Of Penguins and Men*, *My Life as a Turkey*, and *In the Land of Sea Turtles*, the first-person authors used inferences drawn from their experience in the field to express the non-human animal experience more accurately. Although the subjectivity of the first-person point of view allows the author more room for error in assertions about non-human animal behavior, the first-person authors addressed in this paper were more conscientious and framed their anthropomorphic assertions critically more often than the expository authors. These documentaries support that the first-person modality has significant potential to depict the non-human animal with less distortion. In the expository documentary *March of the Penguins*, the authors anthropocentrically anthropomorphized the non-human animal subjects using uncontextualized descriptions. The director claimed that *March of the Penguins* was an accurate account of non-human animal behavior, leading the audience to perceive the documentary as an indexical document about penguin behavior. In actuality, much of the anthropomorphism was crude, superficial, and explanatory (Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt 9). The risk of perceived indexicality in natural history documentaries makes a strong argument for the use of the first-person mode, where any indexical claims would be quickly broken by elements of the author’s performance

As more first-person documentaries are made, I expect greater study of whether the first-person presence on the landscape affects the audience's willingness to act on the non-human animals' behalf. I expect there will be analysis of first-person documentaries' success in the box office compared to expository mode. I foresee that authors and the actuality of their story will be held to closer scrutiny. I believe that many film practices used by natural history filmmakers will be held to closer scrutiny by the audience. Conversely, first-person filmmakers should carefully consider the nature of their interaction with the non-human animal and when appropriate, discourage audience members from copying the author's non-human animal interaction. Despite these unknowns, the potential of the first-person sub-frame to move the natural history genre forward is undeniable. As an industry, we need further study of how to tell stories in this modality that are impactful, accurate, and conscientious.

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