ANIMAL SAPIENS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN POPULAR MEDIA

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2012

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of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citation, bibliographic style, and consistency and is ready for submission to The Graduate School.

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April 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents for providing me with a childhood that imbued within me a curiosity for the natural world, which still endures today. I would like to express gratitude to my late, great-grandmother, Leah Walten, who provided me with the means to pursue my academic interests. I am grateful to my master's committee, especially Ronald Tobias, whose thoughtful and invaluable advice helped me both formulate my ideas in this paper as well as a filmmaker within the program and beyond.

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GLOSSARY

Anthropocentrism – presuming that all nonhuman experience is the same as human experience. On a broader level, anthropocentric viewpoints place humans at the center of the universe or at the top of an evolutionary ladder.

Anthropomorphism - attribution of human characteristics including emotional states, physical anatomy, or behaviors to nonhumans. An example of anthropomorphism is calling a dog “a courageous old chap whose goal in life is to make others happy.”

Popular media - also referred to as “mass media” and credited with largely influencing popular culture. Popular media refers to many media technologies, but for the purpose of this essay, I will contain its scope to film, television, TV news, and the Internet.

ABSTRACT

The creators of popular media have long used anthropomorphism of nonhuman animals to promote human morals and values and learn more about ourselves by looking at animals. Focusing on the portrayal of penguins in popular media, I will demonstrate the consequences: a society that lesser understands the scientific accuracy of animals and that places humans at the center of everything, anthropocentrism. Although seeing 'human' emotions or characteristics in animals plays an important role in promoting empathy for them, I will argue that it also muddies the water when determining what is best for a species in terms of conservation and management. The use of blatant anthropomorphism often pits the best interest of an individual versus the best interest of a species - a clear contradiction to the basic principles of evolution. My thesis film, *Animal sapiens*, intends to expose the pitfall of popular media's use of anthropomorphism in developing the viewers' attachment to the individual thus jeopardizing conservation of a species. I propose a moderate approach to anthropomorphism, which avoids making blanket statements and instead describes the similarities between humans and nonhumans while providing room to describe the difference simultaneously. As our developing, cultural world continues to distance itself from the natural world - with the advance of technology, population, and environmental degradation - it is important to better understand and reexamine the role of anthropomorphism in our society.

INTRODUCTION

For most people, animals are symbolic: their significance lies not in what they are, but in what we think they are. We ascribe meanings and values to their existence and behaviors in ways that usually have little to do with their biological and social realities, treating them as emblems of nature's purity or bestiality in order to justify, ultimately, our views of other human beings.

-Bruce Bagemihl, Biological Exuberance

Today, popular media consists of a wide-range of communications including television, film, and more recently the Internet. These broadcast communications help shape society's perspectives or social mores within a given culture. Embedded in these communications are 'preferred' morals and values (Bousé 152). As our culture progresses, broadcasters disseminate these 'preferred' ideas as social mores or memes.

The creators of popular media have long used anthropomorphism of nonhuman animals to promote 'preferred' morals and values. The depiction of animals in film, TV and news renders these nonhumans as social actors promoting a narrative viewpoint that the animal itself is entirely unaware of. As Derek Bousé explains in his critique of popular wildlife films:

> Imposing narrative on nature not only represents the lives of wild animals according to dramatic convention, but also individualizes and psychologizes behavior typical of entire species. Further attempts to render such behavior intelligible to audiences have often entailed finding simple human analogies for it, which, in turn have forced it into familiar, moral categories – good, bad, kind, cruel, generous, mean and so forth (152).

In this essay, the focus of my argument will examine the consequences of this didactic appropriation of animal behavior: a viewer with less scientific understanding of

nonhuman animals and a society that places humans at the center of everything, anthropocentrism.

As our cultural world continues to distance itself from the natural world - with the advance of technology, population, and environmental degradation – the creators of popular media should reexamine the role of anthropomorphism in their programming. Although, as I will highlight, a certain amount of anthropomorphism may be unavoidable and furthermore necessary, the current extent of its usage harms the accurate translation of scientific information to the public and ultimately jeopardizes the conservation of endangered species.

Within the realm of popular media, not all animals are created equally. As David Pierson, media professor and author, points out in his critical analysis of the Discovery Channel's nature programming "the majority of animals in nature programs tend to fall within the confines of the cuteness/repulsiveness dichotomy" (Pierson 704). In this manner, animals that are 'cute and cuddly' or exhibit humanlike juvenilization – large eyes and big heads, also known as neoteny – are routinely celebrated. Animals that exhibit non-human juvenilization or are alien in appearance, such as snakes and sharks, are typically "associated with negative values that may be translated into emotional reactions like disgust and repulsion" (Pierson 704).

One of the most anthropomorphically depicted animals in popular media is the penguin. Penguins exhibit other humanlike behaviors such as walking on two feet, forming monogamous pairs, and parental rearing of offspring. It is perhaps these similarities to humans that attract popular media and audiences to penguins, elevating

these birds to the status of stardom. From hit, animated films like *Happy Feet* to the natural history documentary, *March of the Penguins*, these 'cute and cuddly' birds have virtually become our human counterparts. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus my critique on the anthropomorphic treatment of penguins in popular media.

In my thesis film, *Animal sapiens,* I explore how our technological world, saturated with anthropomorphic-laden, broadcast media shapes a viewer's perceptions of nonhuman animals. Central to this technique is how popular media constructs "animals as empathic 'characters' with clearly discernable personalities" (Pierson 702). My thesis film demonstrates how popular media's persistent portrayal of nonhuman animals as people develops empathy within the viewer for the individual animal or character. At first glance, this might seem like a good thing as it encourages the viewer to be a caretaker of the nonhuman. Upon deeper inspection, however, the film reveals the inherent flaws. Firstly, extending our own cultural morals and values to animals invites the nonhuman into our society, which is intrinsically impossible. Furthermore, the viewer's attachment to an individual character may threaten the health of that animal or its species, as what might be best for a person, might not be what is best for a nonhuman animal. A good example of this is found in the old adage, "don't feed wild animals." When one encounters a wild animal our empathy may tell us to feed it because it appears hungry; however, feeding a wild animal only creates further problems, potentially even death as in the case of a habituated bear being destroyed.

My thesis film brings into question how popular media handles animal stories. Within the first person narrative of the film, my character discovers a news story about

two ‘gay’ penguins, Buddy and Pedro. These African penguins, part of a captive breeding program at the Toronto Zoo, intended to maintain genetic diversity of the endangered species, are being separated in order to mate them with female partners in hopes of reproduction. The film depicts the onslaught of media coverage and personal testimonies in the form of *You Tube* videos and online news. The overwhelming response from news outlets and the public alike is overloaded with anthropomorphism and is a resounding “let the penguins be.” My character struggles with what to make of the dilemma: are the penguin’s rights being violated or is this outburst completely unfounded? *Animal sapiens* follows my character’s journey into the conflicting world of anthropomorphism. Through encounters with media-makers, scientists, “man on the street” interviews, and the penguins themselves my character discovers the pitfalls of anthropomorphism.

My intention with my film is to illustrate, for a general audience, the mechanisms and outcomes of attributing human characteristics and emotions onto nonhuman animals. By doing so, my hope is that the viewer can develop tools to identify anthropomorphism themselves and better understand its potentially negative consequences.

The modern day depiction of animals in popular media fails to identify its own anthropomorphic tendencies. Consequently, the viewer may be clouded in confusion, unable to identify allegory from fact. As the distinction between human and nonhuman becomes blurred, so does our scientific and cultural understanding of the ‘other,’ in this case, animals. It is imperative to comprehend the history, mechanisms and consequences of anthropomorphism in order to reevaluate its place within popular media.

THE EVOLUTION OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND THE FABLE

The topic of anthropomorphism has produced a cornucopia of research from diverse fields including history, psychology, biology, and ethology (Asquith, Bekoff, Bousé, Daston, Doniger, King, Mitchell, Mitman, Povinelli, Serpell, Spada, Timberlake, et cetera). Although the debate as to its use and misuse continues, a survey of the material reveals a common thread: the evolution of Homo *sapiens* and the evolution of anthropomorphism are intricately connected. At some point during evolution of the human brain, we developed the sophisticated concept of attributing emotional states to others (Povinelli 94). This ability, referred to as reflexive consciousness, allows us to look inside the minds of others, human and nonhuman alike, and extrapolate using our own subjective mental experiences. For this reason, some academics refer to humans as "natural psychologists" (Serpell 123). In other words, it is in our nature to anthropomorphize. Archaeologist Steven Mithen explains that anthropomorphism probably evolved some 40,000 years ago and opened the door for nonhuman animals as pets and eventually domestication (Serpell 124).

Since its inception, the word anthropomorphism has always had negative connotations. Science historian, Lorraine Daston states "anthropomorphism was a theological sin long before it became a scientific one" (39). Originally used to describe the attribution of human form to gods, the act was blasphemous and forbidden by several religions (Daston and Mitman 2). In the post-Darwinian era, however, anthropomorphism became a scientific taboo. Animals were no longer considered machines and humans

were now considered to be animals (Spada 39). The concept of anthropomorphism had become more complicated. In the sciences, especially in the field of animal behavior, it was now considered an act of "sloppy thinking" or as science philosopher Sandra Mitchell explains, "science made too easy is bound to be wrong" (102). She elaborates,

> By describing a dog as feeling shame when it walks away with its tail between its legs, one is not gathering neutral data with which to test the myriad of theories about the nature of dogs but rather is assuming in that very description that dogs have mental or emotional states like human mental and emotional states (102).

Along these lines, it becomes clear why anthropomorphism is best avoided during scientific observation: it makes the categorical mistake of assuming that all animals experience the same mental states and conditions as humans. If such were the case, what point is there in studying and understanding animal behavior? However, when one considers the cultural use of anthropomorphism, as in storytelling and other modes of communication consistent with popular media, its evaluation becomes much more complex. In science, the quest for utter objectivity is not helpful, but as I will point out, neither is the opposite extreme of utter subjectivity – investing animals with human emotions and characteristics. For the remainder of this essay, I will focus on the cultural use of anthropomorphism.

As long as we can remember, animals have played an important role across human cultures in storytelling, both oral and written. As far back as 1000 B.C.E. in India, a collection of stories called the *Panchatantra* depicted animal characters in human roles, intending to teach their audience morals. These animal allegories were appropriated by European literature under the banner of Aesop's fables (Doniger 18). The fables, adapted

over time to suit the current values, taught the virtues of hard work through a grasshopper or the perils of lying through a wolf. Throughout the many rounds of revisions, the stories were intended for children in order to help them “displace human vices (as well as virtues) onto animals so that they can be confronted, examined and satirized from a safe distance” (Bousé 92). Derek Bousé notes an important distinction: “seeing elements of humanity reflected in the natural world comes from having projected them there in the first place, in [Aesop’s] fables this was clearly intentional” (Bousé 93). In other words, the fables made use of allegory with no attempt to disguise it as otherwise. As animal stories evolved, however, the line between anthropomorphism as literary device and anthropomorphism as fact began to erode. Consequently, the audience’s ability to distinguish between allegory and realism weakened. This is best exemplified by examining Disney’s ‘true life’ portrayal of the animal.

THE MECHANISMS AND EFFECTS OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Walt Disney Studios is best known for its animated films, but in the late 1940's the company launched its first nature documentary series, True-Life Adventures, with surprising success (Mitman 109). These natural history stories depicted animals in the *wild* devoid of any human characters. Although the content was different, the natural history stories reverted to familiar messages reminiscent of fables. As Bousé describes, "animals that survived and triumphed tended to be those individuals who exhibited elements of *virtue* – courage, sacrifice, fidelity and so forth" (105). The equivalent virtues were preached to children in Aesop's fables; however, this time, Disney masked the didactic narrative with 'true life,' as if these human concepts are found naturally in nonhuman animals. Even Walt Disney himself would declare that every animal "must earn his right to live and survive by his own efforts and the thing which in human relations is called moral behavior" (Bousé 105). Gone were the allegories – and in entered a new era of anthropomorphism.

With the success of True-Life Adventures, Disney captured a new, postwar, American audience eager to watch nature on the big screen (Mitman 110). In each episode, "nature wrote the screenplay; the eloquence, the emotion, and the drama were nature's own" (Mitman 110). In the Academy Award nominated episode *Islands of the Sea* (1960), even the penguin gets a chance to *sing* the virtues of nature. This episode, as the narrator announces, chronicles "rare and unique species [as] they cling to a precarious foothold of existence on the far away and isolated islands of the sea." The stage is set for

the *natural* story to unfold, far away and unmolested by the advancing, industrialized world of man.

The penguin act in *Islands of the Sea* begins with triumphant, battle music as rockhopper penguins scramble up seaside cliffs on the shores of the Falklands. The narrator announces,

> It's still a long way to the summit and the trip would certainly be easier if their ancestors hadn't forgotten how to fly. High above the sea is the rookery. Here squatter's rights are maintained on every home-site. Among mated pairs a bachelor meets a dubious welcome.

The narration is laden with overt anthropomorphism. The penguins, as if encumbered by their ancestors, become social actors extolling the same hardships and challenges that face humanity. The Falkland cliffs are reminiscent of the American Wild West: a frontier waiting to be settled. The scene continues with the "bachelor" rockhopper, as if a sole prospector, navigating the occupied "home-sites" of mated pairs.

> Tempers become steadily shorter, at last erupting into a knockdown, drag-out brawl. Thoroughly discouraged, the disconsolate suitor seems destine to a life alone. Then it's love at first sight. Along with romance come chores of homemaking.

The penguin's story reflects postwar-American values of a young man's journey into adulthood. The moral strongly resounds: one must *earn* his place in society through marriage and if unable to find a spouse, try and try again. Having secured a wife, children follow and the father's duties become paramount.

The scene's narration continues onto fatherhood "when all manner of scolding fails, [a] father tries persuasion and reason." If the narration were taken out of the context

of penguins and the Falkland Islands, it would almost read as a propagandistic manual on parenting. As science historian Greg Mitman explains, “Disney presented a sentimental version of animals in the wild that sanctified the universal ‘natural’ family as a cornerstone of the American way of life” (111). What once was easily recognized as metaphor is now *proven* through the reality captured by the nature photographer’s lens. Animal as metaphor, easily recognized in the fable, has all but disappeared, but the endpoint has remained – a forum to teach morals.

At this point, one might ask: what is the problem with using animals to covertly teach morals and values? The issue clearly arises when one examines the context of the early Disney series. As the narration announces in the pilot episode, *On Seal Island*, “this is one of a series of True-Life Adventures presenting strange facts about the world we live in. These films are photographed in their natural settings and are completely authentic, unstaged and unrehearsed.” In other words, the stories are sold to the viewer as factual, alluding to the pretense that the animal behaviors described within represent reality. Herein lies the crux of the issue. As Bousé describes, “the danger, obviously, is that when moral values are presumed applicable to nature, their universalizing is complete. They become absolute – no longer moral values, but moral *truths*” (159). The ‘factual’ claims made by the True-Life Adventures result in an entirely anthropocentric understanding of nonhuman animals. Although the depicted behaviors may have been recorded in the *wild*, imposing moral judgment circumvented any scientific explanation or understanding. This new form of anthropomorphism – human morals and values discovered *naturally* in the wild – marks the origins of the mainstream depiction of

animals, still present in today's popular media.

With the success of True-Life Adventures, Disney paved a way for modern animal stories in the mainstream (Mitman 110). Eventually, Disney's animated films overshadowed their live-action counterparts. Although animated films heavily contribute to society's perception of non-human animals (Wells 3 – 5), their use of anthropomorphism is more overtly allegorical than that of the True-Life Adventures. Even young children can easily recognize that an animated film does not represent reality. Cartoon academic, Paul Wells, explains "at a very simple level, whenever an audience is confronted with an animated film, it recognizes that it is different from live action – its very aesthetic and illusionism enunciates differences and potentially prompts alternative ways of seeing and understanding what is being represented" (5). However, with the advance of modern, computer technology, animators are achieving an unprecedented quality of visual realism that, once again, erodes our ability to distinguish between fact and fiction.

One such film, Academy Award winning *Happy Feet* (2006), utilizes hyper-real 3D, computer-animation to tell the story of a young penguin trying to find his calling in life. Contrary to many animated, animal films that portray animals existing within the human, socio-cultural world, often clothed as humans, the penguins in *Happy Feet* appear virtually, anatomically realistic and occupy an equally naturalistic environment – the frozen Antarctic. One only needs to examine the first few minutes of the film to reveal the consequences of this oxymoronic imagery.

High-resolution, 3D animation zooms into a frozen landscape revealing a life-like

flock of emperor penguins huddled together. The authoritative, baritone voice of the narrator introduces the main character's parents, "His mom and dad met in the usual way. The song became love and love became the egg." Two adult emperor penguins, having courted each other through human song, talk lovingly about their egg. The narrator continues, "And in the usual way the mom left for the fishing season while the dad stayed home to do egg time." Within the first several minutes of the film, it is apparent that the distinction between nature documentary and animal allegory is hardly existent. As a viewer, there is little indication of what is fact and what is fiction. The narrator's repetitious use of the word "usual," however, indicates some degree of fact. It could be easily replaced with the word 'natural.' It is as if the narrator is asking us to listen carefully – the story he is about to tell is based on *truth*. The realism of the images contributes to this truth claim. But is it *truth*? And if so, how *truthful* is it?

With the heightened realism of modern animated films, animation alone is no longer enough to differentiate fact from fiction. Adult viewers of *Happy Feet* might immediately recognize the allegory, but a younger, less educated audience, for whom the film was certainly intended, might accept this truth claim unquestioningly. In doing so, the audience is being primed from a young age to "perceive nature in human terms" (King 62). As Margaret King, cultural anthropologist, further explains in her essay, *The Audience in the Wilderness:*

> [When we perceive nature in human terms:] how animals bond; how they "enjoy" family life and reproduce; how young animals grow up, become independent, learn their "trade," and develop survival skills [-] we set standards and judge – by our human template of "character" – animal intelligence, beauty and ugliness, virtue and vice, diligence

> and playfulness, suffering and reward, community and perdition, birth and death (60).

Our anthropocentric interpretation of animal behavior, encouraged by the complex anthropomorphism seen in modern animated films like *Happy Feet*, distances us further from a scientific understanding of nature. Some might argue this type of anthropomorphism is excusable since, as an animated film, its primary purpose is entertainment and not scientific education; however, when films make explicit (and implicit) claims of scientific authority without providing any scientific explanation of animal behavior, the consequences of anthropomorphism become much more drastic, as I will illustrate in the following section.

In 2005, French scientist and filmmaker Luc Jacquet released the feature-length, wildlife film *March of the Penguins* in association with National Geographic. As the second highest grossing documentary in U.S. history, the film sparked numerous, international debates including those between Christian interpretations of intelligent design and evolutionists (Wexler 273). *March of the Penguins* tells the story of the emperor penguins' breeding cycle in the Antarctic. Its anthropomorphic depiction of penguins ignited an academic dispute over the role of scientific information in wildlife film (Goodman, Helms, Kennedy, Mayell and Wexler). This latter debate is of most interest to this essay. Much of the dispute centers on the implicit and explicit *truth* claims the film makes. Before the narrative of the film even begins, we are presented with several credits. One of the first is the easily recognized logo and emblem of National Geographic, a "nonprofit scientific and educational organization… [which] has funded nearly 8,000 scientific projects" (Wexler 276). This symbol, in itself, signifies an

implicit truth or scientific authoritativeness. Several credits later we see, amidst a backdrop of icebergs, “In association with The French Polar Institute (IPEV).” This second credit functions much more explicitly. Together, these elements constitute a metanarrative, which functions outside of the film’s main narrative and informs authority. The viewer now fully expects the following program to be scientific. Instead, what follows is a highly politicized, anthropomorphic, narrative depiction of penguins lacking scientific description of animal behavior or as documentary filmmaker Rebecca Wexler describes, a “cinematic appropriation of the image of scientific authority” (273). This criticism is easily justified by examining the film’s emotionally charged and deeply voiced narration, by Morgan Freeman, in juxtaposition to animal imagery.

The first time we see the main characters in *March of the Penguins*, they are shown in a series of long, telephoto images. Distorted by the air currents, the penguins’ tall, abstract shapes could easily be mistaken as human. Even the narrator introduces them as a ”tribe” and announces, “This is a story about love.” Reminiscent of Disney’s True Life Adventures, almost sixty years earlier, the stage has been set in a more Shakespearian than scientific manner. As the story of the penguins’ journey to the interior breeding grounds of the Antarctic polar cap unfolds, the film employs slow-motion techniques and close-up photography. Eyes, feet and flippers are *scientifically* observed from a distance – each frame building the individuality of what are otherwise seemingly identical penguins. With the help of musical cues, the film depicts one penguin as a leader, while others are clumsy comedians, bumping into each other in sync with the clash of cymbals. This technique, remarkably similar to those employed by Disney

animated films, develops a unique 'personality' to each animal – an important step in helping the audience sympathize with the characters (Mitman 119). The film's anthropomorphic treatment goes as far as to announce; "They're not that different from us, really. They pout, they bellow, they strut, and occasionally they will engage in contact sports." As Bousé describes, "For audiences to follow the life of an individual animal, to care about it, to become emotionally involved with it… means that the animal must both engage our sympathies and display what we consider 'strength of character'" (163). In this manner, *March of the Penguins* uses intimate framing and voice-over narration to invest sympathy in the viewer. In doing so, the film prepares the audience to absorb moral ideology rather than scientific understanding, in contradiction to the film's 'truth' claims presented in the opening. I will examine the consequences by exemplifying one key scene.

The scene depicts the penguins' care and rearing of an egg. The narrator begins, "For now they wait for the egg and winter, which will do everything in its power to destroy that egg." In this line, anthropomorphism extends beyond the animal to nature itself. It is as if even *nature* has a purpose, an objective – *destiny*. With the arrival of the egg, the narration continues, "From now on the couple has but a single goal: keeping their egg alive." In these two loaded statements, the film has set the stakes for success or failure, which will be judged from our human standpoint. As mated pairs of penguins are shown "rehearsing" transferring the egg from female to male, we see a pair drop their egg. The narrator's explanation is as follows: "Some, young couples perhaps, are too impulsive or rushed… they can only watch as the ice claims their egg and the life within

it." It is as if nature has *achieved* its goal and the penguins have failed. On one level, in human terms, the film denounces the abilities of the mated pair. It is a blatant judgment, as if penguins are being held to the same moral standards as our own society expects of us. But, on another level, one can draw a much deeper, socio-political message: every egg is sacred and not to be wasted. In this sense, the narration can be interpreted as speaking directly in support of the American, anti-abortion movement. It is as if the film is speaking to us about the 'carelessness' of abortion through a common animal behavior. As Bousé describes:

> In these ways, Western notions of responsible parenting, filial obligation, obedience by the young, and other categories of proper behavior and personal responsibility are projected onto animals in ways that often make it seem as if life and death are assigned to the deserving – life to the hard working, the selfless, the obedient, the morally upright; death to the selfish, the disobedient, the lazy, the careless (164).

Aside from political, ideological statements, the implicit assertion the film makes within this scene *could* be justified by allegorically advancing the narrative, but amidst the film's context of scientific authority or 'truth,' what does this teach us about our real life understanding of nonhuman animals and the natural world? Bousé argues that this type of moral projection teaches viewers that humanlike "family values" are nature's survival strategies rather than reproductive survival strategies resulting from "long and slow evolutionary processes" (159). The result of this type of anthropomorphic, moral explanation of animal behaviors, under the guise of scientific authority, simplifies and misrepresents what are complex, biological interactions. The consequence of this anthropocentric simplification is an increasing gap in our collective understanding of

animal sciences. Modern wildlife films like *March of the Penguins* reveal, that in more than sixty years of filmmaking, media makers still revert to the same anthropomorphic tendencies as demonstrated in Disney's True-Life Adventures. The misuse of animal allegories in popular media presented as *scientific* animal representations, risks the health of our relationship with the natural world as I intended to demonstrate in my thesis film *Animal sapiens*.

As penguins fall into the 'cute and cuddly' category, they are heavily represented in popular media. With the success of films like *March of the Penguins* and *Happy Feet*, virtually everyone is aware of the superficial similarities between penguins and people – they walk on two feet, they tend to have monogamous mates, parental care of the young, et cetera. Penguins are inherently ripe for anthropomorphism. What many people aren't aware of, however, is how these depictions of penguins have the potential to threaten their conservation. This is the focus of my thesis film, *Animal sapiens*. Through my film's overt use of anthropomorphism I intend to provide the viewer with tools to recognize how it is used and its potential consequences.

The technique I employ in my film makes reference to its own use of anthropomorphism, not as covert allegory, but rather as a topic of discussion. I present the viewer with multiple depictions of the 'penguin controversy,' ignited by the Toronto Zoo's decision to separate two same-sex paired penguins in an attempt to breed them with the opposite sex. The popular media; news, talk shows, and online newspapers, largely appropriates the 'penguin controversy' often referring to the zoo's decision as "homophobic." One talk show host calls the zookeepers "cruel and bigoted" and refers to

the controversy as “a hate crime against penguins everywhere.” This type of commentary clearly demonstrates the current extent of anthropomorphism – that popular media exploits complex animal behaviors to advance human, social ideology.

My film exposes the extent of the effect of popular media’s use of anthropomorphism on the general population. Films like *March of the Penguins* and *Happy Feet* have trained us to individualize and thus sympathize with individual animals. Scattered over the Internet, I show personal testimonies that echo the media: “leave the penguins alone. Don’t be homophobic.” Initially, my film encourages this reaction in the sense that it is good to care about individual animals. In an attempt to wade through the politicized debate, however, my character discovers the pitfall of this type of anthropocentric viewpoint. If the Toronto Zoo heeded the media and public’s reaction and kept the penguins together, they would have jeopardized the African penguin conservation program. As the film points out, African penguins are endangered and are experiencing a sharp population decline in the wild. Conservation programs, like that of the Toronto Zoo, are integral in maintaining genetic diversity for penguin species. Towards this effect, the anthropomorphic reaction of the media and the public pits the rights of individual penguins against the survival of a species. My film points out that although it is good that we care about animals and that we are able to empathize with them, it is important to realize that nonhuman animal’s needs, however similar, are very different than our own. In other words, anthropocentric reactions created by popular media’s depiction of penguins as ‘little people,’ could jeopardize animal wellbeing when we examine the situation at the level of a population or species.

As my thesis film reveals, once the penguins are separated, they quickly pair with introduced females. This suggests several conclusions: one, the penguins were not 'gay' in the sense that human society understands the term and, two, the bond that penguins form between one another is entirely different than that of our own human experience. The complex behaviors involved in pair bonding in penguins, having evolved over millions of years, entirely exclusive of our own evolution, cannot be summarized by a simple human analogy. Animal behavioral scientist, William Timberlake, asserts that although "anthropomorphism can contribute to the study of [animal] behavior, alone it leads inevitably to the realm of human social relations, not to the realm of understanding [animal] behavior" (85).

My thesis film argues it is necessary to empathize with animals in order to properly care for them and anthropomorphism aids in developing empathy; however, the extreme subjectivity involved in imposing the same morals and values we expect from our society onto animals is problematic. Animals occupy an important place within our society. Although we invite them into our homes and our families as pets, we rely on them often for our existence and sustenance, it is important that we recognize they are not members of our society. Furthermore, treating them as such can, at times, do more harm than good. As I mention in my thesis film, "A bear doesn't need a lawyer because we called her a *killer.* A dog doesn't get a promotion when we call him a *hero*. And a penguin doesn't need an advocacy group because we called him *gay*."

Popular media's use of anthropomorphism, in some ways, helps society care about animals, but the extreme subjectivity, as demonstrated in films like *March of the*

Penguins has negative consequences. It leads us to interpret animal behavior through our own moral compass rather than acknowledge the significant, biological differences that every species exhibits. The average viewer does not discern between anthropomorphism as allegory or as a replacement for scientific explanations of animal behavior. The unchecked use of what was previously a literary device, has now become a widely accepted anthropocentric viewpoint which negates the necessity of understanding the differences between human and nonhuman.

Pamela Asquith identifies two major forms of anthropomorphism: situational and categorical (33). Situational anthropomorphism misinterprets an animal behavior by labeling it as a human behavior in a given situation (an example is saying penguin A *loves* penguin B because they are spending time with one another). Categorical anthropomorphism, on the other hand, makes blanket statements that are either entirely wrong or impossible to prove. An example of categorical anthropomorphism is calling a penguin 'gay." The definition of a term like 'gay' is defined by a society – its members acknowledge the meaning of the term by determining 'gayness.' Since penguins are not members of our society how can they be gay? Labeling them as such fails to describe complex animal behaviors and narcissistically assumes that human experience is the foundation for *all* experience. Along these lines, we see the paramount consequence of anthropocentrism. As Busé elaborates:

> To see any human society as a model for widely varying animal species is to assume that we stand atop an evolutionary "ladder," that other animals are climbing up that ladder behind us, and that they must follow our examples if they are to join us on the high rungs (161).

Obviously, it is essential that we as humans treat animals well. We have advanced

our understanding of animals and their emotional capabilities well beyond Descartes' early concept that they are autonomous 'machines,' unable to feel or emote. It is important, nevertheless, that society is able to recognize and understand anthropomorphism. The prevailing modern depiction of nonhuman animals in popular media has the effect of diminishing our understanding of animals rather than advancing it.

CONCLUSION

As some academics have pointed out, anthropomorphism can be useful in aiding conservation through individualizing animals and highlighting their similarities to humans, thus encouraging a type of "celebrity" in animal form (Mitman 193). Biologist Marc Bekoff argues, "When we anthropomorphize, we're doing what comes naturally and we shouldn't be punished for it. It's part of who we are" (125). I would argue that anthropomorphism, in itself, is not *bad*; however, it is important that consumers of popular media have the tools to distinguish between animal allegory, used for narrative effect, and anthropomorphism as a replacement for scientific explanation of animal behavior. As Bousé points out, the danger of anthropomorphism is the "reduction of complex processes to oversimplified formulations, of what should have been metaphors to literal interpretations, and of broad, biological principles to narrow, psychological motives on the part of individuals" (169).

The so-called 'penguin controversy' I expose in my thesis film identifies the paradox of society's anthropomorphic dilemma: in a world saturated with popular media, in which conservation and biological understanding are increasingly important, what is the role of anthropomorphism? My thesis film identifies the two extremes; on the one hand, complete, scientific objectivity has little importance in general society – nothing exists in a vacuum – and on the other hand, the opposite extreme, imbuing nonhuman animals with humanness and thus including them within our society, is equally troublesome. As humans we inherently anthropomorphize and, largely, this ability allows us to extend our empathy beyond ourselves, but it is perhaps necessary for popular media

to employ a more moderate approach to anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism is clearly an important literary device that provides animal allegories viewers can relate to. As this essay argues, the predominant issue with popular media's use of anthropomorphism arises when it replaces accurate explanations of animal behavior under the claim of scientific authority. I do not propose a complete abolition of anthropomorphism, but more moderation. A moderate approach might include replacing entirely anthropomorphic explanations of animal behavior with descriptions that draw similarities between human and nonhuman 'personhood.' Film historian Pete Porter explains, "Anthropomorphism as a one-size-fits-all concept fails to capture such nuances of being… An alternative schema is personhood, which promises a greater attention to such nuances" (402). If popular media were to replace blanket statements, "they're just like us," with more moderate statements, " they have these similarities to us," that still leaves room for describing nonhuman otherness while appreciating our similarities. In this way, we could describe animals as having certain qualities we identify as 'personhood:' emotions, means of communication, social structure, et cetera, while still identifying their otherness. This approach allows for scientific explanations of otherness while simultaneously acknowledging sameness: "animals are similar, but this is how they are different." A moderate approach to anthropomorphism, such as this, avoids anthropocentrism while creating space for scientific objectivity and further understanding of the other – nonhuman animals.

For films like *March of the Penguins*, which employs anthropomorphism as allegory in order to advance the narrative while still claiming scientific authority, I

propose a further method in the form of a disclaimer. Perhaps media that presents itself as a scientific authority, such as natural history documentaries, should be required to disclose their use of anthropomorphism. In the world of feature films, it is common to precede a movie with a title that disclaims accuracy or authority: “All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.” These types of warnings minimize the risk of legal action; yet, maybe there is a potential solution in adapting this type of disclaimer for anthropomorphism. Along these lines, media that claim scientific authority while using animal allegories in place of accurate descriptions of animal behavior should use a disclaimer such as the following: “Although the images of this film are real, their explanations have been adapted to suit the story and do not reflect the accuracy of scientific findings.” A disclaimer such as this would allow the medium to employ animal as allegory while helping the viewer identify and distinguish between anthropomorphism as narrative device versus accurate descriptions of animal behavior.

Popular media rarely, if ever, makes reference to its own use of anthropomorphism. Increasing computer technology blurs the line between fact and fiction. Consequently, consumers of media are experiencing a decreasing ability to distinguish between animal allegory and scientific authority. The prevalent depiction of nonhuman animals in wildlife film has remained largely unchanged in over sixty years. Too often popular media replaces scientific information with narrative-advancing, dramatic techniques encouraging anthropocentric viewpoints. Anthropomorphism is clearly part of storytelling and here to stay, but further discussion is warranted as to its,

often covert, use in popular media. Viewers are in need of better tools to identify its use and understand the consequences. Ultimately, it is up to media makers to determine how anthropomorphism is used and to what extent.

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