

BEYOND THE IMAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Documentaries with science and nature as their subject matter have a great, untapped potential for art virtually unexplored in the history of film. A look at the general trend of these films shows a steady progression attempting more subjective and reflexive treatments of material, but science documentaries today are generally stuck in the classical expository mode. This lack of progression in films with scientific subject (including nature and wildlife) subject matter is largely due to producers' unwillingness to break from the conventions of genre.

In their attempts to create *art* instead of *craft*, the next generation of science and wildlife filmmakers will recognize that the promise of art rests in its ability to restructure symbolic representation and therefore change how an audience understands the world. This restructuring of symbolic representation is important and necessary because of hidden and oppressive ideological forces in society ratified by "normal" symbols. The new generation of science documentary creator will discard the notion of film images as *facts* and instead pursue a more ambiguous goal of *truth*. This may involve fabrication; a "lie that makes us know the truth." Several individuals serve as examples in this endeavor, such as Brecht, Buñuel, Morris and Herzog. In their works, these artists employ reflexive techniques that elevate viewers' consciousness. My own thesis film project, *The Last Run* (2006), demonstrates some of these techniques more successfully than others.

Creators of the new science and nature documentary must break step with decades of established conventions, moving beyond a literal, objective perspective and embracing an imaginative, subjective treatment of their material. These new "artistic" science and wildlife filmmakers will have three goals: 1) Escape from genre and its binary tendencies; 2) Make art by altering symbolic meanings or representations; and 3) Choose subjects of political (even controversial) or personal importance that are uncommon in today's television programs about science and nature.

INTRODUCTION

Motion pictures with nature or science as their subject have a great, untapped potential for art. Creators of the new science and nature documentary must break step with decades of established conventions and move beyond a literal, objective perspective and embrace imaginative, subjective treatments of their material. Current aesthetic and narrative conventions clearly distinguish nature and science documentaries as sub-genres of the greater documentary form. As in all motion pictures, there exists a distinction between craft and art in the science documentary and nature documentary realms – the great majority of this body of work being craft, not art. A documentary may be an excellently crafted story or demonstration of a scientific concept, but if it doesn't move the viewer to question the world around them, see it from a new perspective, or possibly confront the techniques of representation, then it is not art. Furthermore, the subject matter in science or nature documentaries is rarely of a personal or political nature. Rather, the subject generally defers to a pool of technological innovations or trendy hypotheses. The condition described here is a shame, because our world is increasingly governed by the discoveries of science and technology. Under certain circumstances it can be irresponsible or even dangerous for society to promote passive engagement with such material, as dominant ideologies entrench themselves in our minds in the application of technology or our interpretation of nature and scientific concepts.

There will be three goals for the new wildlife or science documentary creator. First, escape from the shackles of genre and its binary, structuralist tendencies. Second,

make art, not craft. This new crop of “artistic” filmmakers will use interactive and/or reflexive strategies to “shake up” the viewer’s societal frame of reference. Third, the new science and nature filmmaker will strive for subject matter of a political or personal nature that is uncommon in current television documentaries. To achieve these goals and break step with decades of established conventions, creators of the new science and nature documentary must move beyond a literal, objective perspective and embrace imaginative, subjective treatments of their material.

A BRIEF HISTORY

A look at the history of nonfiction cinema yields four overarching historical eras. Each of these eras overlap to some extent. The first of these periods came before the idea of a “documentary” existed, as we know it today. This included the very first films in the late 1800’s (ie: Lumière Brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895))¹ and carries through Cherry Kearton’s *Roosevelt in Africa* (1910) and the 1920’s adventure films of filmmakers like Martin and Osa Johnson (*Trailing African Wild Animals* (1923), described as “the first purely commercial animal feature”²) or Cooper and Shoedsack (*Grass* (1925), *Chang* (1927)).

The classical period of documentary as a distinct genre from narrative fiction film began somewhat in the 1920’s and spanned the 1950’s. John Grierson helped define the classical documentary and has been called the “Father of documentary film.”³ Pare Lorentz’ *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937) are good examples of the expository style that defined documentaries of that period (and continue to define the documentaries on Discovery Channel or National Geographic today). One should also point out that during this period Walt Disney began producing in large quantities his animated “nature films” – feature films with talking animals as the main characters. *Bambi* (1942) was the first of these and is perhaps the most well known today. *Seal Island* won an Academy Award in 1948, and was one of Disney’s first wildlife films, a

¹ Barsam, Richard M., *Nonfiction Film*. Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 19

² Mitman, Greg, *Reel Nature*. Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 26

³ Barsam, Richard M., *Nonfiction Film*. Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 46

series called *True Life Adventures*. Although this has been characterized as a romantic idealization of nature emerging from a real situation,⁴ these films are really more of an anthropomorphic exposition.

Robert Flaherty's films, especially *Nanook of the North* (1922), influenced the 1920's adventure films, and in a way he was far ahead of his time. *Nanook of the North*, his masterpiece and first film, was a poetic exposition of human struggles in a hostile natural environment. He realized that "filmmaking is...an act of the imagination; it is both photographic truth and a cinematic rearrangement of the truth."⁵

In the 1960's the techniques and ideological ramifications of the classical expository documentary came into question. Filmmakers of the cinema vérité and direct cinema movements like the Drew Associates or Frederick Wiseman challenged the classical documentary's authority as an objective depiction of reality by removing the "voice of god" narration and expository editing style.⁶ The difference between cinema vérité and direct cinema lies in their method. Direct cinema, also known as "fly on the wall" cinema, did not permit filmmaker intervention with their subjects. The idea was to capture reality as it happened, as Frederick Wiseman did in his many films such as *High School* (1968) or *Zoo* (1993). Cinema vérité looks a lot like direct cinema to a viewer, but in this mode of filmmaking, the director could act as a catalyst of action behind the scenes. Both of these modes of filmmaking continue today to some extent. French filmmaker Nicolas Philibert's film *To Be and To Have* (2002) about a one-room

⁴ Ibid. p. 46

⁵ Ibid. p. 52

⁶ Lewis, Kevin, *War Stories: Drew Deserts Direct Cinema for Latest Doc*. Documentary Magazine, 2006

schoolhouse in rural France, or Jehane Noujaim's film *Control Room* (2004) are two examples of modern verité cinema.

More recently (since the 1980's) a trend has emerged (among the more creative filmmakers, at least) toward more subjective or reflexive documentaries. These films contrast with the verité movement of the 1960's by acknowledging the position and point of view of the filmmaker. In Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986), the filmmaker in fact becomes a character through voice-over and the occasional self-interview. What I will call "subjective filmmaking" (those films employing interactive or self-reflexive techniques) is a mode of filmmaking with greater awareness of conventions and a more transparent point of view than expository film.

Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) uses recreations with the visual style of film noir in his documentary about a young man convicted of murder. This film takes one step further than *Sherman's March* by using fictionalized recreations; which at that point in history were a taboo technique in documentary. The recreations cast doubt on the documentary form itself, while simultaneously casting doubt on the man's guilt.

This general history of documentary film demonstrates two things. First, science and wildlife subjects have always been a part of documentary. From one of the first "scientific movies" by Eadweard Muybridge of a horse running in the famous bet by Leland Stanford in 1872 to the early wildlife adventure films in Africa with Teddy Roosevelt, the filmic medium has always concerned itself with science and natural

history subject matter.⁷ That the documentary should continue to explore and exploit these subjects is clear. Second, over the years there has been a steady progression in documentary toward a more subjective cinema that supports and encourages a “higher consciousness” in the viewer. A viewer with such elevated consciousness gets an experience from the film that allows them to “step outside the box” in the way they see the world. For the most part, science documentary has not moved beyond the objective literal perspective common in the era of the “classical” expository documentary. As we will see, this lethargy of innovation is largely due to the leftover conventions of genre.

⁷ Bousé, Derek, Wildlife Films. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, p. 41

THE SHACKLES OF GENRE

In his book Film/Genre, genre theorist Rick Altman describes a film genre as having a lifecycle. Altman quotes John Cawelti.

“One can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period of articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so well known that people become tired of their predictability.”⁸

The genre described as “television science documentaries” includes many of the science documentaries and nature or wildlife documentaries made in the last twenty or so years, and are well represented by the PBS series *NOVA*.⁹ But this genre fits a bit awkwardly into Cawelti’s lifecycle of a genre. Certainly we are through the phase of initial discovery and articulation (Cherry Kearton to Disney’s *True Life Adventures*), and certainly the patterns have become well known and predictable for audiences (take for example David Attenborough’s narration in the *Trials of Life* or *The Blue Planet* series). However, we’ve somehow skipped Cawelti’s phase of “conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences.”¹⁰ The future creators of the science documentary will heighten this self-awareness by manipulating conventions currently taken for granted

⁸ Altman, Rick, Film/Genre. British Film Institute, 2000, p. 21

⁹ Bousé, Derek, Wildlife Films. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000

¹⁰ Take for example Bousé’s analysis of the trailer for 1990’s BBC series, *The Trials of Life*, in his introduction to Wildlife Films. There, he shows how the violent United States trailer prompted outrage at the BBC because of its graphic nature “misrepresenting the series”. However, Bousé argues that the trailer was simply a condensed version, a “mirror” of the series. Thus, the wildlife filmmakers were totally out of touch with what they were really doing and thus did not possess a “conscious self-awareness”.

by both audience and director. This coincides with the more reflexive, subjective and imaginative cinema of the late 20th century.

Attempting to decipher and dismantle the “television science documentary” requires a close look at the norms of the genre. Altman proposes a “semantic/syntactic approach to genre.”¹¹ To truly understand and categorize a film genre, look at both semantic elements (i.e.: iconography, subject matter) as well as syntactic elements (i.e.: narrative structure, creative techniques). To simplify, semantic elements are *what* we see or what a film is *about*, syntactic elements are *how* the story is told.

What are the semantic elements of science documentaries? Science and wildlife are the subject matter. For science documentaries, scientists, laboratories, microscopes, research findings and technology are all basic semantic elements. For nature/wildlife films, wild animals and vast natural landscapes are the norm, and the struggle or wonder of life in the “natural world” is the theme.

In the “Blue-Chip”¹² subgenre of wildlife films people are notably *absent* as a semantic element. More recently, as with a film such as *Winged Migration* (2003), wildlife films may include some human elements, maybe even people directly. In *Winged Migration*, unnamed human characters hunt migrating geese, and ducks end up stuck in oil at a refinery. From an ethical (or, increasingly, a practical) standpoint, the world is simply too small to avoid people altogether, and such subjects that truly are

¹¹ Altman, Rick, *Film/Genre*. British Film Institute, 2000, p. 89

¹² Bousé defines a Blue-Chip wildlife documentary as generally possessing several characteristics. These include mega-fauna, visual splendor (wilderness), dramatic storyline (rather than a science lecture), absence of science (the most often broken of rules), absence of politics (except, perhaps, for a final statement by the narrator), a sense of timelessness, and an absence of people (a rule broken more and more recently).

devoid of human beings (as in *March of the Penguins* (2005)) are becoming rare. It seems probable that in the future wildlife films will merge with science documentaries, as the semantic element of wildlife will no longer be *the* defining characteristic. The number of truly Blue-Chip films will dwindle to only the most obscure or inaccessible topics such as the deep sea, as seen in *March of the Penguins* or *The Blue Planet: The Deep* (2001).

Syntactic elements for wildlife films nearly always include evocative music, expository voice-of-god narration and life and death struggles as the key narrative conflict. Wildlife films, although often devoid of human signs, employ heavy anthropomorphisation (as in the *March of the Penguins* love story) in telling their stories. The success of wildlife films depends on another syntactic element. One might call this the “How did they get that shot?” factor. Ironically, though there are no humans portrayed in *March of the Penguins*, nearly everyone who watches this film wonders how the camera crew got the winter storm footage. In this way, humans are present at a subtextual level.¹³

The syntactic elements of science films also include music and expository narration, but in a plot structure that closely follows the scientific method. That structure generally plays out as: (1) observation – (2) hypothesis (posed as a question, rather than a

¹³ Because of this “getting the shot” subtext, there seems to be great potential to pursue interactive or even reflexive modes of filmmaking in wildlife films, where the presence of a human photographer is implicit. I will later discuss an example of this in Hugh Miles’ *Puma: Lion of the Andes* (1996).

statement) – (3) experiment – (4) application. In science documentaries, “B-Roll”¹⁴ dominates the images on screen and is a common method for advancing the story. Rarely does an event occur unscripted, for the first time, on camera as it would in a verité documentary, even though many science documentaries stage scenes and pretend that they are happening as “life unscripted.” The modern use of computer graphics to make a point has more recently become a prerequisite for television documentaries on science and nature.¹⁵ Both science and wildlife films also share one other key syntactic element – education. The audience learns interesting facts about the subject matter. This is part of Discovery or PBS’s material, which can be described as “edutainment.”¹⁶

National Geographic’s recent series *Strange Days on Planet Earth* (2005) successfully uses this scientific plot structure with celebrity actor Edward Norton hosting and narrating. One episode, *The One Degree Factor*, takes as its primary observation that human action is warming the world. Subsequent sequences begin with individual scientists noticing an event, such as dwindling numbers of migrating caribou in Alaska, and proceed to investigate the cause of their observation, ultimately applying the knowledge to the greater question and implication of the series “What are we doing to the earth and how will this affect us?” Large amounts of staged B-Roll, interviews with scientists, and computer graphics demonstrate concepts and move the story along. In the

¹⁴ “B-Roll,” along with interviews, makes up the majority of the screen time in many science documentaries. This is often footage, usually without important sound, of actions demonstrating a concept or historical event. For example, a scientist measures a sample on a scale while in voice-over he explains what he is doing.

¹⁵ Comment by Janet Rose (executive producer at PBS *Nature*) at the International Wildlife Film Festival, 2004

¹⁶ Higgins, John M., *Back to Nature*. Broadcasting and Cable, January 16, 2006

Strange Days series, all the semantic and syntactic elements of the television science documentary are present, and there is no doubt that it belongs in documentary's science sub-genre.

But, for all its flashy graphics, celebrity host, and high production value, *Strange Days* is essentially not much different from, or even more advanced than, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936). These films utilize the same fundamental narrative techniques, though decades of technology separate their expression. If, in deciding which elements to include in a film with science or nature as its topic, the filmmaker defers solely to the semantic/syntactic elements of science documentaries, they shackle their imagination to the confinement of what is arguably a stale genre. *Strange Days* still pretends to be objective, it presents material literally, and it still encourages a passive engagement with that material for the audience. Information may be conveyed, indeed, this may be very interesting or frightening information. But information presented with a hip style is not art, and a science documentary like *Strange Days on Planet Earth* is not art. It is commendable for its selection of controversial subject matter and its excellent expression of storytelling, but at the end of the day it is still craft because watching it does not change someone's life.

WHY IS ART IMPORTANT? / THE WORLD IS A SYMBOL

The promise of art rests with its ability to restructure symbolic representation and therefore change how one sees the world.

Cinema is first a sensory experience. Emotion or knowledge comes secondarily, as a result of the symbols seen or heard. This primary reaction by an audience to a motion picture is to the image on the screen and the sound cues that go with, or occasionally contrast against, that image. As an audience, our engagement with the image and sound-scape is always subjective, no matter how factual or objective a film may purport to be.

In his Ways of Seeing, John Berger argues how the picture is a visual symbol, a representation of reality seen through the lens of society. The visual symbols common to a culture shape world-views (even identity) for the individuals within that culture. Society fills in for us how to speak about what we see (or hear). Berger writes, “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.”¹⁷ One might add that the child hears even before it can fully see, as it takes several weeks for a baby’s eyes to begin properly focusing. So let us consider for the sake of this discussion that Berger’s “seeing” describes both image *and* sound in film.

There is disjunction in this understanding between what we see or hear and what we understand. “The relation between what we see and what we know is never

¹⁷ Berger, John, Ways of Seeing. BBC, 1985, p. 7

settled...the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.”¹⁸ There is a gap between representation and understanding. From within this gap emerges an opportunity for subjective imagination. Symbols, taken literally at face value, don’t quite work. Why then, try to use them at all?

For one thing, they come easily to us, and they allow us to communicate quickly and effectively under most circumstances. But this ease of communication belies a more nefarious sub quality of objective symbolic representation. Suppose, along with basic meaning, there are things society tells us unknowingly, unconsciously. (The philosopher Louis Althusser calls this interpellation.¹⁹) As humans, we are socially constructed products of society. Motion pictures are also products of that society, and are thus socially constructed on multiple levels; in its symbols (image and sound) or in its actual practical creation. This is the reason why any pretense that a documentary could be an objective portrayal of reality fell away in the 1960’s with the new subjective movements as observational cinema replaced expository documentary. More recently, the interactive and self-reflexive movements have questioned observational cinema’s truth claims.

Althusser described this intangible thing coloring our understanding of the world as an Ideological State Apparatus. His description is of an oppressive force that regulates the level of consciousness of the average citizen according to dominant ideology.²⁰ However, there is the potential, under threat from this ambiguous force, for higher

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ From lectures by Walter Metz, taken from Louis Althusser’s *Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus*, published in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press, 2001 (Ben Brewster, transl.)

²⁰ Ibid.

consciousness and understanding. As film is a metaphorical and symbolic medium created under the umbrella of this nefarious apparatus, it is subject to the same mechanisms of influence as an individual. Without imagination and deconstruction, valuable reflection on our ideology and its symbols cannot occur. On the other hand, a motion picture that *does* succeed in deconstructing symbols becomes a rock in this oppressive current and creates an “eddy of higher consciousness.”²¹

The observational cinema of the 1960’s was a first step in trying to evade these “interpellative” forces. But as soon as this new cinema began, it came under fire from modernists, who wanted to do more with the gaps of understanding caused by symbolic representation. These filmmakers (such as the Drew Associates, who included Robert Drew, DA Pennebaker and Albert Maysles²²) try to move beyond traditional factual or objective representation and foreground the subjective qualities of cinema. This contrasts with the observational movement’s hopes of capturing truths of reality simply by photographing actual events.

Werner Herzog, coming out of the German New Wave or New German cinema has his own take on the cinema verité movement of the 1960’s, calling it “devoid of verité...It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants.” His manifesto continues in twelve declarations (repeated here only to part 7).

“3. Cinema Verité confounds fact and truth, and thus plows only stones. And yet, facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.

²¹ Discussion with Walter Metz, 2003.

²² Lewis, Kevin, *War Stories: Drew Deserts Direct Cinema for Latest Doc*. Documentary Magazine, March-April 2006

4. Fact creates norms, and truth illumination.
5. There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.
6. Filmmakers of Cinema Verité resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts.
7. Tourism is sin, and travel on foot virtue.”²³

There are more categories. Herzog does not believe that pointing a camera at something can capture anything more than an image of that thing. To do so and call it truth is in fact a sin (One might say, because this promotes the subconscious absorption of the Ideological State Apparatus). Instead, striving for a “poetic, ecstatic truth,” Herzog blends documentary and fiction with great subjective imagination. Norms are the enemy, the goal illumination.

Picasso said of art, that it is “a lie that makes us realize the truth.” Film is a great fantastical lie of which the audience is a part. Disbelief suspended, audience immersion into the fantasy of narrative fiction films can be total. Hollywood fictional narratives create a believable reality that doesn’t actually exist, where we vicariously connect with the “truth” of the narrative.

Documentaries on the other hand create an endearing lie by presenting a reality that audiences know *does* exist; a reality to which, in some small part, they belong. In some cases, this “lie” stretches reality further.

Werner Herzog’s *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) makes its setting, the burning oilfields of Kuwait after the first Gulf War, quickly apparent, but the film itself never acknowledges this other than through its images. (Titles and narration never mention the

²³ From Werner Herzog’s official website: www.wernerherzog.com

filming location.) Somehow, though the images are obviously of Middle Eastern oil fields, they are amazing enough, in fact surreal enough, that through music and alternative narration and lack of explanation, they take on another meaning. Indeed, the film is like a work of science fiction.

The film begins with a *fictionalized*²⁴ quote from Blaise Pascal; “The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like creation – in grandiose splendor.” With subtle symphonic horn music, Herzog voices the narration that follows over images of smoky mountain ranges, which look a little bit like (and in fact are) small mounds of dirt shot with a telephoto lens. They are convincing enough that we go along with it. “A planet in our solar system. White mountain ranges, clouds, a land shrouded in mist.” Then a slow motion shot without sound of firemen trying to put out a burning oil field, signaling to turn off the water to a fire hose. “The first creature we encountered tried to communicate something to us.” Then a title “I. A Capital City” followed by an aerial of what is probably Kuwait city at dawn with quiet audio of the call to prayer. “Something is looming over this city, this city that will soon be laid waste by war. Now it is still alive, biding its time. Nobody has yet begun to suspect the impending doom.” Then tragic symphonic music rolls in to accentuate the mood.

Because of the audience’s historical situation, the images shown are recognizable as having been filmed unstaged. They are a kind of fact. We know that this is Kuwait, that there was a war; that the war resulted in Saddam Hussein igniting the oil fields during his army’s retreat. But for Herzog, that information is not interesting. What is more

²⁴ Hoberman, J., *Werner Herzog’s New Direction*. The New York Times, Sunday, May 8, 2005

interesting is the condition of a civilization that seeks its own destruction. He is interested in the lessons learned in the dark shadows of the clouds of smoke from the burning oil fields. Like he describes in his manifesto, the facts in this situation are not enough to illuminate the truth. Instead, he fabricates a plot structure, imagining a distant civilization on another planet, but uses real images.

Discovery International originally marketed the film as a documentary.²⁵ However, the conventions of traditional documentary form would yield an entirely different film with the same material. Let us imagine such a hypothetical film. The narrator would go on and on about how many gallons of fuel were burned and how much money was lost and how long it took to put them out. The film would have the same amazing visuals but also interviews and testimonials by firefighters and experts. By sticking to the facts in this case, the film narrows its scope to a film about burning oil fields at a certain time and place. Even if, supposing at the resolution of this hypothetical documentary, the narrator speaks about how this could be the future of civilization, the voice would have little impact. We would *know* what the narrator was talking about, but we would not *understand* the larger implications of what they were saying. This film would not illuminate the true gravity of the situation. Instead, perhaps according to Althusser, really what the film would be saying is, “war gives us amazing images to make television with.”

What is interesting in comparing this hypothetical film to the real one is that in the case of the hypothetical film, narration at the end of the film admonishing the horrors of

²⁵ *Lessons of Darkness* DVD menu notes “Werner Herzog Bio.”

war would have little effect. This is because the film sticks to the traditional syntax of a documentary. Its symbols and ideologies fit in perfectly with the norms of the Ideological State Apparatus. On the other hand, even though the audience recognizes the images and sounds in Herzog's version, the same images immediately become *unrecognizable* because they are quickly taken out of the previously understood context. In this case, what the narrator says is illuminating, even though he is in fact, lying. By taking the literal narration and literal use of images and sound out of the picture and by changing the semantics and syntax of documentary, Herzog causes a rift in our symbolic understanding. The world in the film becomes allegorical, the film no longer simply the documentation of an event. The symbols of the burning oil fields now successfully signify the entire destruction of our own civilization.

ART VS. CRAFT

The difference between art and craft is that art raises consciousness. The purpose of art is “to cause us to confront and question what is being done in our name, or what we ourselves are in the midst of doing.”²⁶ Basically, art makes us see things in a new way, differently from mainstream perspective by restructuring symbolic associations. Bill Nichols, in his book Representing Reality, classifies documentary into four categories (not mutually exclusive). These are expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive.²⁷ Expository documentaries include classics like *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, or Disney’s *Seal Island*, or modern television science documentaries such as *NOVA*, or National Geographic’s *Strange Days on Planet Earth*. Observational cinema includes cinema vérité and direct cinema movements. There has been very little use of this mode of documentary concerning scientific or wildlife subject matter. However, when narration is removed (as in Godfrey Reggio’s *Anima Mundi* (1992)) the film moves closer to direct cinema (at least in its conventions) and may be received as an art film.²⁸

Interactive cinema engages the viewer at a different level, inviting them inside the filmmaking process by breaking the illusory veil of the absence of a filmmaker. Again, wildlife and science documentaries have seldom utilized this mode. One exception in the wildlife film subgenre is Hugh Mile’s chronicle of Patagonian cougars in *Puma: Lion of the Andes* (1996) in which the filmmaker’s quest to film this elusive cat becomes part of

²⁶ Geuens, Jean-Pierre, Film Production Theory. State University of New York, 2000, p. 52

²⁷ Nichols, Bill, Representing Reality. Indiana University Press, 1991, Chapter II

²⁸ Bousé, Derek, Wildlife Films. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, p. 2

the story. Miles even appears on camera, and at one exciting moment the setting sun casts his shadow far enough to have it noticeably fall upon the cougar he names Penny.

Although *Puma: Lion of the Andes* acknowledges the presence of the filmmaker and situates the perspective thus, the film retains much of the chicanery and craft that goes into telling a wildlife story. How much of the story is true, how much is rearranged? Were sequences shot in the order they appear in the film? Were shots from multiple days spliced together as if occurring simultaneously? The film itself answers none of these questions. Of course, if a scene has a great deal of coverage, then there is a great deal of filmmaking going on that slips past a viewer distracted by Miles' voice narrating his and Penny's exploits.

The fourth mode described by Nichols, the reflexive mode, is the highest evolution of film as art thus far because it not only situates the filmmaker, as in the interactive mode, but also calls into question the very techniques used to do so. This is where a film such as *Puma* falls short of being reflexive. A reflexive cinema raises issues about the relationship between the motion picture and what it represents. It emphasizes the degree to which dominant ideology archetypes the film's subjects (people, or animals).

Nichols writes, "Like poetry, reflexive strategies remove the encrustations of habit [and] political reflexivity removes the ideological encrustations that support a given social order."²⁹ The idea is to depart from the norm and therefore make things unfamiliar or unusual. Russian formalists called this "ostranenei." Nichols describes the effect of reflexive techniques upon audiences:

²⁹ Nichols, Bill, *Representing Reality*. Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 67

“Unexpected juxtapositions or stylistic departures from the norms of a text or the conventions of a genre make realism and referentiality themselves strange. They fold the viewer’s consciousness back onto itself so that it comes into contact with the work of the cinematic apparatus rather than being allowed to move unimpeded toward engagement with a representation of the historical world.”³⁰

One such example is Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line* (1986). His film reflexively folds viewer consciousness by recreating the different versions of accounts from witnesses of a murder scene. Each person’s account is slightly different, and each time the very stylized recreations change slightly. Characters change their hair, a man becomes a woman, the number of shots fired varies. Instead of reinforcing the arguments or descriptions of players, as traditional B-Roll or recreations in science documentaries would, Morris’ recreations raise *doubts* about these arguments. They muddle reality, and in doing so, the truth claims of the characters statements come into question. Not only that, but the truth claim of the whole documentary form comes into question. At the time this was controversial, because fictional recreations were for narrative films, not documentary. Because the recreations cast doubt on the documentary itself (as well as the statements of its characters) *The Thin Blue Line* is an example of a reflexive documentary. Now, however, modern TV documentaries do recreations all the time. Instead of raising doubt about historical events they try to demonstrate them through recreation. They’ve borrowed the aesthetic without retaining its original intent or effect.

Taking something at face value doesn’t require an elevation of consciousness. To take something literally is to engage it at face value, without question. In the new science

³⁰ Ibid. p 61

documentary, traditional literal treatments of material will be obsolete. The goal of the new science documentary creator will be to confound traditional notions of what is “normal” or “strange.” They will achieve this through the use of imaginative reflexive strategies that raise a level of consciousness in the audience by calling into question not only qualities of subject matter but also how those qualities are presented by the film.

NEW MODERNISM

Champions of the new realm of science and nature documentaries resurrect modernism. One could call them post-post-modernists – they will bring modernism to a more accessible/entertaining level but retain its complex deconstructive tendencies.

Bertold Brecht was an original modernist whose political theatre of the 1930's sparked a movement in theatre and cinema that documentary, especially science documentary, might benefit from. Brechtian cinema or theatre presents a conflict between the diegetic (the story world) and non-diegetic (*our* world) worlds. For example, during a play he might have someone walk across stage with a sign saying, "Don't stare so solemnly." (Using techniques of "ostranenei" and being called "Brechtian" is essentially the same thing.³¹) Despite being a modernist, Brecht also, as Jean-Pierre Gueuens writes, knew the importance of offering "the audience the pleasure of 'smoking a good cigar'."³² The science documentary creator's task is no less. Entertainment is as important as illumination. After all, without people watching, there's no consciousness to elevate.

In addition to creating strife between the diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, Brecht's theatre sought to *originate* emotion in the audience, whereas traditional cinema and theatre attempt to *transfer* emotions from actors to audience through empathetic identification with characters. The difference may be subtle, but tangible nonetheless. One can make a stretch, comparing this to science documentaries' transfer of

³¹ Ibid. p. 65

³² Geuens, Jean-Pierre, Film Production Theory. State University of New York, 2000, p. 136

information, rather than emotion. In science documentaries, this information or message usually originates with the narrator, as in *Strange Days on Planet Earth* – i.e.: feel bad about our changing the environment. On the other hand, in Herzog's science fiction documentary *Lessons of Darkness*, the message has a chance to originate in the viewer. The realization that we are destroying ourselves is a very Brechtian technique employed by Herzog in depicting the aftermath of the first Gulf War.

VERISTIC SURREALISM

Science documentaries often deal with scientific method and normally treat their subject matter with the authority and respect one might expect from the scientific process. It might be difficult to incorporate surrealist tendencies into this realm. However, the new science documentary filmmaker will have every technique in their arsenal and their goal remains a deconstruction of the literal world in the hopes that this will allow them to achieve “illumination” or a truly new perspective.

What if all reality is imaginary, and in our imagination lies the true reality? There play the surrealists, who don't try to alienate or distance an audience from technique, they move completely outside a rational framework. If dominant ideology creates rationalism, then rationalism is a fraud because it masks reality according to dominant ideology. If there is no objective reality, then our rationale determining symbolic meaning is a fraud. Surrealism is one way of getting outside the “crust” of ideology.

In 1932 Luis Buñuel made a surrealist, reflexive documentary while documentary was still in its adolescence. *Las Hurdes* (1932) is an expository documentary on the surface. It is edited as such, and the accompanying narration and music at first seem to comply. Its subjects are the poor Hurdanos living in the mountains of Spain. They are starving and without resources. As the film continues, the narrator's droning, unaffected voice in the face of such suffering becomes diabolical. The melodic classical music complicates the situation even further. In the end, “there is a chasm between the three

tracks, the three distinct discourses, and we are left without any stable meaning.”³³

Buñuel takes traditional form and forces it into an irrational space. He pushes our impression of a traditional narrator to the extent that the film forces participation of the viewer, thus “folding consciousness” back upon the adolescent form of the documentary. In this case, the omniscient narrator, supposed to be normally objective and factual, tells only lies.³⁴

At the time *Las Hurdes* was controversial for a number of reasons. Because of its subversive nature, bourgeois culture panned the film. Others mistakenly criticized it for its callousness. If Buñuel had made *Las Hurdes* today it would still be controversial. But now that documentary conventions are so much more established, I think the film would have been far less *misunderstood* as a reflexive film. The lesson from the surrealist Buñuel and his film *Las Hurdes* is to take issue with a convention that bothers you by self-consciously pushing it to an extreme. (In this case, narration that might occasionally be incorrect becomes totally inaccurate.) This will alienate the audience from traditional conventions, leaving them “without any stable meaning,”³⁵ and ultimately (our goal) raising their consciousness. As Geuens writes, “[the] truth cannot be served on a plate ready for our consumption. Rather it must be sought discussed, and revised, over and over again.”³⁶

³³ Ibid. p. 222

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 224

René Magritte, a painter of the school of “naturalistic or veristic Surrealism,”³⁷ is an inspiration for the new science documentary creator. Magritte’s *La Trahison des Images* (*The Betrayal of Images*) (1928) is the classic example. The painting of a pipe, with the French writing below that says, “This is not a pipe,” ultimately points to the irreconcilability of an image and its referent. Of course we know it is not a pipe, but we still see a pipe. That pipe we see is a pipe in general, and so in some ways it’s more of a pipe than the pipe in your pocket.³⁸ If this were cinema, Nichols would certainly classify it in the interactive category of documentary because the canvas acknowledges itself as a painting by its having writing on it. But it is also reflexive. It takes symbols (a pipe, and a painting) and separates them from their traditional meanings. Like Brecht’s defamiliarization, it calls into question the meaning created by society and folds the viewer’s consciousness back upon the work of art. It makes the viewer question what is fact and what is truth, and what is a pipe and what is a painting.

Werner Herzog is a kind of “Veristic Surrealist.” Taking true subjects (the documentary image) and putting them into new and unfamiliar contexts. In *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997) Herzog studies Dieter Dengler, a pilot shot down in Vietnam and imprisoned by the Viet Cong, where he was tortured and faced death daily. He ultimately saved his own life with a spectacular escape through the jungle.

For the film, Herzog returns to the jungles of Vietnam with Dengler, where Dengler describes in a shockingly frank and detached manner how he was captured and how he

³⁷ Lynton, Norbert, *The Story of Art*. Phaidon, 1998, p. 180

³⁸ Ibid.

escaped. The scenes are totally uncanny because Herzog uses Vietnamese “actors” who are really just peasants in the jungle to play out the parts of the captors as Dengler describes what happened. The Vietnamese just sort of stare at the camera when they are done with their “part” (possibly wanting for direction) and the camera lingers. At one point the man who interacts with Dengler becomes visibly upset with the brutal pantomiming and Dengler, once finished with his description, turns to the man and comforts him and puts his arm around him smiling, “It’s all right. Don’t worry.” Then in another scene they reenact Dengler’s captors moving him through the jungle after capturing him during an escape attempt. The group of them run through the jungle, the camera follows, and everyone is out breath. As they tie up Dengler into a more secure position, he stops and says to Herzog, off camera, “This is feeling a bit strange.” It is the first time Dengler appears visibly upset.

The effect is striking. For one, we get a sense of what it meant to Dengler to be captured. Doing away with actors and the aesthetically weak recreations found so commonly in current television documentaries, Herzog cuts right to the heart of the psychology of his main character by literally putting him “through the motions” of the past.³⁹ A sit down interview with Dengler was never done for camera. Instead, he is “interviewed” walking around his house, in the jungle, in *action*. Like Magritte’s painting of a pipe, somehow the transparently staged recounting of historical event is

³⁹ This was also done in the recent documentary *Touching the Void* (2003), about mountain climbers recounting a harrowing accident. Bringing the climbers back to the site of the accident brought out strong emotions, but in this case ended with one man leaving the film. The ethics of this practice are rather suspect.

“more realistic” than a seamless fictional recreation. In a sort of “Brechtian style,” the discomfort in watching this scene originates in the viewer because during these scenes we are not only uncomfortable for Dengler, but also for ourselves as we watch another man’s suffering recounted. Herzog never lets us forget this fact, that we are watching a movie about a real man’s suffering. The ethics of Herzog’s techniques here are questionable, though they do pique the imagination, raise consciousness and perspective, and juxtapose symbols (ie: Vietnamese and American soldiers) of a generations old war in a unique way.

Though this is not a film about science or wildlife, *Little Dieter* is a good example for science documentaries of how a cinema can become interactive and reflexive. Like the science documentaries and nature documentaries of the present and the future, it has interviews and deals with subjects that happened in the past and were not filmable. Instead of pretending to recreate the events as if they were happening for the first time, Herzog allows the viewer and the participant in on the recreation process. The way Herzog staged his interviews and recreations they became even more real, precisely because he was not trying to suspend disbelief like recreations in the current breed of science or historical documentaries.

THE LAST RUN

Many of the ideas presented here arose during the production of my own thesis film project, *The Last Run* (2006), which takes as its subject the importance and decline of salmon in the Pacific Northwest as seen through several individuals with close ties to salmon. In addition to exploring points of view regarding salmon as an important cultural icon and food source, the project also includes traditional natural history sequences that are meant to demonstrate the importance of salmon to ecosystems. My hope was that by accessing the importance of salmon on multiple levels (some expository, some subjective, others more experiential), the audience ultimately attains deeper insights and emotional connections with the salmon than they would in a traditional “Blue-Chip” wildlife film or a science documentary that, for example, follows one scientist’s struggle to save the salmon. As a critical filmmaker, the degree to which *The Last Run* is successful in these endeavors marks my point of embarkation, not my final destination.

First, reconsider the three goals of the next generation of science and wildlife filmmaker as described earlier: 1) Escape from genre and its binary tendencies; 2) Make art by altering symbolic meanings or representations; and 3) Choose subjects of political (even controversial) or personal (humanistic) importance.

The Last Run is more successful in goals (1) and (3) than it is with goal (2), which is perhaps the most difficult to achieve of the three. It takes a very partisan political subject (3) and treats it without regard to political party. It eschews heavy-handed

political commentary for individual relationships between salmon and people, and salmon and the ecosystem. *The Last Run* is most successful in attaining this goal.

With regard to genre and binary thought (1), *The Last Run* is not just about how hard or miraculous a salmon's life is, like a traditional nature documentary would be. Nor does the movie follow a traditional science documentary's structure – it doesn't look to science to explain an issue that is much larger than the one facet of human understanding found in science. Whether or not we may truly see the last run of wild salmon in our rivers is left open to interpretation. Instead the individuals presented in the film give a small variety of predictions about the future of local wild salmon that together paint more of a *feeling* rather than a concrete yes or no answer.

The scene with the tiny fry uncovered from its nest demonstrates a more “experiential” level of engagement, in which emotions originate in the viewer rather than narration. Narration starts the scene but then the violent images play out with only music as the tiny salmon gets thrashed in the current, desperately trying to get back to safety under the rocks. This was dictated by the images themselves. When I saw the footage I knew it was dramatic enough on its own that it was important not to editorialize, instead allowing the subjective imagination of the viewer to feel what it was like to be a tiny doomed salmon struggling in the river current. As a viewer, you get a sense of *being* a salmon, rather than *empathizing* with one – my humble attempt at applying Brecht to wildlife filmmaking.

By weaving together multiple levels of engagement, *The Last Run* attempts a possibly new understanding of salmon for the viewer by moving away from the pure,

traditional syntax of science and wildlife documentaries. However, *The Last Run* could have gone much further in its pursuit of art (2). If there is any success claimed by this film with regard to the alteration of symbolic meaning, it is hopefully in the audience's final perception of salmon. However, even if the audience sees salmon differently after watching my film, unfortunately this is not much different from *Strange Days on Planet Earth* changing our perception of the dangers of global warming through its excellent storytelling. If it had been truly successful, *The Last Run* would have confounded our idea of what we mean by "nature" and its supposed opposite, "civilization." Maybe it could have made the viewer wonder if salmon were more than just a food resource, or that humans are closer to nature than we perceive. This might be the "ecstatic truth" I was striving for.

Ironically, my experience suggests that making a film is probably the best way to figure out how to make a film. Production on *The Last Run* was a one-man show aside from a few happy days of assistance, and so the simple acquisition of raw material took precedent over everything else. I call this the beginner's version of survivalist filmmaking. The style of interviews, B-Roll, camera angles for wildlife shooting, all came out of practical necessity found in the need to create something "good enough". Then, once in the edit room, there is only so much a filmmaker can do "syntactically" when the semantic elements were defined in this way. Though my budget was significantly lower than most television documentaries (approximately \$12,000 vs. \$200,000-\$300,000 for a typical Discovery Channel one-hour program) these larger productions are also subject to many of the same restrictions as I had because bigger

crews don't necessarily mean more creative freedom or time or even money to spend on the picture. In essence, because I subjected myself to the same production path of least resistance found in producing most television science documentaries, my film shares many elements with this genre. Better pre-production scouting and planning allows a filmmaker to more consciously deviate from the norms of a genre. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a strong theoretical framework grounded in experience allows the filmmaker to make key creative decisions on the fly.

If you are truly going to strive for an imaginative, subjective creativity, a standard set of production or semantic elements is useless. Every convention should be called into question and reassessed until the best match of conventions with subject can be found for each individual project. Often however, it seems in the pursuit of a worthy topic, filmmakers lose their willingness to experiment to find the perfect mesh of subject and conventions. Bill Nichols writes:

“It is hard to be reflexive if you have something urgent to say about a pressing issue, and for most documentarists the urgency of the said takes far higher precedence than the self-consciousness of the saying.”⁴⁰

Most wildlife filmmakers have something to say beyond the images in their film. With this film, I certainly had something to say. But I think this is still not an excuse to make “blind cinema.” Herzog says a lot in his films, and does it with amazing self-consciousness and imagination. Hopefully in the future, and after congealing the ideas found in this essay, I too will be able to say a lot and do so more self-consciously than I did in *The Last Run*.

⁴⁰ Nichols, Bill, Representing Reality. Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 17

CONCLUSION

The history of documentary films in general is the same as the history of science and nature documentaries, but this sub-genre of documentary hasn't moved much beyond the era of the classical expository documentary. Wildlife films share enough semantic and syntactic elements with science documentaries that in the future there will be little distinguishing a wildlife film from a science film. At the heart, they are about knowledge and the workings of the world; "edutainment," if you will. Blue-Chip mega-budget productions will be the only films portraying the most remote and inaccessible locations and species in this traditional fashion. The future films of the science documentary will be more imaginative and incorporate interactive and reflexive strategies that contradict the impression of objectivity and reassess ideas of literal representation. The movement will have a deeper awareness of genre, allowing filmmakers to manipulate conventions to great extent.

The difference between the new science documentary and the traditional television science documentary is the difference between art and craft. One (the traditional science documentary) "edutains" using normal symbols, the other (the new science documentary) makes us question these symbols' meanings. In a world where some nefarious Ideological State Apparatus governs our perspective at every juncture, art forces a deconstruction of this status and allows an eddy of higher consciousness that may in time change the course of oppressive dominant ideologies. Though there exist few artists as such making films in the television science documentary school today, other models exist

from which to take example. These include Magritte, Brecht, Buñuel, Morris and finally Herzog, currently the most active and innovative champion of the new modernist movement.

But then perhaps we need look no further for guidance than to one of the fathers of documentary, Robert Flaherty, who once said, “Sometimes you have to lie. One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit.”⁴¹ In the end, isn’t that what we’re trying to do; catch a “true spirit” or an “ecstatic truth.” Flaherty’s idea of a “lie” was staging a walrus hunt to explore mankind’s relation to nature. Today Herzog stages a former POW’s escape in search of an “ecstatic truth.” Looking from Flaherty to Herzog (and seeing this similarity between the two filmmakers) in this sense suggests that some of the things we need to progress as a genre have been there from the beginning. We just haven’t thought or pushed ourselves hard enough.

There is a big difference between an omniscient narrator saying “We know so little about the behavior of such and such an animal” and a reflexive technique that makes you wonder if *anything* you’ve just heard makes sense. Science or wildlife documentaries are always admitting to a lack of knowledge by presenting it as a story element - mystery. Science and wildlife films have great authority. They are educational. They teach, but the “factual” information they teach is that information society deems true. It is precisely because of the authority of these films that new filmmakers should approach documentaries dealing with such topics in a way that draws attention to the conventions and the content – that recognizes the incongruity of word and image, of image and nature.

⁴¹ Barsam, Richard M., Nonfiction Film. Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 52

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