THE ANIMATED ROOTS OF WILDLIFE FILMS: ANIMALS, PEOPLE, ANIMATION AND THE ORIGIN OF WALT DISNEY'S *TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURES*

by

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ABSTRACT

Although Walt Disney's nature films mark a turning point for wildlife film, no satisfactory explanation has been offered as to how Disney managed to come up with such a successful concept. This thesis will examine the history and production of the *True-Life Adventures* productions to demonstrate that, rather than being mere live-action iterations of Disney's animated films, the Disney nature films had their origins in the studio's travelogue endeavors of the 1940s. The logical consequence of these origins is that the films present the natural world as a cultural entity rather than a scientific one. Analyzing the *True-Life Adventures* from this perspective allows for a better assessment of how they influenced all later wildlife documentaries. In particular, two innovative strategies were crucial to the success of these films: 1) the Disney gaze and 2) the associated, highly manipulated presentations of the natural world, formatted to tweak the emotions of the human observer.

Additionally, because his studio extensively promoted the work of the naturalist-photographers and the scientist-cameramen, Disney can be credited with having commercialized documentary-style film shooting. The fostering of such filmmaking inside his studio's walls helped to popularize the so-named "nature film," laying the foundation for what would one day become a thriving film industry in its own right.

INTRODUCTORY QUOTES

Disneyfication – "That shameless process by which everything the studio later touched, no matter how original from which the studio worked, was reduced to the limited terms that Disney and his people could understand."

Richard Schickel
The Disney Version, 1968

"…there's fantastic drama out there. If you spend five years with the same animals, it's unfolding in front of you, and you're a fool if you can't see it."

Dereck Joubert, acclaimed wildlife cinematographer
Outside Magazine, May, 1996

INTRODUCTION

Almost a decade after the release of *Jungle Cat* (1967), the last of Walt Disney's *True-Life Adventures* films, Richard Schickel commented on Disney's influence on wildlife films: "…Disney preempted the field in such a way that it will probably be a long time before anyone tries again and that if they do try, they will undoubtedly be tempted to imitate his proven formula." (Schickel: 247) More recently, Derek Bousé claimed that the *True-Life Adventures* "did more to codify the wildlife film genre than any other entity had up to that time, and arguably, has since." (Bousé 2000: 69)

Certainly, Disney's films were different from anything that came before them. Prior to the first *True-Life Adventure*, *Seal Island* (1948), films presenting animals in their natural environment had focused predominately on the hunting and pursuit of wildlife by human protagonists. In the early 1900s, showman Lyman H. Howe produced *Hunting the Hippopotamus* (1907) and *Thrilling Capture of Huge Seal Elephants* (1919); Paul J. Rainey made *African Hunt* (1912). In the 1920s, there were the safari films of Osa and Martin Johnson (e.g., *Simba*, 1928). Eventually, this type of film iterated the genre further, with some focusing more on the sport and technique of the hunt (e.g., *Wild Boar Hunt*, 1940, which showcased the expertise of champion archer Howard Hill), while others sensationalized the notion of "man vs. nature" (e,g., Walter Futter's *Africa Speaks*, 1930, as well as the films of Frank Buck, such as *Bring 'Em Back Alive*, 1932, all of which involved staged confrontations).

Contemporaneous with these productions were alternate filmic representations, more concerned with presenting scientific fact, but these were less popular. Some presented wildlife from the perspective of a naturalist: Oliver Pike's *In Birdland* (1907); the series *Secrets of Nature* (1922-1933), produced by British Instructional Films (BIF); Julian Huxley's *Secret Life of the Gannett* (1934); and Hans Hass' *Men Among Sharks* (1942). Others simply focused on the close-up filming of insects, usually for the purposes of documenting some aspect of the life cycle, as in James Williamson's *The History of a Butterfly - A Romance of Insect Life* (1910) and Karl Von Frisch's *Counting Bees* (1927).

When Disney's *True-Life Adventures* came along, they differed from their predecessors in a number of ways. Animals shifted from objects of pursuit or study to characters by virtue of their "found" qualities captured by the camera, with accompanying anthropomorphism. Stock technical effects (such as stop motion and time lapse) contributed to the narrative flow. Also, humor and drama became commonplace. Most significantly, in what has been described as "Disney's foremost structuring feature," humans disappeared from the frame (Chris: 27). The format and style that resulted became the template for all later wildlife films and shows, from so-called "blue-chip" fare produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and National Geographic to the many series today on cable channels like Discovery and Animal Planet. In the 1990s, Marty Stouffer, producer of PBS' *Wild America* (1982-94), acknowledged outright that the image of clashing bighorn rams in Disney's *The Vanishing Prairie* had influenced his own work at a subconscious level. (Bouse: 69)

Disney's nature films thus stand as a turning point for wildlife film. Despite this significant impact, no satisfactory critical explanation has been offered to explain how Disney managed to come up with such a successful and seemingly innovative concept, or, for that matter, whether he was even consciously trying to reinvent the genre. Film scholars and critics routinely cite the animated features *Bambi* and *Dumbo* as having been the templates for Disney's treatment of the natural world as seen in the *True-Life Adventures* (Bouse: 62, 135; Chris: 82; Mittman; 114). This observation, however, overlooks the fact that any noticeable similarities between the animated films and the live-action Disney films are outweighed by many more obvious and significant differences. In the *True-Life Adventures*, for instance, the animals do not speak for themselves; instead, all behavior is explained by a narrator. The narration delivers information about the behavior of multiple subjects rather than promotes a conventional narrative with a single protagonist. In addition, animals are not so much named as they are labeled according to life and story role (e.g., "Mother" and "Baby" seals in *Seal Island*, 1948 and "Mrs. Kittiwake" in *Beaver Valley*, 1950). The Disney nature films also present, despite their idealized view of nature, harsh realities of the kind unthinkable in an animated film, such as grim scenes of actual predation and animal death onscreen.

Such significant differences suggest that the *True-Life Adventures* format – and thus the "modern wildlife film" – has roots somewhere else in the Disney canon. As such, this thesis will examine the history and production of the *True-Life Adventures* to demonstrate that, rather than being mere live-action iterations of Disney's animated films, the Disney nature films actually evolved from an attempt to repeat the commercial

success of the studio's live-action 1942 travelogue *Saludos Amigos*. The *True-Life Adventures*, however, go even further: they are constructed similarly to the ethnographic sub-genre of documentary, except that exotic humans have been replaced with exotic animals in the role of the Other. Ultimately, what the *True-Life Adventures* offer to the viewer is an anthropomorphized culture of animals as seen through a fishbowl. This presentation of the natural world as a cultural entity rather than a scientific one is the key factor behind Disney's enormous success with the *True-Life Adventures* films. By transforming the wildlife genre, the series also made the exotic subject matter safely accessible to the rapidly growing American middle class audience of the era.

Identification of a cultural-based format for the *True-Life Adventures* also allows for a more satisfactory explanation of the distinguishing aspects of the series, in particular the compelling nature of their footage, their experiential delivery of information to the viewer and their constant references to post-World War II white American middle class values. Ultimately, analyzing the *True-Life Adventures* from this perspective allows for a better assessment of the following issues related to wildlife documentaries:

1. How and where these films fit in the genre of documentary film;
2. To what extent later wildlife filmmakers imitated Disney; and,
3. Why this kind of film originated at the Disney Studio.

A discussion of these subjects will help assess to what extent and in what capacity Disney is truly responsible for the "modern wildlife film."

ORIGINS

The observations and analysis in this essay take into account all Disney live-action films which present natural history and wildlife topics in a non-fictional format and which were initially-released theatrically between 1948 and 1960. The following are among the more well-known films in the series:

Seal Island (1948, the very first True-Life Adventure);

The Living Desert (1953, the very first feature length True-Life Adventure);

The Vanishing Prairie (1954, noted for its scene of a bison giving birth to a calf); and

White Wilderness (1958, includes the staged lemmings "suicide" scene).

For a complete listing of all thirteen films, see "Appendix A: Disney Nature Films 1948-1960."

The *True-Life Adventures*: Production Staff

There were many different talents associated with the production of the series, with drastically different kinds of expertise. Walt Disney, of course, oversaw all staff, but only a handful of the filmmakers were longtime Disney employees with a focus on animation. The rest had never worked for Disney prior to the *True-Life Adventures*. This distinction meant that, unlike other Disney efforts, each of the *True-Life Adventures* was the joint effort of two separate production teams: a field staff, and an in-house post-production staff.

The field staff did the filming. For the most part, this group consisted of naturalists who were intimately familiar with the behavior of their subjects, devoting considerable time (usually months, even years) to acquiring the footage. The field staff was comprised of two sub-groups: the "naturalist-cameramen," who worked outdoors filming large to small animals, and the "scientist-photographers," who filmed small to minute subjects such as insects and plants in their own specially-equipped laboratories. (These two sub-groups were first identified by these names in the Disney television specials *Behind the True-Life Cameras*, 1955, and *Searching for Nature's Mysteries,*1956.) Without question, the most prominent of the "naturalist-cameramen" were Al and Elma Milotte, a husband-and-wife naturalist team from Alaska (they shot the very first True-Life Adventure, *Seal Island* and, later, all the footage for *The African Lion)*. Among the more prominent "scientist-photographers" were N. Paul Kenworthy, who filmed the sequence of the hunting of a tarantula by a Pepsis wasp (featured in *The Living Desert*) and John Ott, an established time-lapse photographer with some twenty years' worth of experience prior to his involvement with Disney. (His footage can be seen in *Nature's Half Acre* and *Secrets of Life*).

Members of the post-production staff, on the other hand, had no expertise when it came to filming wildlife and natural history subjects, but all had had been employed at the Disney studio prior to the *True-Life Adventures*. Most had since learned how to translate animal behavior into personality traits (e.g., the rabbit mannerisms of Thumper in *Bambi*); the same approach applied to the live-action animals in the *True-Life Adventures*. The following Disney staff members regularly worked on the series: Ben

Sharpsteen, producer, who had overseen the educational and industrial films Disney produced for the US government and various corporations during World War II (Thomas: 206); ‚James Algar. director, who directed the history of flight sequence in the 1943 animated Disney documentary *Victory Through Airpower* ("Tribute to James Algar," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 1); Winston Hibler, narrator (Thomas: 238), whose relaxed vocal delivery became a trademark of the *True-Life Adventures*; and Paul Smith and Oliver Wallace, both Oscar-nominated composers ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 3).

Ties to South America

The template for the very first *True-Life Adventure*, *Seal Island* (1948), can actually be traced back to is Disney's 1942 feature *Saludos Amigos* (Barrier: 206), a travelogue about Latin America, and the one film which has more in common with the *True-Life Adventures* than any other earlier Disney endeavor. *Saludos* was produced in partnership with the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), a U.S. agency set up under Nelson Rockefeller in 1940 with the objective of thwarting a growing Nazi presence in presumably neutral South America. Rockefeller's strategy was two-fold: the agency would provide economic support to Latin America addressing various countries' needs associated with agriculture, education, health, etc.; meanwhile, a propaganda initiative would promote the notion of goodwill between the North and South Americas, in the hopes of strengthening ties with the United States and the Allied Powers. Because film was considered the most effective medium to use for propaganda, the CIAA reached out to the Hollywood community. Among those answering the call were Disney and other well-known celebrities such as Orson Welles, whose own efforts on behalf of the CIAA ended up adversely affecting his ability to edit his 1942 film *The Magnificent Ambersons* (the circumstances and the ensuing damage to his career were eventually detailed in Canal Plus' 1993 documentary *It's All True: Based on an Unfinished Film by Orson Welles*).

Disney's interest in working with the CIAA, however, had more to do with finances: the partnership offered the studio an opportunity to tap into the Latin America

market, thereby mitigating the loss of the European market due to the war (Kaufman: 8; Maltin: 57). Initially, Disney's contract with the CIAA called for twelve animated shorts that would showcase topics pertaining to South America. For authenticity's sake, however, Disney felt it was necessary for his staff to experience the associated sights and cultures first-hand with him (Kaufman: 18). Consequently, he sent himself, his wife, and members of his staff on an extended tour of both Central and South America, supplementing the staff's usual supply of sketchpads and other drawing materials with two 16mm cameras. (The resulting live-action footage would serve as a visual aid to the animators in much the same way as that of live-action animals had previously). Simultaneously, however, in an entirely separate goodwill promotion, the CIAA had put out a public call to Hollywood celebrities and artists soliciting any 16mm movies of Latin America they might have, with the express purpose of editing these movies into documentaries intended for non-theatrical release in both the U.S. and South America (Kaufman: 31). Toward that purpose, the CIAA asked Disney and his staff to also point their cameras at themselves while on tour. Disney responded by giving cameraman Larry Lansburgh the following instructions: "Shoot, I want to get everything, I want to see everything." (Kaufman: 125)

Upon completion of the Latin American tour, the footage was edited into a documentary, *South of the Border with Disney* (1943), and distributed non-theatrically in 16mm. When the first four animated cartoons due under the CIAA contract were being readied for theatrical release, however, questions arose about how to market them, since each had been produced to showcase a specific South American country or region and the

studio's presumptive feeling was that these cartoons had limited appeal outside their featured countries. For example, the cartoon segment which featured Goofy as a bumbling gaucho would have been well-received in Argentina but probably nowhere else.

Disney's solution, allegedly on the advice of David O. Selznick (Kaufman: 96), was to incorporate all four animated shorts into a feature film which could be marketed throughout Latin America, using the 16mm footage from *South of the Border with Disney* as a connecting device. The result was *Saludos Amigos*, a travelogue whose unifying narrative focuses on the foibles of the Disney staff as they tour the cultural and geographic terrains of such countries as Argentina, Brazil and Chile in search of local subject matter that might translate well into animation. Subsequently, in this context, the four animated shorts function as more than just cartoons: they are the highlighted proof of the Disney staff's creative experience. Additionally, this reflexive presentational strategy makes *Saludos* one of the first films to offer a behind-the-scenes look at its own production, a practice which would not become common until much later, with films such as director Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* (1982) and *Project Greenlight* (2001-05), produced by Home Box Office (HBO), LivePlanet and Miramax Television, as well as the innumerable *The Making of* featurettes that are now a standard component of contemporary DVD and web releases.

Saludos Amigos presages the *True-Life Adventures* in a number of ways. First, the film uses silent 16mm color stock enlarged to 35mm for the final print, with the entire soundtrack - narration, music and sound effects – added later in post-production. This

production strategy, and the fact that most of the film's forty-two minutes consists of live-action rather than animation, meant that *Saludos* proved quite economical. The film was the only Disney feature in the early 1940s which ended up recouping its cost and then some ($623,000 in box office receipts vs. $300,000 in production costs).

The most profound connection of *Saludos* to the *True-Life Adventures*, however, is that the former's strategy in presenting exotic subjects – the familiarization process Richard Schickel deemed "Disneyfication" – is virtually the same as in the Disney nature films. Various scenes in *Saludos* show the Disney staff observing local people, animals and landscapes, all of which are eventually rendered down by the animators into charcoal sketches and watercolor paintings. While the narration employs the words "inspire" and "inspiration" to explain the motives of the Disney artists, much of what the animators are doing is, in fact, abstracting, distilling and familiarizing the local subjects to make them more accessible and engaging to the white American middle class audiences of the time.

In one particularly revealing sequence, the process of "Disneyfication" is revealed in detail. In the segment featuring the Disney staff's experiences in Bolivia, there is live-action footage of the indigenous people, their native dress, the village marketplace where they gather, and the llamas and burros that serve them as beasts of burden. Interspersed with these are pastel drawings and animation by the Disney staff of these same subjects, with some shots showing an artist's hand actually sketching the Disneyfied version of the subject. In particular, the presentation of burros foreshadows how live-action animals in the *True-Life Adventures* would be handled. The burros are shown as beasts of burden, trotting through the village streets, loaded up with bales of straw, humorously framed by

a peppy reed-based melody whose rhythm matches their gait. Meanwhile, the narrator describes "these little syncopated" animals as "walking haystacks" who "bear the heavy burdens" because "the dignified llama will carry so much and no more." This is the same type of anthropomorphism that would later distinguish the *True-Life Adventures*.

Most significant of all, however, is the fact that the introductory device that opened all *True-Life Adventures* – the animated paintbrush – makes its debut in *Saludos*. This occurs in the film's closing segment, which begins with a live-action account of the Disney staff's visit to Rio de Janeiro and concludes with the animated "Aquarela do Brasil" sequence. At first, the Disney staff is shown sketching various sites in and around the city while the narrator extols the cultural aspects of Rio, in particular the region's signature dance music, the samba. Also shown is a locally-occurring green rainforest parrot – *papagaio* – the likes of which, as the narrator explains, inspired Disney to create a new cartoon character, José Carioca, an anthropomorphized version of the rainforest parrot who sports a straw hat, a black bowtie, and a white jacket, with a cigar and an umbrella added for flair. The segment then switches to animation, announcing the upcoming song, Ary Barroso's *Aquarela do Brazil*, via a title card. The scene opens with a view of a blank canvas resting on an easel. As the song's introductory bars play, a human shadow passes across the canvas, which is of the artist who is planning to paint on the canvas. The artist continues to be shown as a shadow, except for his right hand which eventually appears in close-up, picking up a brush and dipping it in blue paint. As this paint is applied to the canvas, the music picks up and eventually the artist's brushstrokes create a waterfall that flows profusely with the blue paint. From then on, only the upper

half of the paintbrush is ever shown, dribbling colors on the canvas, which coalesce to form tangoing flamingos, clacking toucans and singing flowers. Eventually, the brush paints the characters of Donald and José, and they come to life. As they cavort amid the rainforest and the streets of Rio, the brush accompanies them as a third character, painting the scenery which then permits them to continue on in their adventures.

This paintbrush serves a visual metaphor of the Disney animator persona: it produces fanciful, familiarized versions of exotic subjects, the better to appeal to the American middle class viewer. Subsequently, re-deployed to open the *True-Life Adventures*, the paintbrush serves the same purpose: to visually proclaim the start of the "Disney version," regardless of the fact that what follows is all live-action. From that point on, whatever is presented on the screen is a highly-embellished rendition of reality, intended to engage the viewer in the same way as the mixed live action-animation *Saludos Amigos*.

Alaska, Disney's Failed Travelogue

Hoping for a repeat success with another travelogue along the lines of *Saludos*, Disney then decided to showcase Alaska in the same manner based on a suggestion by Ben Sharpsteen, who cited how the region had recently become active because of homesteading by returning veterans (Gabler: 445). As early as February, 1946, Disney was reviewing footage of Alaska sent to the studio by Al and Elma Milotte. (Barrier: 206) By May, 1947, the studio had 482 reels of 16mm film covering all sorts of subjects filmed by the Milottes at the request of Disney: mining, fishing, hunting game, logging,

and other uniquely Alaskan commercial and recreational pursuits (Schickel: 284). The film's promotional trailer documents Disney's original vision for the feature, a modest variation of the "El Dorado" theme of exploitation: "WALT DISNEY TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURE 'ALASKA – THE LAST FRONTIER.' " ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 2) Nonetheless, the majority of the footage proved less than engaging to Disney (Barrier: 206). According to one source, Al Milotte then took it upon himself to journey to the Pribilof Islands to film the seasonal birthing of Alaskan fur seal pups there.

"Sugar-coated Education"

Disney was adamant about a subject's potential to engage the viewer while delivering information, having been greatly disappointed by the lackluster results from the studio's past endeavors in educational and training films. During the mid-1940s, when the financial returns from his animated features fell short of their production costs and his studio needed revenue, Disney had entered into various collaborative efforts with US Government agencies (the CIAA, of course, but also the U.S. military) and corporate entities (e.g., American Cellu-cotton and General Motors), all with the hope of making industrial films that exhibited the Disney touch. Unfortunately, these partnerships ended up frustrating him because of the associated lack of creative control. Since outside partners provided funding, they, rather than Disney, always had the final say on these films. (For proof of this lack of control, one has only to search the internet and find any

number of Disney-animated films which have since fallen into the public domain because their corporate owners never bothered to renew the copyrights.)

Discouraging Disney further was the dull nature of the subject matter itself: rivets, power tools, etc. When his partnership with the CIAA dissolved and the studio's remaining corporate projects looked, at best, mundane, his showmanship persona finally exploded. He allegedly told Ben Sharpsteen "Let's stick to entertainment. We'll make educational films, but they'll be sugar-coated." (Thomas: 206) Disney's experiences with such entities as the CIAA had left him feeling that the very word "educational" was "forbidding," since the associated educators had often been "critical of almost every idea anyone brought up." (Miller: 215) This, then, marks the beginning of Disney's commitment to "informative-entertainment." (Barrier: 208) Later, critics and filmmakers both would re-dub this kind of filmmaking as "edutainment," expanding its scope to include any and all media from any source which entertains while teaching.

One important side note related to terminology: while the word "edutainment" is often used to describe Disney's *True Life Adventures*, the word cannot be traced any further back than 1975, its coinage credited to Dr. Chris Daniels, whose Elysian World Project espoused "Education through Entertainment." Likewise, while the official description of the *True-Life Adventures* was as "informative entertainment," the word "info-tainment" did not come into being until 1979, when it was allegedly coined by Joseph L. Putegnat III to name his video production company.*

* Irrefutable references regarding the origin of the words "edutainment" and "infotainment" could not found despite exhaustive searches over the Internet. Origins of the two words are cited throughout the web, but only with Wikipedia referenced as the information source. Allegedly, Putegnat first issued "press releases" (none of which are available) which contained the word "info-

For Disney, this change was profound: no longer would there be any need for outside approval for these kinds of films. Elaborating on this notion of "informative entertainment," James Algar described *Seal Island* this way:

> …teaching film of the future [in which] information can be entertainment if interestingly presented…Too many so-called educational films fall under the supervision of people who know their subject thoroughly but their medium very little… you must win your audience. All entertainers know this." (Barrier: 207).

(On) Seal Island

From its start, *Seal Island* plants the notion in the viewer's mind that Disney's live-action animals will be as entertaining as any animated character, yet still exotic. The title credit "A True-Life Adventure" appears against a background of a live-action twirling globe, followed by the title "On Seal Island." A subsequent credit proclaims that the story is "unrehearsed and unstaged." In a striking departure from any wildlife or nature film prior to *Seal Island*, the animated paintbrush bounds across the screen and paints a colorful relief map of the Bering Sea and its surroundings, which orients the viewer as to the location of the Pribilof Islands off the furthest tip of the Aleutian Island chain. The white fuzziness of the animated sea mist dissolves into live-action panorama of the rocky shores of the Pribilof Islands, while the narrator announces that here "nature plays out one of her greatest dramas…" and that what will follow is "theater for the spectacle." The seals, the viewer is informed, will only spend enough time on the islands to breed and bear young, so they are described as coming "from no man knows where, from the depths of the Pacific, from the depths of mystery." The bull seals are called

"beach masters," while females are referred to as "brides" (at which point the score switches to playing "Here Comes the Bride"). The breeding cycle results in pups being born, and the film subsequently focuses on the pups' struggle to survive in the arctic environment. Eventually, the seals depart from the Pribilofs "swimming no man knows where."

Despite all the humor, however, genuine facts are intermittently delivered to the viewer. The narrator explains that each female births one pup each season, that the pups are nursed like any other mammal, that the mothers must swim out in order to eat well, and that bull seals are "polygamous," taking as many as "one hundred wives." Throughout the film, of course, Milotte's footage remains compelling, whether it is a close-up of a seal pup or a wide shot of a beach rife with breeding seals. Color footage of such exotic animals and places was still something of a rarity at that point in cinematic history, becoming commonplace in commercial film only later, during the 1950s, with such films as *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) and *Mogambo* (1953). On December 21st, 1948, Disney's *Seal Island* was previewed at a theater in the upper middle class California suburb of Pasadena, where it was an immediate hit. It was then booked at Loew's Theatre in New York, where it also proved a great success, eventually going into general release in the spring of 1949.

Such was the genesis of Disney's most successful live-action theatrical series. Additionally, the *True-Life Adventures*, despite their range of imagery and imagination, can be credited with having established the foundation for all of Disney's later live-action films.

PRODUCTION

The *True-Life Adventures* differed in one critical aspect from *all* of Disney's other films: their method of construction. An animated film – whether a feature such as *Bambi* and *Dumbo*, or a one-reel cartoon such as a *Mickey Mouse* or *Silly Symphony* short – required extensive pre-production. Prior to any animation, plot and character design had to be worked out, music, effects and dialogue had to be recorded, then all the audio components had to be carefully mixed into a soundtrack before the animators could begin drawing on paper. Only after extensive pencil tests were the individual drawings traced onto cels, painted (on the reverse side), and exposed – one frame at a time – onto film.

In contrast, the production process for any of the *True-Life Adventures* was the exact inverse of the standard Disney protocol. A vast bank of exposed live-action footage served as the *starting* point. And while the Disney post-production staff had general ideas about the footage's story potential because of known factors such as the locale (e.g., Africa) or the animals (e.g., beavers), nothing like a narrative thread could even be considered until after the editors had sorted through – literally – thousands of feet of live-action footage. Only *after* this exhaustive review could a *True-Life* production move forward. Only then could the staff construct storylines, edit them to perfection, and, finally, embellish them with sound effects, music and narration.

The first step toward creating a narrative was to categorize all footage according to both its visual quality and its potential to support a narrative. Editor Norman Palmer explained:

> I'd run through the film and put the best shots on an "A" reel. And then the next ones on a "B" reel. And then the "C" reel was usually not much of anything. But every once in a while you'd come to a place when you're trying to put it together that you'd need a certain shot like a close up or something looking left or right. Then you'd have to go through, start through the outtakes to see what we had to make it a better sequence. ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 3)

The director and writer (most often Algar and Hibler) then collaborated with an editor to make sequences "that would fit into a continuity that would make a story." ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 3) According to Roy Disney, each of the *True-Life Adventures* "was entirely created in the editing room" ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 2).

Once the storylines were completed, audio had to be added, since the footage as originally shot was silent. This necessitated the use of wild sound. Sometimes the sound consisted of audio recorded separately in the wilderness (e.g., acclaimed ornithologist Arthur A. Allen contributed sound recordings of birds to *Beaver Valley,* 1950), and sometimes it was synthetically-generated, or "Foleyed" using the same noise-generating devices that created sound effects for animated cartoon. For example, in *Bear Country*, growls were created by having effects man Jimmy McDonald "growl" into a glass tube ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 3).

Great consideration was also given to the musical score, which Disney knew from experience could convey emotions in a way that visuals could not. However, veteran Disney composers Oliver Wallace and Paul Smith were used to composing for animated films, which required the composing of music prior to any animation. In contrast, music for the *True-Life Adventures* could only be composed *after* the live-action sequences

were finalized. Wallace and Smith thus found themselves creating musical phrases to accompany the dart of a rabbit or the pounce of a lion.

Last of all came the narration, most of it written by Winston Hibler (Barrier: 209; "Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 2). This was perhaps the most crucial element when it came to making the images personally engage the audience. Emphasis was mostly on storytelling rather than humor, with the further stipulation that writing be kept to a minimum (http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Commentary/TrueLife/TrueLife.htm). Hibler, for the most part, was concerned about conveying the balance of nature in his scripts ("Tribute to Winston Hibler," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 4), promoting that notion via the series' tagline "Nature is the dramatist." It was his anthropomorphic framing, however, that transformed the mute onscreen animals into "characters." Earnestly seeking Disney's approval when scripting, he employed jargon that appealed to the Midwestern background of his boss. The square-dancing scorpions in *The Living Desert*, for example, are accompanied by the comment "Choose your partners for the stingaree."

SUCCESS AMONG THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS

Money-makers in Every Sense of the Word

Because of their unique production process, the *True-Life Adventures* and other nature films cost less than most other Disney productions. For one thing, the field crews for the *True-Life Adventures* were small, usually one or two people, the majority of whom were already based in the field because of their interest or research. Also, they were not unionized. (Beebe: 70) This not only translated into lower labor costs for production, but it also meant that the crew could do everything from filming to taking care of their own equipment to building whatever was necessary to ensure the acquisition of captivating images (e.g., platforms to film beavers from overhead, tanks to film hippos swimming underwater, etc). Additionally, film and equipment were cheaper. The 16mm Kodachrome color stock used was considerably more economical than 35 mm (only when each film was ready for theatrical release was the stock enlarged to 35mm). Furthermore, since each film's soundtrack was added in post-production, there were no field expenses for sound engineers and recording equipment.

The relatively low cost of producing the *True-Life Adventures* meant that their profitability was phenomenal compared to that of Disney's animated features. *Seal Island,* completed in the summer of 1948, ran twenty-seven minutes and cost $86,000; subsequently, the film went on to earn a gross of $434,000 in its initial release. The second *True-Life Adventure*, *Beaver Valley* (1950), was even more profitable, coming in at $102,000, and an initial gross of $664,000. The first feature-length *True-Life*

Adventure: *The Living Desert* cost $300,000, then went on to earn $4 million in its initial release. In comparison, *Cinderella* (1949), the studio's biggest animated hit since *Snow White* (1938), had a box office return of $4 million while costing $2.2 million to produce. Subsequently, the cost for an animated feature only rose, meaning that the associated box office gross would have to exceed that of *Cinderella*'s for it to be at all profitable. Thus, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) cost $3 million but lost $1 million at the box office. *Peter Pan* (1953), on the other hand, managed to recoup its initial cost of $4 million and then some, but with such a high price tag its profitability fell short of *Cinderella*'s. The *True-Life Adventures*, then, stand along with the animated features as major financial milestones in the history of Disney studio.

Overwhelming Commercial Appeal

Because of their folksy, sometimes cornball, approach, Disney's nature films had an appeal unlike any wildlife films before them. Much of this had to do with timing. In the United States, the period following World War II was marked by an overall commitment to the pursuit of "normality" – or "'situation normal,' whatever that was" (Creadick: 2) - with Americans experiencing a standard of living that had not been possible since before the Great Depression. The return of American soldiers initiated the "Baby Boom." In 1946, the marriage rate was 16.4 per 1000 (25 percent higher than it had been in 1942), and 3.4 million babies were born (26 percent more than in 1945, producing an all-record high). (Sickels: 22)

The post-war period was also one of economic prosperity and, subsequently, considerable middle class affluence. The economy was strong, driven by a "massive era of consumption." Combined with the fact corporations were beginning to come into their own in the American business sector at this time, jobs were plentiful as a result. (Sickels: 24) Returning soldiers took advantage of the recently enacted G.I. Bill and FHA mortgage insurance to obtain college degrees and purchase homes for their new families. The American middle class quickly became the "predominant slice of the American populace." (Sickels 24), no doubt assured at how their own family values were reflected in the social dynamics of the wildlife on display in the *True-Life Adventures*.

Additionally, the years following World War II were also a period of expansion for the American suburb, which subsequently consumed everything in its path in the name of tract housing and mass transit highways to accommodate this booming middle class. In many areas, land long occupied by small family farms suddenly became available as the associated landowners found themselves unable to compete with the mass output of industrialized farms and the convenience offered by local supermarkets. The vacated farmland subsequently made possible housing developments such as Levittown, New York, and Lakewood, California. Between 1945 and 1950, as America's rural sector entered a period of irreversible decline, home ownership in the United States surged, increasing by nearly 50 percent. One study calculated that, between 1940 and 1950, the American residential suburb sector as a whole had increased by 31.9%. (Schnore: 169)

In these burgeoning suburbs, homeowners co-existed with nature, but it was of the safe domesticated kind. Indeed, the predominate structural style was that of the "ranch

house," an architectural concept that supposedly promoted unity with nature. The associated natural elements, however, such as plants and rocks, nevertheless ended up highly manipulated in order to create a "tamed and open environment." Consequently, the outside surrounding space, intended for observing through picture windows and sliding glass doors, lacked anything that was wild or irregular. Such protected suburban environments afforded its hard-working middle-class residents the chance to restore a sense of peace and tranquility to family life. (Clark: 179)

Nothing exemplified this preference for "tamed" nature more than the emphasis placed on the house lawn. Despite their contrived appearance and required maintenance, lawns nevertheless represented "the joy of suburban prosperity," serving as "the great unifier of the American landscape, as lawns from Walla Walla, Washington, to Poughkeepsie, New York, all look basically the same." (Sickels: 114) However, conspicuously absent from these broad manicured (and often chemically-treated) expanses of green were naturally occurring wild plants such as weeds and dandelions. (Clark 179) In contrast, the imagery of the *True-Life Adventures* offered American middle class suburbanites the opportunity to connect with a more pristine form of the natural world, "to become close to nature, yet curiously removed from it," (Mittman: 206) ultimately to serve as a "continual reminder of the free and fertile ground upon which the characters of individualism and egalitarianism supposedly took root." (Mittman: 131)

But there was more to the popularity of the *True-Life Adventures* than the values they explicitly and implicitly espoused. Like all subsequent wildlife and natural history

films, Disney's nature films cater to viewer "scopophilia" ("love of looking"), the basic human pleasure that comes from looking at another person (or, in this case, animals that *seem* like another person). Feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey identified this as the driving appeal behind Hollywood narrative film. (Mulvey: 307) Indeed, many of her observations have specific applicability to the *True-Life Adventures*, particularly her comments regarding voyeurism and viewer ego. Cinema, she observed, plays to the voyeuristic fantasies of the viewer by presenting a "hermetically-sealed world" that is "indifferent to the presence of the audience." This notion of "looking in on a private world" is furthered by the fact that the traditional venue of the movie theater places the subject in the light while keeping the audience in the dark. (Nichols 1976: 307) Without question, the *True-Life Adventures* promote this idea, vividly presenting as they do so many "things we might not otherwise have ever seen" (Schickel: 289). Many of the visuals exude the feeling of invading someone's privacy, since they present behavior related to sexuality and reproduction, such as a bison calf being born, or any of a number of animal mating rituals. For the American middle class viewer of the time, such intimate Technicolor moments provided a guilt-free voyeuristic experience, since all subjects were non-human and the viewer's peeping was all done in the name of learning.

Mulvey also noted that "cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego," in the process inducing a "sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to perceive it." (Mulvey: 308) Here, again, is an experience the *True-Life Adventures* were adept at delivering. They present many carefully crafted "structures of fascination" meant to

overwhelm the typical middle-class viewer. By constantly and abruptly changing location and scale, these films entice one to forget the suburban reality of mass-produced houses and implied "conformist behavior" (Clark: 184). Frequently, scenic mountain vistas or vast desert panoramas are juxtaposed with extreme close-ups of some small- or tiny-sized entity, such as a scurrying prairie dog or a blooming flower.

Eventually, however, in the 1960s, this notion of the American suburb as a middle-class haven would itself become satirized in animated cartoons. Hanna-Barbera produced *The Flintstones* (1960-66), which spoofed middle class domesticity by placing it in a prehistoric setting. Additionally, in 1962, Famous Studios released the short *Funderful Suburbia*, which depicts the American suburb as the unwitting victim of its own popularity, overrun with writhing traffic jams, self-serving neighbors, endless supermarket checkout lines, and even aggressively snapping crabgrass. Subsequently, along with this shift in perspective came a change in the public's overall attitude toward Disney, culminating in the rise of the "counterculture" of late the 1960s and 1970s as legions of former Mickey Mouse Club viewers matured and acquired a new, underground appreciation for the psychedelics of the Disney classics *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and *Fantasia* (1940). By then, however, the *True-Life Adventures* had long-since ended production, the last one, *Jungle Cat*, having been released in 1960.

Disney's Animals vs. "Burlesque Humans"

Despite the series' popularity, negative criticism of the *True-Life Adventures* occurred from the start. In a review of *The Living Desert*, Bosley Crowther of *The New*

York Times specifically lambasted the use of anthropomorphism in a presumed documentary: "…it appears the wild life…is behaving in human and civilized ways…all very humorous and beguiling. But it isn't true to life." (Schickel: 245) Much later, addressing this same issue, noted media scholar Erik Barnouw deemed Disney's *True-Life* animals to be "burlesque humans." (Barnouw: 210). What Barnouw's pronouncement fails to take into account, however, is the fact that, prior to Disney's efforts, two film series released by other Hollywood studios had already anthropomorphized live-action animals, and were, to an extent much more deserving of the term "burlesque humans." These were the so-named "animal comedies": MGM's *Dogville* and Paramount's *Speaking of Animals*, released in the 1930s and 1940s, respectively. These commercially successful live-action farces -- rather than any natural history or wildlife films -- were the more popular cinematic representations of animals in the decades preceding *Seal Island*.

Dogville was created by Harry Rapf in 1930 and produced by MGM. As the name implies, these shorts featured dogs of various breeds. Because the storylines, however, centered on the trials and tribulations of American middle class domestic life, the dogs were outfitted in clothes and filmed walking on two legs, the cumulative effect seeming very much like a genuine burlesque skit. Plots were of two types: situations otherwise too risqué for a human film (e.g., adultery, murder, etc) or parodies of commercially successful MGM releases of the time (e.g., *Dogway Melody*, 1930). The comedy, of course, came from seeing familiar household pets perform as humans, with additional humor supplied by racy dialogue. Presaging the tactics of the *True-Life* production team,

directors Zion Myers and Julius White edited the staged footage of the dogs into cogent sequences first, then wrote the script and recorded the dialogue later (in many instances, using their own voices). Although the premise proved immensely popular, the series ran just over a year, for a total of nine installments.

A subsequent series, *Speaking of Animals*, produced by Jerry Fairbanks for Paramount in 1942, lasted significantly longer: seven years and fifty episodes. Its anthropomorphic approach to humor was the brainchild of acclaimed animator Fred "Tex" Avery, best-known for his creation of, among other notable "screwball" characters, Bugs Bunny, while he was at Warner Brothers Studio. Avery's sex-and-violence-based humor was a deliberate pushback to the "Disney style." His innovative premise for *Speaking of Animals* called for imposing animated mouths on live-action animals so that they could "speak" via dubbed human voice tracks. Each film presented a number of rapid-fire "spot gags" (the same technique Avery used in his animated parodies of travelogues and wildlife documentaries, such as *Wacky Wildlife*, 1940). Humor in these came not just from the fact that the animals were talking, but also because their comments were often ironically sarcastic; for example, the demo shown by Avery to Paramount included a horned toad saying "I don't care what you say, I'm horny." (Adamson: 151). The production values of *Speaking of Animals* outdid those of *Dogville*: there was a variety of animals – everything from dogs, monkeys, cows and horses to zebras, hippos, ostriches and even insects; the costumes and sets were more elaborate; and later episodes were filmed in color. Though voice tracks were still dubbed, improvements in recording technology allowed for fuller, richer soundtracks, with some

shorts even featuring musical numbers. More significantly, two episodes won Academy Awards (in 1942 and 1944) for "Short Subject (One-reel)," the very same category in which the *True-Life Adventures* would eventually predominate.

Such success is a good indicator of how movie audiences in the 1940s expected live-action animals on film to behave: outrageously anthropomorphic as in any animated cartoon, performing as "burlesque humans" in every sense of the word. While Disney's marketing claim that the *True-Life Adventures* were "unrehearsed and unstaged" sounds particularly brazen to contemporary ears, it sounds considerably less so when considered in the wake of *Dogville* and *Speaking of Animals*. Perhaps not so coincidentally, the long run of *Speaking of Animals* ended in 1949, the same year the first of the *True-Life Adventures*, *Seal Island*, went into general release.

THE *TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURES* AS "DOCUMENTARY"

Despite Disney's intentions to release the *True-Life Adventures* as "informative entertainment," the films have always been presumed to be – and have subsequently been labeled as – "documentary" by critics and supporters alike. Whether the designation is valid is open to discussion.

On one hand, the birth of a bison calf in *The Vanishing Prairie* or the killing of an osprey chick by a wolverine in *White Wilderness* is, no doubt, as documentary scholar Bill Nichols describes, "*evidence from* [italics his] the world" (Nichols: ix); indeed, evidence from the historical world of nature. On the other hand, considering the frivolous treatment of many subjects (such as the square-dancing scorpions of *The Living Desert*) along with the anthropomorphism that permeated the series as a whole, the answer to the question of whether the films are documentaries would seem to be a resounding "no." From a more distanced perspective, William Bluem, founding editor of *Television Quarterly*, cited *The Living Desert* along with a number of other non-fiction films from the 1950s such as Guy Brenton's *Thursday's Children* (1954) as representing "…the highest standards of creativity in film-making" but which "miss the mark of documentary" for the very reason that they do not "do more than merely describe processes and functions." (Bluem: 59) Although the *True-Life Adventures* eventually were at the helm of a new wave of conservationism in the 1950s, that was never their intention, and so they fall short of Bluem's assertion that social documentary, among other things, should "make exciting the great issues and causes of our time." (Bluem: 59)

Later, Derek Bousé would simply write that the Disney nature films "had been widely (and wrongly) considered as 'documentaries.'" (Bousé 1990: 31)

Meanwhile, from an educator's perspective, the films at one point were praised in an article in the *Peabody Journal of Education* as providing "lessons which most of those in his audience could not have experienced" (Izard: 39), although the same article acknowledged that the "cameraman's footage contained natural drama, but the dramatist's hand was added to make it correct." (Izard: 37)

From an audience perspective, historically, the realism on display in the *True-Life Adventures* has cued them into watching the films as they would any documentary, inviting them to apply what Nichols describes as their "procedural skills of comprehension and interpretation." (Nichols: 24) Even for disapproving critics, this seems to have been the case. Richard Schickel, for example, while deeming the films to be a "prettified" version of nature, nevertheless categorized them as "short documentary." (Schickel: 297)

The Oscar-recognition given to the series only confuses matters. The early short films - *Seal Island* (1948), *Beaver Valley* (1950), *Nature's Half-Acre* (1951), *Water Birds* (1952) and *Bear Country* (1953) – all won in the category of "Short Subject (Two-Reel)," *not* "Documentary (Short Subject)," while the later feature-length films *The Living Desert* (1953), *The Vanishing Prairie* and *White Wilderness* won in the category of "Best Documentary (Feature)." Although the Motion Picture Academy's reasons for such an abrupt switch in Oscar category nominations may never be known, the decision most likely reflected the institution's ongoing efforts during the war and the years that

followed to acknowledge and accommodate the ever-increasing number of films that were designated as "documentary." The catch-all category of "Short Subject" was created in 1932. However, the categories of "Documentary (Short Subject)" and "Documentary (Feature)" did not exist until 1941 and 1943, respectively, perhaps in response to the numerous news and training films being released by military and government agencies as part of the war effort. Later, following the war, the movie industry as a whole found itself having to adjust its output to accommodate the more sophisticated, mature tastes of its postwar audiences. Narrative film production took on more realistic, socially-relevant topics such as anti-Semitism (*Gentlemen's Agreement*, 1947), racism (*Pinky*, 1949) and mental illness (*The Snake Pit*, 1948) as well as developing its own cynical style of cinema, *film noir*. Jack Warner of Warner Brothers Studios stated outright that "Motion pictures are entertainment, but they go far beyond that." (Warner) Additionally, Eric Johnston, President of the Motion Picture Association at the time, expressing a similar mindset, claimed that a motion picture could be "an instrument for the promotion of knowledge and understanding among peoples." (Johnston)

Clearly, such attitudes had implications for the recognition of non-narrative films, inspiring the Motion Picture Academy to regularly re-assess what kind of films should be nominated in the two documentary film categories. Meanwhile, in the realm of documentary film, focus had since shifted from military topics to mostly human interest stories, resulting in feature-length Oscar-nominees which spotlighted the medical (e.g., *Journey into Medicine,* 1947), the political (*I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.*, 1951) and the historical (*The Titan: the Story of Michelangelo*, 1950). Feature-length documentaries

presenting the natural world, on the other hand, were few but notable; *Kon-tiki* (1951) and *The Sea Around Us* (1952) both won in their respective years. Thus, perhaps because of the Oscar-recognition given these last two films, the Motion Picture Academy ultimately decided that the *True Life Adventures* also belonged in the category of "documentary," despite the series' earlier established track record for "Short-Subject (Two-Reeler)." In stark contrast, Disney's other live-action series, *People and Places*, had, from its start, received Oscar-recognition in the category of "Documentary (Short-Subject)," beginning with the series' first release *The Alaskan Eskimo* (1953).

An Academic Perspective

It is also possible to compare the *True-Life Adventures* according to an academic, theory-based standard of documentary, such as the one established by Bill Nichols (Nichols: 31). His main contention is that all documentaries present an argument by the filmmaker on behalf of the subject on view. The argument poses the question "It's so, isn't it?" to the viewer; subsequently, all visual and audio in the presentation must support the filmmaker's rhetoric.

Additionally, emphasis in the *True-Life Adventures* always seems to be more on the *experience* of observing the natural world rather than on conveying the facts of it. More than anything else, the films promote viewer engagement with the subject, be it animal (e.g. the title species of *The Olympic Elk*), vegetable (e.g., the time-lapse flowers in *The Living Desert*) or mineral (e.g., the flowing lava of *Secrets of Nature*).

Recall that Disney's original concept of the *True-Life Adventures* called for the films to be made as "informative-entertainment." With this objective in mind, given the animation staff's experience in storytelling, it was inevitable that those assigned to the *True-Life Adventures* would attempt to construct narratives from their accumulated stock of live-action footage, in the process personifying various aspects of the natural world. But in order for the same argument to be promoted consistently in each film, a very special character would be required, one which would have as strong a connection to time-lapse flowers and exploding lava as it did to seals and beavers. The solution: "Nature," "with a capital 'N'," similar to "Mother Nature" but distinctly a Disney entity by virtue of its performative qualities. (Maltin: 114)

The utility of such a character is evident in the introductory sequence of *Seal Island*. Narrator Winston Hibler congenially explains how "…Nature plays out [here] one of her greatest dramas…the saga of the fur seal." Even the publicity for *Seal Island* makes it clear who is the real star of the film: "A Live-Action Saga of Nature in the Mystic Pribilof Islands." Eventually, "Nature" would even be given star billing, as in *Nature's Half-Acre* and *Nature's Strangest Creatures*, where it is credited as being the driving force behind catastrophic phenomena such as volcanoes and storms.

Combining the prominence of this character "Nature" along with the *True-Life* series' emphasis on engaging the viewer, then, one can deduce that the argument to be found in these films is simply that "Nature is engaging." Subsequently, Disneyfying this ethic and reformatting it to conform to Nichols' rhetorical phrasing, the series' argument then becomes "Nature is entertaining, isn't it?" Ironically, this deduced rhetoric is

validated by no less than Walt Disney's nephew, Roy E. Disney. Recalling his own experiences working on the *True-Life Adventures* (as a writer on *Mysteries of the Deep*), he summarized the philosophy of the films in terms of a Disney colloquialism: "Ain't Nature grand?" ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 1) Disney's nature films, then, conform quite nicely to the claim that "documentary is a fiction (un)like any other." (Nichols: 105).

With so many varying opinions regarding the *True-Life Adventures*, perhaps the best resolution to the question of their status as "documentary" would be to qualify them as documentations of natural events – but not documentaries. The natural world subjects, after all, do not have the ability to speak for themselves. Unlike a documentary featuring human social actors, where the recorded behavior and spoken words expose thoughts and feelings, the *True-Life Adventures* present behavior which is ultimately unknowable. Regardless of the accompanying narration or the viewer's familiarity with the specific animal, the subject in the frame is incapable of communicating to the human viewer whatever processes – "thought" or otherwise - are actually occurring in its head. Examination of any wildlife footage that lacks narration proves this notion: with no verbal cues from the narrator, while the animals may gesture about and make sounds, their actual motivations elude human detection, even in a situation as familiar as a mother and a baby (Is the baby hungry? Is the baby playing?). Furthermore, such animals are, for the most part, ignorant of the human world. They cannot conceive of the notion of being photographed, even in the presence of a camera and/or the filmmaker; instead, they simply "continue being what they are, regardless of what people think of them." (Lutts:

3) Perhaps this is the real distinguishing factor when assessing whether the *True-Life Adventures* are documentaries or not: in documentaries, the real-life subject or subjects are able to communicate in a way that establishes a genuine emotional connection to the viewer. In sharp contrast, in a Disney nature film, any and all emotional connections, however apparently believable, are nothing but artifices imposed on the animal subjects by the filmmakers. Additionally, the same holds true for wildlife films in general, even for those that, while avoiding any outright anthropomorphism, nevertheless unwittingly humanize animals to some degree. (Lutts: 284) Given all this, perhaps the solution to the debate is to recognize "edutainment" as a legitimate film genre, into which *all* wildlife and natural history films could then be appropriately – and rightfully – assigned, along with all other films which deliver information through subjects which lack the capability of genuine - not imposed or inferred - emotional expression.

Defining the "Modern Wildlife Film"

In *Making Wildlife Movies*, Christopher Parsons, founding member of the BBC Natural History Unit, recalls how the first natural history films on British television adhered to a lecture format, in need of revising in order to attract "a wide range of people, few of whom would ever have taken the trouble to go to a lecture hall." (Parsons: 49) His perspective, then, was almost identical to Disney's: both saw the need for such films to engage rather than to merely cite facts.

Never once mentioning Disney, Parsons seems averse to producing anything resembling the *True-Life Adventures*. Wildlife filmmakers, he claims, should:

> …truthfully portray, wholly or in part, animal life in its natural habitat… This is a tall order, but it is one that the responsible maker of wildlife films must remember all the time. (Parsons: 13)

Later, Parsons criticizes those wildlife films promoted as "true-life" because they "…are usually intended to provide pure entertainment, and very entertaining some of them are; but the implication that they show natural animal behavior is misleading." (Parsons: 16) Yet for the remainder of his book, Parsons instructs the reader on how to make a film presentation of natural history nevertheless dramatically engaging, specifically advocating such Disney constructs as dramatic editing and the addition of a musical score.

Contemporary scholars, on the other hand, have acknowledged a persistent Disney influence in all wildlife and natural history films, even those of the BBC. Gregg Mittman's description is typical: "As art and science, nature films seek to reproduce the aesthetic qualities of pristine wilderness…As entertainment, they promise enlightenment and thrills simultaneously." (Mittman:3) Regarding films by the BBC in particular, feminist critic Barbara Crowther describes them as "…straddling the functional divide between entertainment and education. They also straddle the conceptual divide between science and art, marrying – with no apparent complications – two disparate traditions and aesthetics." (Crowther: 290) Finally, Ralph H. Lutts summarized them succinctly as being a mix of "scientific documentation, good story telling, audience interest, and anthropomorphism." (Lutts: 14)

THE DISNEY GAZE

Innovations

Consider Marty Stouffer: his highly successful series, *Wild America*, featured many instances of wild animals hunting, chasing and otherwise vividly confronting each other. He was even once credited as a "Renaissance Man of wildlife films," for his regular use of time-lapses that have since become standard in PBS nature shows (http://www.prweb.com/releases/wildlife/internet/prweb4614574.htm). Unfortunately, Stouffer's Disney-inspired zeal eventually proved to be his undoing. Revelations of staging and other fakery (e.g., a rabbit had been tethered so that a raccoon could kill it, and polar bear cubs presented as "wild" were actually residents of the Denver Zoo) raised so much controversy that PBS was forced to end their relationship with Stouffer and cancel *Wild America*.

While later filmmakers may not have intentionally set out to copy Disney to the same extent as Stouffer, most efforts in the wake of Disney have nevertheless ended up looking very similar to what is on display in the *True-Life Adventures*, since many of the production techniques established by Disney quickly became industry standards. Yet surprisingly little has ever been discussed regarding the innovative camera work associated with the *True-Life Adventures*, perhaps because the presumption has always been that it was the slick work of Disney's studio technicians. In fact, the naturalist cameramen and scientific photographers themselves were responsible for these innovations. John Ott, whose exquisite time-lapse photography is featured in *Nature's*

Half Acre and *Secrets of Life*, spent years perfecting this technique prior to his association with Disney. Regarding the macro-photography of insects, entomology student Bob Crandall, working with the Disney technical staff, devised a filming system which synchronized a strobe light and a camera motor so that each flash of the strobe and each opening of the camera's shutter occurred simultaneously, thus maintaining the amount of heat reaching its tiny subjects at a comfortable 75 degrees Fahrenheit. As for innovations on a larger scale, for *Water Birds*, for instance, biologist Dick Borden added a shoulder rest to a 16mm camera, allowing it to sight objects like a rifle. For *Nature's Strangest Creatures*, Al and Elma Milotte constructed a glass-walled "platypus-erie" on-location in Australia in order to witness the underwater behavior of a platypus nurturing its young. ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 2)

Regarding general aspects of production of the *True-Life Adventures* that were implemented by the Disney studio, there were two that had profound consequences for all subsequent wildlife film production. The first was the use of 16mm film to record the natural world. This occurred for two reasons: 1) the 16mm Kodachrome film stock was cheaper for filming than 35mm; and 2) the cameras used were substantially more portable than any camera using 35mm. Disney first discovered this economy with *Saludos Amigos*, then subsequently applied it to not only to the live-action *True-Life* series but also to the studio's official ethnographic series, *People and Places*. The subsequent use of 16mm color film became so widespread that even Christopher Parsons in his 1971 book declared the format a "respectable film gauge" for natural history television shows on British television. Additionally, in tandem with this, because sound recording

equipment of the era was not easily portable, the creation of a soundtrack in post-production also became standard.

This use of 16mm film stock also paved the way for a second new production paradigm: the requisite exposure of, literally, thousands of feet of film, in order to assure the capture of a sufficient amount of engaging animal behavior, a practice which, at first, the associated filmmakers were reluctant to embrace. According to Diane Disney Miller:

> Father's biggest problem was to persuade his naturalist-cameramen to keep on shooting. They were inclined to be stingy with film and hoard it because they were accustomed to buying their own.
> "Shoot, shoot, and keep on shooting!" Father told them. "The cheapest thing we have in our operation is film." (Miller: 217)

For Disney, certainly, the cost of 16mm film was very inexpensive compared to that of 35mm stock. The fact that *Seal Island*'s lively twenty minutes had been culled from many hundreds of feet of film made it evident to all involved that, going forward, the shooting ratios for these kinds of films would, by necessity, always be high, with extended stays in the field required of the filmmakers in order to make this possible. Following the Milottes' eleven-month assignment in the Pribilof Islands for *Seal Island*, they spent two years in the American northwest for *Beaver Valley*, and three years in Africa for *The African Lion.* During these shoots, on a good day, as much as four to five hundred feet of film would be exposed ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 1). Of the 300,000 feet of film shot in Africa for *Lion*, 2,500 made it into the final film. Later, when comparing the film's shooting ratio of 120:1 to contemporary standards, Roy E. Disney jokingly deemed it "unacceptable Hollywood numbers." ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 3)

Additionally, in the *True-Life Adventures,* distinct presentational strategies debuted that have since become standard throughout the wildlife film industry. The most obvious – indeed the most distinctive – was the removal of humans from the frame. While Disney was not the first to do this (it had occurred as far back as the 1920s, in the British *Secrets of Life* series and the films of Jean Painlevé). Disney, however, was the first to strategically deploy it so that it created an exceedingly voyeuristic perspective for viewers, making them *feel* as if they had exclusive access to the Edenic settings being presented. The result was a much more experiential presentation of the natural world, the stars of which subsequently came off as engaging as those of the animal comedies yet obviously more "true to life." Whether this was Disney's original intention is uncertain; more likely, the decision to omit humans was due to the fact that Paramount's *Speaking of Animals* already had popularized the all-animal format. Eventually, however, Disney acknowledged the voyeuristic nature of his *True-Life Adventures*, explaining to TV viewers in 1956 "You know if there's one question that everyone likes to ask…it's how do we manage to pry into the private lives of the animals." (*Backstage with the True-Life Cameras*)

Disney's omission of humans allowed for another formal innovation: the imposition of the ethnographic documentary format on the natural world, with each *True-Life Adventure* coming off as more of a travelogue than a lecture film (a logical consequence, as noted earlier, of the series starting off as a follow-up to *Saludos Amigos*). Perhaps, then, this is the key to Disney's success with the *True-Life Adventures*: unlike previous representations of the natural world, Disney's version presented wildlife as a

cultural entity to be enjoyed and experienced, rather than as a scientific entity to be observed and dissected. Additionally, with anthropomorphized animal stars, storytelling became easier.

Another formal innovation was the use of camera angles usually reserved for narrative film. N. Paul Kenworthy employed this when filming his pepsis wasp and tarantula sequence. By repeatedly staging and filming the confrontation using multiple individuals of each insect, Kenworthy was then able to obtain shots from various perspectives ("…subjective camera, extra close-ups, over shoulders, and exits"), which then allowed him to construct a dramatic and tension-filled chase sequence. ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 2)

It is to the credit of both Disney and the naturalist-photographers and scientist-cameramen he employed that their innovations have endured – and continue to endure – in the wildlife film industry. Collectively, however, these contributions contributed to what will now be cited as Disney's most influential legacy.

Wildlife and Natural History Film: a Distinct Type of Documentary Gaze

Feminist Laura Mulvey, in her analysis of Hollywood narrative film, argued that, historically, a heterosexual male gaze has always influenced how women and sexuality are presented on the narrative screen. (Mulvey; Pg 314) Later, Bill Nichols modified this concept for non-fiction film, proposing that the filmmaker's "politics and ethics" are what influence representation in a documentary film. (Nichols: 77) He identified six distinct gazes – the accidental, the clinical or professional, the endangered, the helpless,

the humane, and the interventional – each one defined by how the filmmaker treats his/her human subject when recording reality.

Likewise, wildlife and natural history films have their own distinctive gaze, one that obviously seeks to convey the notion that "nature is entertaining." Unlike other documentary gazes, however, the gaze in a mainstream natural history film seems intent on recording – not just evidence from the natural historical world – but *striking, entertaining* evidence. For example, the capture of the visual record of elephants stampeding and tigers hunting is preferable to the capture of the visual record of these same animals during less engaging moments of their lives, such as when they are at rest, despite the fact that the latter is "what mostly happens in wildlife." (de Vise).

This gaze first rose to prominence in the *True Life Adventures*, and it has since come to predominate in the modern wildlife film. As such, I propose it be deemed the "Disney gaze," defined as "the capture of the images of real-life referents of the scientific and natural world with the specific intention of creating a presentation that is as engagingly and emotionally-compelling to the viewer as possible." Such a definition recognizes the motivations of any filmmaker in the wildlife filmmaking industry. For someone as freewheeling as Marty Stouffer, who sought to imitate, even outdo Disney, by proclaiming that "The 'pictorial essays' which I create are always true and yet not always real" (Sink), the description seems particularly apt. But the same also applies to those whose approach is considerably less sensational. The distinctive poetic presentation employed by Christopher Parsons and the BBC, for instance, while dedicated to factual integrity (Parsons: 13), is nevertheless concerned with attracting television viewers

(Parsons: 49). At the same time, this definition of the Disney gaze allows for a wide range of animal representation when it comes to enticing viewers, everything from the slick and visually-stunning (e.g., *Planet Earth*) to the outrageously anthropomorphic (e.g., *Wacky Babies*, 1998, Marty Stouffer Productions).

This "Disney gaze" also demonstrates a noticeable lack of compassion when it comes to death and dying: it permits what is forbidden in a human documentary and instead places it center stage, highlighting the difference in how viewers regard cinematic animals as opposed to cinematic humans. In National Geographic's *Great Migrations* (2010), for example, the camera looks unflinchingly – but repeatedly – on as crocodiles disembowel hapless wildebeests. More to this point is filmmaker Dereck Joubert's admission that there is actually a formula for wildlife shows that deal with predation: "…you should have a kill in the first half of the film, a kill in the second half, and then mold the story around them." (Woodward)

The establishment of this gaze as a standard in natural history documentaries is Disney's greatest contribution to the modern wildlife film. Although similar gazes that focus on the "sensational" are evident in earlier wildlife films (e.g., the films of Frank Buck), Disney was the first filmmaker to fully exploit this gaze for its story value and, consequently, ongoing commercial success. Disney's innovations allowed for the mass production of films featuring this gaze. By catering to the often-demanding technical needs of his field crews, he made it possible for them to concentrate on – and indulge in - their passion of filming the natural world at its most fascinating.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the wildlife films that preceded them, Disney's *True-Life Adventures* were constructed according to more of an ethnographic/travelogue format, anthropomorphically framing their subjects culturally rather than scientifically. Various aspects of the natural world – animals, plants, weather, geologic phenomena, etc. – were all presented as extensions of a single character – "Nature." Much as in many ethnographic films, where the objective is to familiarize the viewer with the exotic, the character of Nature and all its manifestations were subsequently positioned in the role of Other, their actions and behaviors translated into cultural idioms culled from the American middle class of the late 1940s. Two innovative strategies were crucial to the success of these films: 1) the Disney gaze, which seeks out and records rare, ephemeral moments in the natural world, and 2) a final, highly-manipulated presentation to the viewer of these images, formatted to tweak emotions rather than the intellect. The ubiquity of these same two strategies in later, non-Disney productions confirms Disney's legacy in the category of wildlife film. However, rather than being credited with only having influenced the representation of wildlife on film, Disney and his team of naturalist-cameramen and scientist-photographers should be credited with having established new paradigms for wildlife film*making*.

What has never been discussed is why the *True-Life Adventures* – and the filmmaking innovations that made them possible- could *only* have originated at a studio like Disney's. The explanation may be that, all "Disneyfication" aside, the films'

shooting ratios and on-location schedules were unheard of, indeed *unthinkable*, at any other studio. In the 1920s, Robert Flaherty's *Moana of the South Seas* (1926) had, initially, been enthusiastically funded by Paramount, but the film's subsequent failure to meet the studio's financial expectations. Subsequently, the production of documentary films throughout the 1930s and 1940s shifted to private organizations and/or the U.S. government, who tolerated the routine high shooting ratios of documentary films by the likes of Robert Flaherty and, later, Pare Lorentz and his contemporaries.

But the situation at the Disney Studio was unique: for however absurd the shooting standards of these wildlife films *sounded*, the actual economics paled when compared to that of any animated film, feature or short. Key to this, of course, was the practice of using 16mm Kodachrome stock when filming in the field, then enlarging it to 35mm Technicolor prints for theatrical distribution. (The same economic production strategy which would later distinguish many social documentaries of the 1970s, among them Barbara Kopple's 1976 *Harlan County U.S.A.* and Peter Davis' 1974 *Hearts and Minds.*)

More critical than anything else, however, was Disney's partiality to this kind of time-consuming filmmaking. It shared much with the medium of animation: the endless patience required affirmed the dedication of the filmmaker to his craft as it did for any animator drawing figures frame-by-frame. Subsequently, Disney understood the passion of the naturalist-photographers and the scientist-cameramen for their wild subjects, and how it drove them to invest whatever time and energy were necessary to obtain a few captivating moments on film. The basic tenet to the *True-Life* production teams was "wait

for it to happen." ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 3) As Elma Milotte remembered "It all came very slowly. We really never got frustrated because we knew that eventually we'd get something…we spent long hours out." ("Filmmakers' Journal," *True-Life Adventures* DVD Vol. 1) Wildlife filmmakers have since embraced this approach. Beverly and Derek Jouberts, for instance, estimated that, between 1981 and 1991 they had spent 23,000 hours watching lions in Africa – usually 12-16 on a daily basis but only filming for 2. (Woodward) Alternatively, rather than "wait for it happen," some producers – most famously Marty Stouffer and the BBC but also, on occasion, some of the *True-Life* cameramen – discovered that using captive animals in staged events also yields compelling images, with the viewer none the wiser. (However, in recent years the industry has since come down on this practice, issuing very strict guidelines regarding the use of captive animals, http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/naturalworld/.) Because of his studio's promotion of the work naturalist-photographers and the scientist-cameramen, Disney can be credited with having incorporated documentary-style film shooting into the Hollywood system, helping to popularize the genre by bringing it inside the studio walls.

On the speculative side, the success of the *True-Life Adventures* may have impacted other genres of documentary. Ethnographic film, after a lull lasting nearly two decades, enjoyed a resurgence in the 1950s. (Heider: 30) More intriguing is whether the origins of Direct Cinema came about because of the *True-Life Adventures*. Certainly, the two film lines have much in common: the use of portable cameras shooting on 16mm

film stock, the presentational immediacy of their subjects, the absence of the filmmaker from the frame, the high shooting ratios necessary to ensure the capture of engaging moments, and also the emphasis on editing "to make something seamlessly convincing, not factually perfect." (Monaco: 200) There is also the issue of timing: Direct Cinema comes into being at the close of the 1950s, a period just after the *True-Life Adventures* had found new audiences by being broadcast on Disney's ABC television show. The notion should not be discounted.

If such a connection does exist, however, Disney's wildlife film legacy may need to be re-qualified. As cited previously, his nature films employed many of the same techniques and ideas that would eventually become embraced by the nonfiction movement during the second half of the 1950s. Quite possibly, such commercial success on the part of Disney could have encouraged broader acceptance of these techniques among both filmmakers and audiences. In that case, perhaps Disney should be credited, not with having invented a new kind of wildlife film, but, rather, with having helped to establish a new kind of nonfiction film.

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Disk 1

The Living Desert
Seal Island
The Vanishing Prairie

Disk 2

Behind the True-Life Cameras (1955)
Filmmakers' Journal (2006)
Islands of the Sea
Nature's Strangest Creatures
Prairie television show (1954)

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Disk 1

The African Lion
Bear Country
Jungle Cat

Disk 2

Cameras in Africa television show (1954)
Filmmakers' Journal (2006)
Olympic Elk
Tribute to the Milottes (2006)
The Yellowstone Story television show (1957)

Algar, James, Paul Kenworthy, and Ralph Wright. 2006. *Walt Disney Legacy Collection - True Life Adventures, Vol. 4*. Walt Disney Video, December 5.

Disk 1

Secrets Of Life

Disk 2

Filmmakers' Journal (2006)
Nature's Half Acre
Searching for Nature's Mysteries (1956)
Tribute to Winston Hibler (2006)

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South of the Border with Walt Disney (1942)

Sharpsteen, Ben, and James Algar. 2006. *Walt Disney Legacy Collection - True Life Adventures, Vol. 1: Wonders Of The World*. Walt Disney Video, December 5.

Disk 1

Beaver Valley
Prowlers of the Everglades
Water Birds
White Wilderness

Disk 2

The Crisler Story television show (1957)
Filmmakers' Journal (2006)
Mysteries of the Deep
Tribute to James Algar (2006)
Wonders of the Waterworlds television show (1961)

APPENDIX A

THE DISNEY NATURE FILMS 1948 – 1960

* = Oscar nomination

** = Oscar winner

<u>*True-Life Adventures* series</u>

Seal Island (1948, 27 min.) **

In Beaver Valley (1950, 32 min.) **

Nature's Half-Acre (1951, 33 min.) **

The Olympic Elk (1952, 27 min.)

Water Birds (1952, 30 min.) **

Bear Country (1953, 33 min.) **

Prowlers of the Everglades (1953, 32 min.)

The Living Desert (1953, 69 min.) **

The Vanishing Prairie (1954, 60 min.) **

The African Lion (1955, 75 min.)

Secrets of Life (1956, 70 min.)

White Wilderness (1958, 72 min.) **

Jungle Cat (1959, 69 min.)

Films presenting similar subject matter but which were not released under the *True-Life* label:

Mysteries of the Deep (1959, 24 min.) *

Nature's Strangest Creatures (1959, 18 min.)

Islands of the Sea (1960, 28 min.) *