

REFLEXIVE FILMMAKING FOR WILDLIFE AND NATURE FILMS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Historically, wildlife and nature filmmakers have embraced the expository mode of filmmaking and a realistic style, attempting to influence their audience with compelling arguments. However, while their scripts may call for activism, their expository, realistic style, with hidden production methods, an authoritative tone, and pristine visuals, instead encourages voyeurism. In addition, standard theater and television distribution methods offer no outlet for action to viewers who do feel inspired. I offer a different model for influence in my wildlife series Nature Break: reflexive filmmaking. In this series I use such reflexive strategies to critique the voyeuristic way in which spectators consume wildlife and nature films.

However, *critiquing* passive spectators with reflexivity is not the same as *creating* active spectators. Therefore, with Nature Break I go beyond simply making and distributing a film. Additionally, I will create a related website on the Internet as a platform for viewers to post their own films, discuss issues inspired by films on the site, and coordinate activism efforts. Through Internet distribution, the Nature Break series can finally live up to the reflexive filmmaker's goal of creating an art that leads to activism.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main motivations for documentarians is to inspire social change, but what qualities must a film have to best accomplish this goal? Is there a formula that filmmakers can follow? What style of filmmaking is most likely to motivate its viewers to become active participants in cinema and to act on the social issues of a film? Historically, wildlife and nature filmmakers have embraced the expository mode of filmmaking, attempting to influence their audience with compelling arguments. However, while their scripts may call for activism, their expository, realistic style, with hidden production methods, an authoritative tone, and pristine visuals, instead encourages voyeurism. In addition, standard theater and television distribution methods offer no outlet for action to viewers who do feel inspired. Without a platform for discussion and activism, the impact of many potentially influential films fizzles.

I offer a different model for influence in my wildlife series Nature Break: reflexive filmmaking. Bill Nichols defines the reflexive film as one that presents not only the historical world, but the filmmaker's techniques for representing it as well (Representing 56-7). In Nature Break, I use such reflexive strategies to critique the voyeuristic way in which spectators consume wildlife films. However, *critiquing* passive spectators with reflexivity is not the same as *creating* active spectators. Therefore, with Nature Break I go beyond simply making and distributing a film. Instead, the reflexivity of this series encourages viewers to use film as a means for active communication and offers them a forum to do so.

I will create a related website on the Internet as a platform for viewers to post their own films, discuss issues inspired by films on the site, and coordinate activism efforts. This combination of the reflexive mode of filmmaking with interactive distribution on the Internet can transform wildlife and nature films into motivational works of art.



## BACKGROUND

In Representing Reality, Bill Nichols outlines six types of documentary: Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative. Although traditional nature films might include elements of several of these styles, they fit by and large into the expository category. This mode of filmmaking was once popular for all documentary and dates back to the 1920's. Nichols describes expository films as those with a rhetorical or argumentative style, employing a "voice of god" narrator or omniscient host who addresses the viewer directly and assumes an impersonal but authoritative stance on the topic of the film (Introduction 105). In expository films, commentary drives the film and explains the images. The images serve to support this commentary. In addition to being authoritative, the commentary/host claims to be objective, and therefore "seems above the fray," able to "judge actions in the historical world without being caught up in them" (Nichols, Introduction 107). Nichols says, "The professional commentator's official tone...strives to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as distance, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience" (Introduction 107). While most documentary genres have adopted other styles of filmmaking, the expository style continues to be the standard for wildlife films, perhaps because of this genre's tie to objective scientific practice and educational discourse.

Additionally, traditional wildlife adhere to the conventions of realism, which, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer state, ignore the subjective

contribution of the filmmaker and support the illusion that “the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen” (34). Although a certain amount of realism is inherent in all films, since the medium captures actual images of its signifiers, it is especially misleading in documentaries because these films reflect the actual historical world and so claim a certain amount of truthfulness. As Bill Nichols remarks, “One fundamental expectation of a documentary is that its sounds and images bear an indexical relation to the historical world” (Representing 27). When watching a documentary, spectators assume that “the film merely reveals what we could have seen around us had we, too, looked with a patient, discerning eye” (Nichols, Representing 6). This assumption hides the control of the filmmaker over both the visual image and the events captured. In wildlife films in particular, Cynthia Chris notes that, “The preference for unpeopled landscapes...bolsters an implicitly positivist belief in the veracity of direct observation, that is, in the camera’s capacity to represent reality...and invite[s] viewers to forget that their view of nature is mediated” (71).

In truth, as I have witnessed over the past seven years of working in this specific industry, wildlife and nature documentarians alter the historical world in many ways, from feeding interview subjects lines to changing the positions of objects. In his book Reflexivity in Film and Literature, Robert Stam points out that according to The Heisenberg Principle, “acts of scientific observation necessarily modify the phenomena observed” (xiv). The same can be said of the act of filmmaking, particularly wildlife filmmaking. In the presence of a film crew,

animals rarely behave as they normally would. Only after months of habituation can a filmmaker become “invisible” to their wildlife subjects, and even then the normalcy of their behavior is uncertain since we have no idea how animals behave when humans are not there to observe them. In addition, wildlife filmmakers commonly use captive or tame animals to play the part of wild animals, and may stitch together footage of several animals and portray them as the same one, creating “composite characters and events” (Bouse 106). Likewise, when covering scientists in a lab or doing fieldwork the presence of the film crew undoubtedly alters the scientists’ behavior. Many experts are uncomfortable in front of a camera, and so the camera does not capture their true personalities. Filmmakers also make these on-camera subjects repeat behaviors several times so the camera operator can shoot them from multiple angles. Furthermore, when interviewing scientists, producers often coach them to deliver succinct sound bites rather than speak in their natural manner. In short, the final film is not an accurate representation of the scientist as a worker, or as a person. By not acknowledging any of these production tricks, wildlife and nature filmmakers claim to portray reality, when they are actually portraying a world that they have altered.

Although traditional wildlife films deliver important educational information and messages, they also attempt, either overtly or subconsciously, to convince the audience of a particular political ideology. Stam says that “by trying to reproduce reality, realism inevitably expresses only the ideology implicit in

conventional bourgeois notions of reality” (Reflexivity 13). Similarly, Nichols states that:

The expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and of well-substantiated judgment...by eliminating reference to the process by which knowledge is produced, organized and regulated...Knowledge...[is] in compliance with the categories and concepts accepted as given or true in a specific time and place, or with a dominant ideology of common sense...(Representing 35)

What ideology, then, do wildlife and nature films express? Sometimes this question is easy to answer, as in the case of environmental activist films, but often ideology is hidden behind the seemingly objective position of the film. In this latter case, these films advocate standard conceptions regarding science and wildlife. First, by showing the most intimate moments of animal life and intruding on every aspect of the natural world, they maintain a colonialist attitude towards non-humans. Just as western societies dominated other human cultures through colonization, they extend this belief and practice to the natural world as well. Wildlife films that invade the lives of other creatures and portray nature as something to be owned, conquered, and exploited by humans exercise a similar type of colonialism. Additionally, they reinforce the Judeo/Christian sense of human entitlement, the belief that the world exists for human utilization, whether through scientific study, recreation, or visual pleasure. They also take an elitist attitude that nature needs humans to decipher biological and ecological processes and save the natural world from destruction. Finally, traditional wildlife and nature films foster the dominant view of nature as “other,” something that is

separate from human life. They assume that humans should consume this “other” passively and voyeuristically. While the expository style can be a powerful tool of influence for filmmakers, it also reinforces these potentially harmful ideologies. As Nichols says, an expository film “will add to our stockpile of knowledge but not challenge or subvert the categories by which such knowledge gets organized” (Introduction 109).

While reflexive documentaries use many of the same production methods as traditional wildlife and nature films, they question the act of representation, thereby unsettling the assumption that documentaries capture the reality of the world (Nichols, Introduction 24). Bill Nichols points out that reflexive films work similarly to Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effects, to the Russian formalists’ “making strange,” or even to the surrealists’ techniques that show the world in new ways (Introduction 128). While “realism provides unproblematic access to the world...[r]eflexive documentaries will employ such techniques only to interrupt and expose them” (Nichols, Representing 57-58). For example, Luis Bunuel’s *Land Without Bread* (1933) uses reflexive gestures to mock the classic ethnographic documentary. In one scene Bunuel’s narrator, in the standard unimpassioned tone of documentary narrators, tells the audience that one of their crewmembers examines a little girl sick with an enflamed throat and tonsils. The narrator states that the film crew “can do nothing about it.” The film then cuts to a rather shocking shot inside the girl’s mouth. Then, in the same, distanced manner, the narrator says that the girl later died. In this scene, Bunuel parodies

the expository documentary codes that valorize objectivity at the expense of caring for their subjects. This example shows how exposing filmmaking practices also critiques the ideology that supports conventions of documentary representation.

Robert Stam notes that Christian Metz listed an “arsenal” of reflexive devices “such as direct visual address to the camera, verbal direct address, reflexive intertitles, the frame-within-the-frame, the film-within-the-film, subjective imagery, and the display of the apparatus” (Reflexivity xiv). In Reflexivity in Film and Literature Robert Stam organized these techniques into four types of reflexivity. First, reflexive films might portray “allegories of spectatorship,” which highlight the “intersubjective textual relation,” the relation between spectator and film. Alfred Hitchcock’s entire 1954 film *Rear Window* is an allegory of spectatorship. The main character, Jeffries, who spies on his neighbors through his apartment window, represents the voyeuristic viewers of a film. Allegories of spectatorship such as these “focus on the cinematic apparatus and the desiring spectator’s place within that apparatus” in order to criticize the acceptance of voyeurism and passivity in the spectator and the larger society (Stam, Reflexivity 69). Second, reflexive films might highlight the process of production, thereby demystifying the cinema and making spectators “aware, to some degree, of the medium, of its codes, and the work of its signifiers” (Stam, Reflexivity 126). For example, by including shots of the camera, camera operator, and editor, Dziga Vertov made his 1929 film *The Man with a Movie Camera* a reflexive film.

Third, reflexive films can be self-conscious and “call attention to their own artifice and operations” (Stam, Reflexivity 129) as part of a “genre of the self-conscious” (Stam, Reflexivity 127). The films of Woody Allen are excellent examples of this type of reflexivity. For example, his 1980 film *Stardust Memories* is self-conscious in that it is about a filmmaker making a film. Finally, films can be reflexive by employing carnivalesque and modernist techniques. Visual effects like the cutting of the eye in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) use the absurd to expose the conventions of illusionism (Stam, Reflexivity 167-9).

By using these four techniques, reflexive films challenge the basic assumption that documentaries represent a realistic world. They make it clear to the viewers that documentaries, like all films, are creative constructs. As Nichols says, “To remind viewers...of the creative element in John Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ undercuts the very claim to truth and authenticity on which the documentary depends” (Introduction 24). Reflexive films stress “the deformative intervention of the cinematic apparatus in the process of representation” (Nichols, Representing 61). Furthermore, Stam says reflexivity offers a “double critique,” or “a critique made by texts which criticize fictions...in order to critique the dominant society which generates such self-serving fictions” (Reflexivity xix). Finally, theorists like Bertolt Brecht believed that after inspiring a critique of the dominant society, reflexivity could encourage spectators to enact social change (57). So, by relying too heavily on the expository mode of filmmaking, wildlife and nature filmmakers

ignore the powerful tools of communication and influence possible through reflexivity.

Nature Break employs reflexivity to encourage a “double critique” of wildlife films and the society that supports them. My use of reflexivity challenges the dominant paradigm that dictates a passive relationship between humans and nature. First, I use the disruptive modernistic techniques to challenge the spectator’s current role as voyeuristic observers of wildlife films. Next, I expose the film’s creative construct to make viewers aware of the authorial forces. By showing viewers how these films are created, I intend to inspire them to undertake similar creative projects themselves. Due to the reflexivity of my films, viewers will see that making nature films is not just a task for an elite group, but something that all people can attempt as part of a two-way communication through film.



## CHALLENGING THE VOYEUR

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines a voyeur as “a prying observer who is usually seeking the sordid or the scandalous.” Laura Mulvey discusses cinematic voyeurism in relation to feminist theory. She theorizes that “the cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking” (60) in the form of scopophilia, Sigmund Freud’s term to describe “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (59). According to Mulvey, the cinema places men in the dominant role of the voyeur and women in the role of an exhibitionist, where her threat to the male ego can be contained (62-64). The natural world can easily be substituted for the female subject in this theory, as humans desire to gaze upon wild animals and the natural elements in order to contain their threat to our existence. In fact, Derek Bouse makes a similar claim that the creation of wildlife films fulfills the human need to “impose control over the world by reducing it to manageable images” (39).

Voyeurism in cinema also takes on a passive element, as exemplified in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rear Window* (1954). In this film, the lead character, L.B. Jeffries, is a voyeur who represents the film spectator. His broken leg, immobility, and removed location from the action of the world all allegorize the passivity of the cinematic spectator and his/her separation from the action of the world. In Robert Stam’s analysis of the film, he describes Jeffries as, “opt[ing] for inactivity” and “prefer[ing] his thrills vicarious” (Reflexivity 48). These quotes also aptly describe wildlife and nature film viewers, who, rather than actively engage

with nature by going outdoors to hike or even to hunt or fish, prefer to sit in the isolated shelter of their homes or a theater to watch the spectacle of nature, as Jeffries watches “the spectacle of his neighbors’ lives” (Stam, Reflexivity 48).

The positioning of the spectator as a voyeur is especially strong in wildlife and nature films, where the dominant social ideology reinforces the separation between the spectator and the film’s subject matter. Current societal beliefs dictate that humans live apart from nature and that most interactions between the two require some sort of intermediary, like the organization of a national park, the cages of a zoo, or the screen of a television or movie theater. Both the aesthetics and content of natural history films uphold this belief. For example, the film *March of the Penguins* (2005), by many measures the most successful wildlife documentary to date, tells a fascinating story about animal behavior. However, like most other classic wildlife films, the film is void of any human presence, including that of the filmmaker. Bouse lists this “absence of people” as one of the characteristics of the “blue chip” wildlife film (14). This standard characteristic reinforces society’s division between humans and nature. Furthermore, wildlife films like *March of the Penguins* often focus on exotic locations in order to increase their sense of spectacle. While the remote Antarctic setting of *March of the Penguins* contributes to the film’s appeal, it also allows spectators to retain their distant relationship to the subjects of the film. The emperor penguins and their habitat remain a fantasy since viewers, while they might feel a connection to the narrative of the story, are disconnected from

the subjects in real life. The decision by wildlife filmmakers to disproportionately choose inaccessible subjects perpetuates this feeling of disconnect in our society.

Finally, the conventions of realism used in *March of the Penguins* and other classic natural history films allow consumers to lose themselves in the spectator experience. Seamless continuity editing, pristine images, complimentary and unobtrusive music, and an omniscient authoritative narrator and/or host all lull spectators into a voyeuristic state. Robert Stam summarizes Christian Metz's argument on the film spectator's experience as follows:

the 'impression of reality' achieved by films derives from a cinematic situation that encourages feelings of narcissistic withdrawal and dreamy self-indulgence...This lowering of wakefulness implies a withdrawal of concern from the external world...(Reflexivity 36)

Similarly, Laura Mulvey claims that the conventions of cinema "promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation" between the audience and the film subjects (60). As Bouse points out, realism in wildlife films "may do less to acquaint us with nature than to alienate us from it" because the films give us a false impression of what nature is like, so we are therefore disappointed when reality does not live up to the spectacle and drama of the film (8).

In Nature Break, I try to counter this alienating culture of voyeurism propagated by wildlife films. Nature Break's ideological mission is to encourage people to interact with and appreciate their local environment and the series' content is geared towards that goal. Rather than focus on the exotic, its

episodes show normal people going out to experience their local environment. Therefore, viewers will be empowered to take care of their immediate surroundings instead of made to feel impotent by messages that the only habitats worth experiencing and preserving are those on the other side of the world. Growing up with a nature educator as a parent, I have witnessed how experiencing nature leads people to appreciate it, which then leads to conservation and preservation efforts. I myself am one such example. Some of my most enjoyable life experiences have been in the outdoors, and as a result I contribute to conservation organizations, try to exert a minimal impact on the environment in my daily life, and teach others about nature preservation through my work as a filmmaker. Other examples include the various "Friends Of" groups that preserve local habitats that members enjoy, and hunters that form conservation groups like Ducks Unlimited. Traditional wildlife films do make steps in this direction by making expository arguments for conservation. However, they fall short of inspiring action because they only offer viewers a voyeuristic experience of nature, as discussed above, not a means of direct interaction. I believe reflexivity is a better aesthetic option because, as Bill Nichols says, reflexive texts "...remind us of their status as a text, discourse, narrative, or art, but also of the need to move beyond the text if we, too, are to engage with the world that a text can only represent" (Representing 68). With my reflexive films, I can teach people how to experience directly the natural world

through filmmaking. In turn, this type of experience will lead towards appreciation and conservation of nature.

First, I use the reflexive technique Stam calls “The Carnival of Modernism” to counter the realism that, as discussed above, alienates viewers from the natural world. Using aggressive anti-illusionism, unconventional visual techniques “adopt strategies of carnivalesque fantasy and absurdity” to challenge social and artistic norms (Stam, Reflexivity 167). While the aesthetics of Nature Break are not overtly avant-garde or shocking, some of my techniques are contrary to the realism of most wildlife documentaries. For example, the split screen scenes are an effort to interrupt the realism of the rest of the Nature Break films. This visual technique strives to disrupt the spectators’ ability to withdraw into the fantasy of the film. Instead, they are forced to notice that the version of reality portrayed in the film is altered.

In addition, wildlife camera operators usually use a tripod to hold their camera while filming. This technique insures a steady shot that makes viewers forget the act of filming and the presence of the filmmaker. In contrast, I chose to shoot with a hand-held camera in order to highlight the camera operator’s work. While hand-held cinematography has become a standard and accepted style for other types of cinema, for the wildlife genre it can still be considered disruptive because it defies viewers’ expectations for steady, unaffected images of nature.

Similarly, I use jump cuts to separate interview takes throughout the films. Again, while this might be a common practice in certain film genres, it is very

unusual for nature films, which practice continuity editing in order to conceal the editing process as much as possible. For example, at the beginning of “Hellbenders, Part 1,” my father makes a mistake by beginning to say that hellbenders are the “world’s biggest salamander.” He asks to start over and the film abruptly cuts, with a modernist light transition, to the next take when he corrects himself by saying that hellbenders are “North America’s biggest salamander.” This jump cut, highlighted by the visual transition, makes viewers aware that the film is being edited, and that as the filmmaker I have censored which portions of reality I want them to see. What was said between the two takes? Were there more than two takes that could have been included? Where else in the film were scenes cut because of mistakes? These are all questions that highlighting the editing process can inspire.

These modernistic techniques in Nature Break accomplish the Russian formalist’s concept of *ostranenie*, or “making strange.” As Bill Nichols describes:

[these] 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. (Representing 61)

In other words, this reflexive strategy interrupts the realistic style of my wildlife series to remind viewers that the film is not a direct signifier of the historical world. The split screens, jump cuts, shaky camera, and light transitions disrupt viewers’ ability to retreat into the fantasy of realism.

## CREATING FILMMAKERS THROUGH REFLEXIVITY

As mentioned in the “Introduction,” disrupting voyeurism is just one part of a successful effort to create an active spectator. The second part is teaching spectators *how* they can become active. As Robert Stam says, “Filmmakers have the perennial choice of obscuring or revealing the codes by which they create illusions. They can keep the codes as a closely guarded professional secret or they can initiate the public into their operations” (Stam, Reflexivity 126). Traditional wildlife and nature films hide their production tricks from viewers, maintaining a culture of elitism. Only privileged insiders learn how to make these films. Additionally, their expensive production methods and inaccessible distribution channels prohibit the general public from ever using this medium to communicate. Costly television- and theater-distributed films serve only as one-way messaging platforms from the filmmakers/television networks/film studios to viewers. In contrast, in Nature Break I choose to reveal my codes and operations in order to demystify the wildlife film genre. By showing viewers how I make my films, I hope to transform wildlife filmmaking into a form of two-way communication.

The Discovery Channel/Science Channel series Survivorman is an contemporary example of the elitism of traditional nature films. It is especially useful to analyze because it remains elitist despite its use of reflexive devices. While this series reflexively reveals certain aspects of its production, it shows how such exposure does not necessarily demystify a film. Rather, the reflexivity

of this series supports the other standard elitist devices of nature films like the hero-host, unreachable locations, and hidden production methods, and epitomizes how reflexivity is used in wildlife and nature films, when it is used at all.

Survivorman features filmmaker and survival expert Les Stroud, who, in each episode, travels to a remote and inhospitable location. In addition to surviving on his own for seven days, he must make a film about his experience. While the major theme of Survivorman is about Stroud's conquest of nature, a major sub-theme is his making of the film. This theme is clear from the opening graphics, in which on-screen text reads, "One man...all alone...7 days...no food...no TV crew...Survivorman." Throughout each episode, Stroud regularly shows his camera equipment, describes his shooting methods, and highlights the dangers and challenges of making a film in extreme conditions. However, this reflexivity does little to transform the series into a means of bilateral communication between filmmaker and viewer.

First, by claiming that Stroud is making the film all by himself, it presents a false impression of the voice of the series, and the filmmaker with whom viewers would be communicating. The series hides the other people involved in the production process: a second camera crew, production company, editors, and network executives. When the helicopter drops Stroud off at the beginning of each episode and picks him up at the end, there is obviously a second film crew present. Even though the show uses shots taken by this second crew (helicopter



shots of scenery, shots of Stroud packing his bags and taking out his own camera gear), Stroud never acknowledges this crew. Likewise, no mention is ever made of the long list of producers involved in making editorial decisions, or, more importantly, the compromises that must be made to satisfy corporate clients. Discovery Communications, which owns both The Discovery Channel and The Science Channel, is a multi-million-dollar corporation beholden to its shareholders. As a public company, its primary aim is to make money, not educate or inspire its viewers. Therefore, it benefits Discovery to remain uncontroversial in order to avoid offending its advertisers and stockholders. Likewise, by maintaining the traditional romantic view of the natural world, the company's shows, like Survivorman, remain easily palatable to the general public, insuring consistently successful ratings and therefore continued advertising investments. Their shows could never be a means for transparent communication with viewers because certain topics are off-limits and the views expressed are always influenced by unnamed constituents. So, although this series exposes parts of its "cumbersome machinery of versimilitude" (Stam, Reflexivity 22), it does not present an honest face with which viewers can communicate.

Secondly, Survivorman portrays filmmaking as a feat only for heroes, reinforcing cinema's elitism. Stroud exposes the most dangerous and challenging aspects of his filmmaking and frames them as tasks only to be attempted by an expert adventurer like himself. In fact, this series even claims

that its methods of production (Les Stroud filming all by himself) are unique to this particular show, distinguishing Stroud not only from workers in different industries, but even from all other professional filmmakers. For example, in the 2004 episode titled "Mountain" Stroud must survive and film in the Canadian Rockies. He emphasizes the danger of this endeavor when, at the beginning of Act 1, over footage of Stroud hiking away from the camera, he says, "At this altitude the thin air makes hauling more than sixty pounds of video camera gear a tough job." Then, later on in Act 2, he must climb down some slippery cliffs. He reminds viewers that he must also film it when he says, "These are very wet, slippery and steep rock faces. Breaking an ankle here could be a death sentence. Yet getting shots like these means climbing them twice." Rather than encourage viewers to attempt similar production methods so that they, too, may use film to communicate about their experiences in nature, these scenes portray filmmaking as a dangerous exploit. In the words of Dziga Vertov, Survivorman upholds the "high priests of cinema" by casting Stroud as one of the "immortal kings and queens of the screen" (71). This elitist stance does not encourage real-world action from spectators since it claims that only an expert can communicate about nature through film the way that Stroud does.

In Reflexivity in Film and Literature, Robert Stam discusses Hollywood's use of reflexivity in films such as *A Star is Born* (1954), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and *King Kong* (1933). He notes that although some films are about filmmaking and expose various aspects of their production, they "are not anti-illusionist, and

many, far from demystifying the film industry or exposing its mechanisms, idealize it as a wonderland of dreams fulfilled” (83). The same can be said of reflexivity in wildlife and nature films, as exemplified by Survivorman. Although by exposing the production process Survivorman reminds spectators that they are watching a product, the series ignores the true commercial voice behind that product and maintains the elite position of the filmmaking occupation.

In contrast, I reflexively expose the production process of my series to transform film into a populist means of communication. I believe that filmmaking is a rewarding way to express views and share experiences of wildlife and the outdoors. Like Survivorman, Nature Break is shot by a one-person crew, and the reflexivity of both series’ exposes this single filmmaker. However, unlike Les Stroud in Survivorman, who hides the other important creative and financial influences, as the filmmaker of Nature Break I am truly the sole creator of the films. The choices I made to use relatively inexpensive equipment and a one-person crew enabled me to independently finance the films. Therefore, I am not beholden to external forces like advertising sponsors or network or studio backers. Additionally, since the technology now exists with which such films can be made by anyone with a cell phone and a computer, this production model is accessible to the average viewer. These production choices result in a “less produced,” more “raw” aesthetic. Such a look would not be acceptable for a traditional blue-chip wildlife film, yet it contributes to my overall mission to encourage my viewers to make films of their own. While the highly produced

aesthetic of blue-chip wildlife films makes filmmaking seem unattainable to viewers, my aesthetic is more down-to-earth and closer to what viewers would produce themselves. In addition, I acknowledge my presence and influence as the director of the films to show viewers how I shape the events that result in the finished Nature Break films. Like Survivorman, both the “Hellbender” and “Rattlesnake” episodes begin with an acknowledgement through voice-over of myself as the filmmaker and my task to make a film. Likewise, when editing my on-camera direct address scenes, I include the moments when I step in and out of the frame to press the record button. In addition to exposing the process of creating the film, this technique reminds viewers of the authorial presence behind the finished film. Then, throughout the films, viewers can hear me off-camera directing the people on-camera and asking interview questions. Similarly, I reveal the extent to which wildlife filmmakers manipulate the behavior of the animals featured in their films. For example, in “Hellbenders, Part 2” I include a scene in which we build a corral for the hellbender in order to film the salamander without it swimming away. I also include scenes in which my father releases the hellbender into the water specifically for me to film it. By including my directions as the filmmaker, I reveal to viewers that I am constructing the events of the film, and teach them how they can do the same.

I also highlight the constructed nature of Nature Break by making the series self-conscious. Stam describes such works as those which “flaunt their own condition of artifice” in order to show that the work is an “authorial construct”

(Reflexivity 127). Like modernism, this technique wakes viewers from voyeurism, but it also more distinctly makes them aware of the creative human force behind the film. For example, I include bad takes of the interviews, as seen in the above example of the beginning of “Hellbenders, Part 1.” Mainstream wildlife and nature films edit around mistakes and only use the best takes for soundbites. By leaving in these moments and highlighting them visually, I make viewers aware that they are watching a creative construct. Stam calls this the “self-correcting style” and says that in such instances the text “ceases to comport itself as a finished corpus, evoking instead some endlessly modifiable work-in-progress” (Reflexivity 152). Additionally, in the split-screen scenes, one of the screens is a “Scene” title card that describes the action in the other three screens. This gesture is blatantly self-conscious, classifying and describing what viewers see in cinematic terms. Self-conscious techniques such as these give viewers an active human creative force with which to relate, empowering them to become active creatively themselves.

Finally, by refusing to cast the host as a hero or star I present an approachable persona for communicating with spectators. Most other wildlife and nature films portray their hosts as omniscient experts who spontaneously deliver information directly to the viewer. However, although hosts may have some knowledge of the subject matter, producers usually teach them the information before filming and an off-camera writer most often writes the host’s lines. Furthermore, hosts deliver their lines far from spontaneously, and instead

are coached by the film's director. This approach gives an inaccurate perception of who the host is as a person, and therefore fosters a dishonest relationship between the host and the viewers. Additionally, as mentioned in my discussion of Survivorman, hosts of traditional wildlife films often dramatize their excursions to look more dangerous than they really are, making them seem impossible for the average person. As I discussed in my analysis of the Survivorman host, wildlife and nature films position their hosts as elite in comparison to their viewers. In contrast, my treatment of the host as a regular person learning about and experiencing her environment will hopefully empower viewers to do the same, since they can relate to the host as someone like themselves, rather than a super-human adventurer. I self-consciously acknowledge that the "host" of Nature Break is a part that I am playing for the purpose of the series. When, in the "Rattlesnake" episode, I state in voice over that I am not comfortable in front of the camera and then later that I will "try this on-camera thing," I reflexively reveal that being a host is a contrived performance, another part of the constructed product of the film. Additionally, I do not claim to know everything about the topics of the films and learn the information, along with the viewer, from other experts. Therefore, viewers receive a more honest impression of who I am and what I know. As a result, I do not cast myself as an elite intermediary between viewers and the natural world, but instead encourage spectators to imitate my interactions with wildlife themselves.

Like Dziga Vertov's 1929 film *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Nature Break attempts to bring filmmaking to the masses. Vertov exposed aspects of his production process in order to equate filmmaking with other industrial occupations. He wanted to destroy the elite mystique that surrounded film and instead remind viewers that films are made by human workers. Nature Break takes a similar stance of rebellion against elitism of the wildlife and nature film industry by showing my low cost production methods, authorial influences, and the fallibility of the host and experts. Educating viewers about how to make nature films also rejects the traditional ideal of an untouched wilderness, since viewers see the filmmaker interacting with nature. Instead, these reflexive techniques offer spectators a way to break from their position as voyeurs to actively engage with nature.

## WEB DISTRIBUTION: TRANSFORMING AN ACTIVE SPECTATOR INTO AN INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATOR

In his essay "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," Bertolt Brecht explained how he sought to "convert certain institutions from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication" (42). His essay describes artistic changes to the "Dramatic Theatre," (Brecht 37) many of them reflexive, that he believed would achieve this goal. However, in practice, reflexivity does not necessarily lead to social action. Changing the artistic style of a work is just half of the solution to a spectator who "becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art" (Brecht 38). When viewed on televisions and film screens, even reflexive films offer no opportunity for conversation about their topics and issues. As a unidirectional form of communication, they lack the ability to fully connect with their audience. Spectators need a different platform for consuming this art, one that enables interactivity. Consequentially, I go beyond just making films with the Nature Break series and harness the tools of "Web 2.0."

The "Web 2.0" movement, according to Wikipedia, is the "perceived second generation of web-based communities...which aim to facilitate creativity, collaboration, and sharing between users." Websites like Facebook and MySpace have done this for social relationships. They enable their members to connect over common interests and communicate with written messages, photos, and videos. Other sites have built entire communities around a video series. Revision3.com features fourteen different video shows, each with their



own forum where viewers can have show-related conversations with each other. The site also hosts forums independent from their shows where viewers can enter conversations on politics, solicit help on personal websites or projects, and post comments to the general discussion forum on, in the words of the site, “Announcements, meet and greet, anything really.”

The development of such social networking tools offers filmmakers the ability to build a community around their films and engage in open communication with their viewers. My goal is to apply these social networking tactics to a website for Nature Break: Naturebreak.com. This site will target those passionate about nature, wildlife and the outdoors and offer them a central online space to communicate about these passions. It will serve as a modern stage where the video will not only deliver messages to spectators, but spectators will be able to talk back to the video/filmmaker, and to each other. First, users will create personal profiles on the site and connect with people based on geographic region, specific interests, and conservation topics. Then, each Nature Break episode will encourage viewers to discuss its topics in forums on the website. As the filmmaker, I will actively participate in these forums, creating a personal relationship with viewers. Additionally, using techniques exposed through the reflexivity of my Nature Break videos, viewers will be able to upload their own videos about their experiences with and perspectives on natural events. The simplification of video creation and publishing tools makes this multi-party dialog through film possible.

Additionally, on this social networking site, with the video series as a catalyst, users will be able to coordinate national movements about common concerns. One page of the site, called "Identify This," will be devoted to wildlife identification. Here, members can post pictures of plants and animals that they need help identifying, and receive answers from other community members. A second page, called "Get Out There," will be dedicated to planning outdoor excursions, and members can post travel tips and recommendations here. A third "Conservation" page will be a forum for discussing and solving conservation issues. On this page, people can share ideas about campaigns in which they are involved and receive feedback on how to make these campaigns work. On all of these pages, users will be able to use video to communicate. In this new media landscape, the filmmaker's role is not just to produce a film, but to bring together people with shared interests in a multidimensional communication forum.

Reflexive films and Web 2.0 innovations seem like a perfect match. While reflexive techniques call for activism from their spectators, Web 2.0 communities offer an outlet for that activism. While reflexive films question dominant ideologies, Web 2.0 forums and discussion boards provide a place to discuss alternatives. In short, when combined with a Web 2.0 social networking site, reflexive films can encourage debate and build communities. The combination of an illuminating reflexive style with democratic Web 2.0 distribution enables wildlife and nature film to be a dynamic communication method. Furthermore,

through Internet distribution, the Nature Break series can finally live up to the reflexive filmmaker's goal of creating an art that leads to activism.

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