

HOW DIFFERENT STYLES OF NATURE FILM  
ALTER OUR PERCEPTION OF WILDLIFE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Different styles of natural history film evoke distinct feelings and emotions about wild animals which viewers use as a basis for their perception of wildlife. I define three categories of nature film which reflect varying degrees of human-animal interaction, anthropomorphism and aesthetics: the testimonial, explanatory and non-verbal styles. Although each one is limited in its ability to represent wildlife accurately, it is important to realize that they all show animals from different perspectives (from most to least human-centered, respectively). Given that the majority of people today gain most of their knowledge about wildlife from natural history programs, it is critical for viewers and filmmakers to understand the impact of these films on society—as both emotional and intellectual conduits into the natural world.

## INTRODUCTION

As a budding documentary filmmaker intent on teaching the public about science and nature, it is of immense value to me to understand what viewers learn from science and nature shows. Mass media interactions represent the largest informal education arena, forming a powerful medium for communication and teaching (Merriam 2007). As real interactions with wildlife dwindle for most people, film is now one of the main connections the public has with animals. The growing number of genres of nature shows is raising interesting questions about how truthfully we represent animals onscreen. In this paper I will define three different nature film styles and discuss how each one's portrayal of animals dramatically modify viewers' perception of wildlife.

Since its invention, television has steadily increased in popularity worldwide and continues to draw incredible numbers of viewers and for incredible amounts of time. According to recent studies, Americans spend more time watching TV than doing anything else (after sleep and work), which makes television the ideal place to teach (U.S. Dept. of Labor 2011). In recent years, programs have expanded into new digital media markets, especially online and mobile streaming, with total viewership continuing to rise. Given the vast amount of time we spend in front of screens, it is important to question how the shows we watch affect our perception of the world. Within the realm of science and nature shows, people seem to be most fascinated by animals so wildlife programs are the main focus of this paper. To understand how wildlife programs affect viewers we must first define the terms “perception” and “styles of nature programs” by referring to educational and documentary theory, respectively. After studying Lawrence

Kohlberg's theory of moral development and extrapolating Bill Nichols' modes of documentary to the natural history genre, I will discuss how wildlife is portrayed in each category using examples. This is a theoretical endeavor, a general guideline to what audiences learn about wildlife in nature films.

## LEARNING AND MORALITY

To better define the term “perception” we should look at the context of learning. According to Benjamin Bloom's educational theory, there are three domains of learning: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective (Bloom 1956). Cognitive learning revolves around acquiring knowledge (to recall data, apply it, analyze it, evaluate it). Psychomotor learning is about learning physical skills or learning how to do something. The affective domain is learning feelings, attitudes, values, and overall impressions of something. These domains are sometimes referred to as knowing/head, doing/hands, feeling/heart. For example, if we are studying wood mice, you could learn information about their size, behavior, habitat, evolution, biogeography etc. You could learn skills about how to safely catch and handle a wild wood mouse. You could also learn to have a positive attitude toward mice because they're soft, gentle and nonthreatening. This is an animal-specific example that demonstrates the three distinct domains of learning.

It is this last domain that is of interest to me because it is people's attitudes (rather than neutral and verifiable “facts”) toward a subject that drastically affect their interest in it and can determine their relationship with it for life (especially for children). Today, media is one of the primary ways viewers establish a relationship with nature. In 2009, the very first study was conducted to explore the role of media on environmental sensitivity by showing two different styles of film about insects to twelve-year-olds to see if the films produced different outcomes (Barbas). The researchers concluded that “the students' sensitivity was mainly manifested as an emotional reaction to, rather than as knowledge and understanding of insects” and that “the use of documentaries significantly

influenced students' attitudes and beliefs about insects” (Barbas 65). It is clear from this study that the children were learning impressions and attitudes rather than hard facts.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development explains how the affective domain is developed. According to Kohlberg, the stages of morality a person goes through within a lifetime fall into three groups: simple obedience and fairness morals, morals to fit in with your peers and society, and finally, universal morals that can take precedence over societal laws (Kohlberg 1958). These moral stages can be interpreted on a more practical level as four emotional phases: feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs. These phases build upon each other as our experiences accumulate and are the basis of an individual's morality.

It is easy to see how simple feelings and attitudes expressed in nature films can lead to certain values and beliefs about wildlife. Every image, sound, and intonation in a film, however subtle, will add to a person's general disposition toward wildlife. The cumulative subtleties in nature films are the foundation of how the public interprets nature. In addition to the feelings evoked by a film, it is important to understand the context of those feelings. In my analysis I will include the appropriate “wildlife value type” observed in each film, as defined by Stephen Kellert. As a professor of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University, Kellert created these categories (Table 1) to better define what the public valued in wildlife (Kellert 1994). These terms are useful for analyzing nature films because certain film styles will tend to value wildlife in a specific way and emphasize particular qualities of a species or individual.

Table 1. Wildlife Value Types defined by Stephen Kellert.

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Aesthetic	physical attractiveness and symbolic appeal of animals
Dominionistic	mastery and control of wildlife, typically in sporting situations
Ecologistic	environment as a system and for interrelationships between wildlife species and natural habitats
Humanistic	strong affection for individual animals such as large wildlife species with strong anthropomorphic associations
Negativistic	avoidance of wildlife due to indifference, dislike, or fear
Scientistic	physical attributes and biological functioning of animals
Utilitarian	practical value of wildlife or the habitat associated with wild animals

## NATURE AND MEDIA

If most humans still had daily interactions with wildlife, my investigation into wildlife perceptions would be much less meaningful because people would already have a fundamental understanding of animals. Even if we did, our knowledge would be limited to a few local species. The scope of wildlife seen in films extends far beyond the farmyard into remote tropical jungles and desert islands to ecosystems the average person never visits. These days the average person learns almost everything about wildlife from media. As it has been said, “we've become, in a sense, a race of armchair naturalists” (Seibert 50). Lack of time and money to explore the little wilderness that remains means the majority of the population has no way of learning about nature and wildlife through first-hand experiences, so people commonly seek out connections to nature and animals via natural history films. Although zoos and aquariums attract many visitors, the animals never seem to live up to visitors' expectations – the creatures are not “as seen on TV” (Bousé 6).

Wildlife films are rapidly becoming the only way to know wild animals. Environmental science student Jason O'Bryhim discovered this fact while studying the perception of sharks. He conducted a survey to find out where people learn their information about sharks and found there was a significant difference in the knowledge level based on the information source. Not surprisingly, most people learned everything from TV documentaries, and moreover, the more they knew, the more likely they were to have watched “Shark Week” on Discovery Channel (O'Bryhim 2009). This might sound great at first (wow, people actually learn a lot about sharks from TV!), but the reality is,

while they are clearly absorbing some facts and figures, people are also learning a lot from *how* the animal is portrayed (*Jaws* music, bloody water, close-ups of teeth, etc). As he puts it: “If they are sent the wrong, or misleading, information, or do not distinguish between fact and fiction, then we could seriously hinder efforts to conserve sharks and create a society with an overall hatred and fear of these animals” (O’Byrhim 22).

Conversely, we can also (mis)represent animals as too loveable. Dolphins and whales have long held the top ranks as endearing and adorable creatures, almost entirely because of mass media and films like *Flipper* (1964), *Free Willy* (1993), *Dolphin Tale* (2011), etc. Researcher Erin Barney said:

These seemingly benign attitudes encourage human-animal interactions that are often profoundly injurious to dolphins. “Loving nature to death” is a phenomenon common to many of these coastal species, and the problem is compounded by captive dolphin programs that encourage tourists to swim with and feed the animals; some even make the unlikely (and unsubstantiated) claim that the experience is therapeutically beneficial. (43)

This issue was even the subject of the recent Oscar-winning documentary *The Cove* (2009), where wild dolphins are saved from both aquarium and seafood industries (in a bizarre and ironic twist of fate that now makes dolphins seem like martyrs). Clearly, the images of animals in media can create extremely powerful love/hate relationships with wildlife in very real and negative ways.

Despite this powerful effect, television was never meant to be a well-balanced classroom or even a window onto reality. One could argue that most nature programming no longer qualifies as “documentary” because of its extensive use of fictionalization and techniques with close similarities to reality TV. Television has always been, and always

will be, a source of entertainment; hence, all the sensationalism, violence, anthropomorphism and sentimentality (Burt 2002). As Derek Bousé discusses extensively in his book *Wildlife Films*, nature shows have to compete for viewers and ratings, a necessity which will naturally change the style and content of their programming (94). Just as day-to-day human lives are rarely full of car races, life-or-death situations, incredible love stories or great feats of courage, animals' real lives are just as mundane and boring. If TV only used real-life situations, it would be terrible entertainment – imagine watching a film about a lion sleeping for nine hours (Bousé 2000).

To what extent do viewers realize that wild animals do not act the way they are portrayed on film? It is easy to distinguish human fiction from real life, but it is not so easy to identify fiction in the animal kingdom, unless you are an expert. We know all too well that Tom Cruise is not actually a secret agent, but it is much harder to tell that emperor penguins are not really monogamous. Most people do not see animals in wildlife films for what they really are: actors.

Whether they realize it or not, wildlife filmmakers are almost solely responsible for the representations of animals. And the specific techniques used in various styles of film greatly affect that representation. Unlike people who can explain their own actions, animals are essentially blank canvases onto which we can ascribe any emotion or motivation to suit the film's storyline (Bousé 2003). All films are by nature a human interpretation and therefore impart a specific perspective about their subjects (regardless of whether the facts are accurate or not).

## NATURE FILM STYLES

Throughout the long history of nature films, several standard styles have been established within the industry and have become increasingly familiar to viewers as well. These styles have evolved like any other television genre. Recently, they have also started hybridizing with some genres, especially reality television, producing shows with overly dramatic reenactments of wild animal attacks (Chris 2006). Additionally, in their quest to create new and unique shows, wildlife filmmakers have occasionally come under scrutiny over ethical issues. Dealing with wild and captive animals can bring up many ethical questions, but they are irrelevant to the topic at hand. I am concerned here with what viewers see onscreen in the final product, not the moral ambiguities of how the film was made.

Some film critics have attempted to create their own categories of nature film; however, none of the categories have proved inclusive enough for all the variation of today's programs. My categorization is based on general documentary theory, specifically Bill Nichols' *Modes of Documentary* (Nichols 2010). I use his definitions to extrapolate the following three nature film styles, in order of most to least common, (as well as from most human-focused to least): testimonial, explanatory and non-verbal. Although my categories roughly line-up with his, my three styles mix some of his together to better fit the unique natural history genre. In addition to using Nichols' "formal, cinematic qualities" (143) to define these nature film styles, I also focus on how they differ in emotional impact relating to the human animal relationship.

### Testimonial Style

This style uses the testimony of an onscreen subject and is based on the interactive (participatory) mode. Two sub-genres exist, one with a host or presenter, the other with more formal interviews (either experts in a field or individuals telling personal stories). Both use monologue pervasively, with occasional bits of dialogue, and stress subjective authority. Spatial relations are noncontiguous, as we often jump among various locations within the film and illustrative graphics are commonly used. In hosted films, we are led by a presenter who often initiates active participation with wild and captive animals, sometimes in quite dramatic and dangerous situations. Nichols' definition applies very well here, if we substitute the subject for an animal: "The filmmaker and subject negotiate a relationship, how they act toward one another, what forms of power and control come into play, and what levels of revelation or rapport stem from this specific form of encounter." (184) His or her tone is diaristic, as if the presenter would be doing these things regardless of whether there was a camera or not.

Interview-based films usually rely on both an off-screen narrator and one or several interview subjects: "Filmmakers make use of the interview to bring different accounts together in a single story." (Nichols 190) When necessary, narration is used to stitch the interviews together to make the story more cohesive. Interview subjects can be on-set or in the field and range from animal experts explaining biological facts to people with unique perspectives on the topic, sometimes with strong emotional attachments to specific animals. All science and nature films with people onscreen fall into this category. Hosted examples are many and include: *The Crocodile Hunter*, *Jacques Cousteau*:

*Pacific Explorations, The Jeff Corwin Experience, Jack Hanna's Animal Adventures, River Monsters, Insectia*, and almost anything with Sir David Attenborough. Interview-based examples include: *Gabon: The Last Eden, Cuttlefish: Kings of Camouflage, The Worm Hunters, Grizzly Man, Radioactive Wolves, My Life as a Turkey*, and *Broken Tail*.

### Explanatory Style

Based on Nichols' expository mode, this style includes the classic “blue-chip” model nature film. Here, the voice-over narration is dominant, usually explaining the images on screen, describing behaviors, adaptations, and encounters. The narrator serves as an institutional voice of authority over the illustrative pictures and addresses the viewer directly. Unlike Nichols' definition in which “the images serve a supporting role [to] illustrate, illuminate, evoke” (168), most explanatory natural history films form their story and write their narration entirely around the images collected (although sometimes the story is written beforehand and adjustments are made according to the actual footage obtained). The visuals are entirely centered on wildlife (usually high quality cinematography and/or include rare species), actively avoiding all shots with humans or man-made features. The story is told in a dramatic narrative style, many times following a classic three-act structure: setup, confrontation, and resolution. Non-synchronous sound and music are used extensively, and there is usually a sense of spatial and temporal continuity. Graphics are avoided, except for the occasional map. Prominent examples include *Planet Earth, Life, Thunderbeast, March of the Penguins, Earth, The Last Lions*, and *Wild Russia*.

Non-verbal Style

A non-verbal film has no human voices or images for the majority of the film. It is based on Nichols' observational mode because filmmakers avoid overtly speaking to the viewer (Nichols 2010). Unlike other observational filmmakers who try not to interact with or influence their subjects, this point is overlooked in non-verbal wildlife films because it is usually impossible; that is, you cannot tell a wild animal to “act naturally.” Here, the filmmaker tells the animal's story through editing and music as well as images, instead of through explicit narration. As Nichols puts it: “We look in on life as it is lived ... We tend, like fiction, to reveal aspects of character and individuality. We make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of behavior we observe and overhear.” (Nichols 174) There is emphasis on real time and real situations, using staged scenes only when necessary. Examples include: *Microcosmos*, *Atlantis*, *Winged Migration*, *Anima Mundi*, *Green* and *Coral Sea Dreaming*.

## PERCEPTIONS OF WILDLIFE FROM EACH STYLE

After watching film examples from each nature documentary style, I suggest a generalized perception of nature associated with each. Given the long history and immense variety of wildlife shows, my theories can only serve as a rough guide to these styles. I have also tried to be as impartial and objective as I can in analyzing the films, but because my study is rooted in emotional and subjective issues, much of what I conclude is inevitably personal opinion. By applying Kellert's "wildlife value types" to each example, we can more easily see what kind of values are attributed to wildlife within each style.

Testimonial Examples

The three films I chose to exemplify the testimonial style are Animal Planet's *The Jeff Corwin Experience – Into the Heart of Darkness* episode (2000) for the hosted show, NOVA's *Cuttlefish: Kings of Camouflage* (2006) for a standard interview-based show with experts, and Nature's *My Life as a Turkey* (2011) as a more personal interview-based film. Although *Corwin* is tailored more for children, it still embodies all the tropes used by other shows in this sub-genre, most notably the active interaction with wildlife. Jokes, impersonations and utter goofiness aside, Jeff Corwin is a wildlife expert taking the viewer on a guided trip through the Ecuadorian jungle. In this episode he handles snakes, crocodiles, mammals, spiders, ants, frogs and turtles while providing accurate biological information about the specific species he has captured. For some of the more elusive

animals (like the tapir and kinkajou), scenes are staged where he can work with hand-raised creatures so that he can get hands-on interactions with them.

Some scenes are more contrived than others: either he actually stumbles upon a wild animal while he was walking or the crew goes to a location known for a certain animal. What is refreshing is that even though he may attempt to capture every creature he spots, he sometimes fails, and his reactions are seemingly sincere, as when he's truly upset that he could not get to hold that animal. This catch and release method gives him the chance to set himself up as the hero who frees the poor creature, even though he was the one who caught it in the first place. He even says "I will give you your freedom" when releasing a large frog making alarm calls. Overall, he is extremely playful with the wildlife he encounters, bounding around in the forest, wading through swamps and climbing trees. At one point during a night scene, the mosquitoes are so troublesome that he puts the snakes he finds into bags to better show them to the camera in the morning. He is not the only human involved, either: his boat guide is frequently shown, and he also mentions that the local people are changing their ways from turtle egg eaters to conservationists. This show displays wildlife values that are dominionistic, ecologicistic, scientific and utilitarian.

The *Nova* show is very different in tone, but nonetheless quite familiar. The film is centered on explaining the biology and evolution of three species of cuttlefish by intertwining four interviews with a narrator to tie it all together. The film introduces the viewer to cuttlefish as bizarre, mysterious aliens. Over the course of the film we learn all about their camouflage adaptations and amazing intelligence from the scientists. We

follow three of these experts. The first researcher we see in the field doing simple experiments on wild cuttlefish while scuba diving, the second is seen only during a sit-down interview, and the last two are seen during interviews as well as in their laboratories doing experiments with cuttlefish. The cuttlefish are mostly treated as scientific subjects rather than wildlife; all their behaviors and adaptations are explained through evolutionary theory. Although the scientists are clearly in awe of these creatures and are fond of them, in the context of the film cuttlefish plainly serve as subjects for scientific inquiry. There is a moment toward the end of the film where ethics come into play. The narrator says “with the [egg] laying done, she'll soon die naturally. But there is one more important mission she can help with, assisting Mark with his toxin studies” – At this point, the question is raised whether the filmmakers actually took a dying mother cuttlefish, or whether they simply implied it and used a healthy one. It could also be that they didn't harvest any animals during filming and the study was actually completed months before. (There are images of Mark dissecting a specimen, but it is unclear if it is this species or not). This film values cuttlefish from a utilitarian (for human use), scientific (for scientific knowledge), aesthetic, and to a lesser degree, ecologicistic (framing the animal within its ecosystem) points of view.

The third kind of show is exemplified by films in which the wildlife is a secondary focus while it is primarily the filmmaker's or human subject's relationship with animals that holds the viewer's attention. *My Life as a Turkey* follows Joe Hutto as he raises sixteen wild turkeys from egg to adult (and sometimes to death) in the wetlands of Florida. Although the footage of him and the turkeys is actually a reenactment with an

actor, the voice-over and interviews are really him. What started out as a scientific experiment about imprinting turned into a love affair with the birds. His deep, emotional ties to the young turkeys is vivid and touching and is as obvious to him as it is to the viewer. He learns about turkey behavior and communication from living day in and day out with the group. He also learns powerful life lessons from some of the individual turkeys, like Sweet Pea and Turkey Boy. Everything we understand about the turkeys, their personalities, actions, motivations - are filtered through Hutto. The viewer's perception of wild turkeys is based on Hutto's personal interactions and deeply emotional memories. Although Hutto's description and analysis of the animals are very clearly subjective, his encounters and the knowledge gained from them are unique. Only from such a visceral, personal perspective can we learn about another side to wildlife. When watching a nature film that is this emotionally rooted, it is difficult to figure out what is real and what is only perceived as real by the human filter. With more personal-based films like this one, viewers might get confused (or not perceive the obvious anthropomorphism) and end up thinking that wild animals are more intelligent or human-like than they really are.

Overall, the testimonial style sees wildlife mostly as objects for human inquiry, play, education and/or science. There is a range of anthropomorphism, and we rarely see the animals acting naturally because they are almost always seen interacting with humans. From this perspective, viewers might generalize that animals are valuable commodities, sometimes as inherently interesting and priceless creatures in their own right, but more often as entities available for human entertainment or enlightenment.

### Explanatory Examples

For this style I chose to analyze the BBC's *Planet Earth - Jungles* episode (2006) and Nature's *In the Valley of the Wolves* (2007). *Jungles* is centered on a habitat (tropical forests) and explores the animals that live there; *Wolves* focuses instead on a specific location (Lamar Valley in Yellowstone National Park) and its local pack of wolves, the Druids. Each program introduces its characters (they are indeed characters, complete with personalities and highly anthropomorphized motivations) as individuals struggling for existence. *Jungles* starts off with smaller creatures and gradually moves up the hierarchy of animal subjects, from frogs and insects to elephants and chimpanzees; *Wolves* generally sticks to the three canine species (wolves, coyotes and foxes), occasionally showing other large mammals like elk and bears, but barely mentioning birds and insects. There is a strong sense of winning/losing and good guys/bad guys, as the narrator clearly picks sides and tells the viewer how to read the animal behaviors.

Most interactions are highly dramatized, stressing the deadly, dangerous, perilous lives of animals. Confrontations are made into war-like attacks and murderous acts with seemingly evil motives. For example, in *Jungles*, when the chimpanzees attack a neighboring group to gain their territory and cannibalize a victim, instead of plainly stating that they are eating it for additional protein, the narrator describes the scene in a much more grotesque and disturbing manner. Likewise, in *Wolves* a pack from outside the park moves in temporarily and, in doing so, prevents a local pack from reaching their den site and feeding their pups, causing the pups to starve to death. Again, the narrator describes it in a way that makes it sound like the wolves had ulterior motives and

purposefully killed them. Life in the wild is characterized by constant battles, thievery, trickery and deadly survival. The filmmakers deliberately show us a world without any references to humans to place the viewer in a sort of fantasy-land, to glimpse a pure, untarnished wilderness (though Attenborough does mention the “chimp's cousin” in the very last sentence of *Jungles*). Both films also emphasize chronological movement through time: in *Jungles* through long time-lapse sequences showing fast growing plants, and in *Wolves* by following three years of seasonal transitions. These films ascribe wildlife values that are ecologicistic and humanistic. *Jungles* also shows strong aesthetic values and occasionally some scientific values.

Having absorbed the messages of these two films, viewers would think that nature is quite a savage, threatening place. Not only that, they would see animals as perhaps more intelligent and conniving than they really are. Many of these animals do not, and cannot, think such complex thoughts. Their actions are usually based in instinct, and they are not capable of seeing how those actions determine their future. The focus on charismatic megafauna (elephants, lions, sharks, bears) also blinds people to fascinating smaller species. Filmmakers are clearly making films about the few dozen species that audiences prefer (because they are warm and fuzzy or big and scary), but this endless cycle means people are oblivious to true levels of biodiversity. People watching these films may think that all wildlife is exceedingly brutal and that they form simple unchanging hierarchies. Perhaps most importantly, without the context of human interaction, viewers are misled into thinking that most wildlife is unaffected by man, and that there is plenty of true wilderness for animals to be left alone to go about their lives

(as seen in the film). Without the presence of humans, the animals take on more human-like roles to fill the void.

### Non-verbal Examples

There are considerably fewer non-verbal films, let alone non-verbal *wildlife* films, so the two examples I have chosen are staples of the genre: *Microcosmos* (1996) and *Winged Migration* (2003). Strictly speaking, neither film is actually non-verbal since both have some voice-over narration. In *Microcosmos* it is quite minimal, only heard at the very beginning and very end, and for a short length of time, but *Winged Migration* has over a dozen voice-over sequences throughout the film as well as short subtitles stating the species and migration routes of the birds. In the first film the narrator welcomes the viewer to the small-scale world of insects; in the second film the narrator gives more factual information about the species shown onscreen. Overall, the lack of human voices allows the viewer to simply watch and listen, observe and ponder. Both films share a realistic quality, in which we feel we are simply watching creatures do what they do. The sequences focus less on predator/prey actions and more on grooming, mating, caring for young, walking/flying or just sitting – which gives the impression the world is less hostile than in other film styles. Because there is little or no narration, sound and music play a larger role in steering the viewer toward a certain interpretation of the images, for example, opera music plays while the snails mate, making the scene feel more romantic.

The animals in *Microcosmos* have no interactions with the human world; in *Winged Migration*, the filmmakers often include scenes in which birds are flying through

or near cities, industrial sites, farms, boats, tractors, trains, etc. There are also scenes in which people actively interact with birds, both positively, when the little boy frees a goose from a net and when the old lady hand-feeds some cranes, and negatively, when flying birds are shot down by hunters or when we see caged animals on a boat no doubt headed for the black market. With sequences like these, *Winged Migration* is clearly emphasizing the varied relationships between humans and wildlife (specifically birds) and forcing the audience to think about it in a very visceral way. In contrast, *Microcosmos* makes the viewer question issues of scale and time by living the life of an insect for a day. We are placed under the beak of a frightening-looking pheasant gobbling up ants and in the middle of a rainstorm bombarded by giant drops of water.

Values ascribed in these films are primarily aesthetic and partially ecologicistic. This style of film is centered on little snippets of life rather than an animal's lifetime and rarely gives explanations for wildlife's actions and behaviors. It forces the viewers to question the images in front of them, to figure out what is happening, or simply enjoy the splendor of a beautiful creature. People watching this kind of nature film will see wildlife as more mysterious and perhaps awe-inspiring because they are free to wonder about what they are seeing instead of being told specific information.

Overall, each nature film style and its techniques produce very different perceptions of wildlife. In the testimonial style, animals are a source of entertainment and scientific knowledge, and they do not live independently from the human world. Explanatory films show nature as both beautiful and hostile, with animals that think and

act like people, living in a vast wilderness set apart from humanity. In the non-verbal style, animals are usually mysterious, interesting, bizarre and beautiful.

## THE EFFECT OF EACH STYLE

Each of the film styles described impresses upon its audiences certain implicit ideologies about nature, wildlife, and biology, stemming from each category's use of specific tactics. Although each category can include a wide range of films, a simple pattern emerges for each that holds true for most films within each type. Testimonial films are focused on human individuals teaching facts, explanatory films are about humans telling extreme animal facts and stories, and non-verbal films aim to recreate a sense of "being there." What is fascinating to me, and quite revelatory, is that these categories also happen to line up with the level of human involvement: humans onscreen, human voice only, and limited humans seen or heard, respectively. This organization is helpful in thinking about how audiences perceive wildlife because each style takes a different stance on how to look at animals. The testimonial style is perhaps the most honest in this sense, because it never tries to hide the human mind behind the film: it is unabashedly human-centered. This allows for more personal perspectives on the animal world, and shows audiences how many different points of view there can be, based on the person telling the story. The same cannot be said of the explanatory style. With a single omniscient narrator, viewers are under the impression that there is one Truth about the animals onscreen and that all members of that species live in the same way, forever unchanged in their habits. For most explanatory films this effect is intended, giving the film a long shelf life, thereby allowing the film distributor to replay the film over and over to earn higher returns. In the long run this can be detrimental because viewers assume that wildlife is happily going about its business, unaffected by people, lost in a

time warp. On the other hand, removing people from the picture (literally) is a valuable exercise for thinking about animals. It is important for people to re-focus their point of view away from the human-animal relationship and instead try to understand how animals lived before modern humans dispersed across the globe. We tend to forget how recently humans evolved, and films that delve into the purely animal suggest a glimpse of what life on earth was like for most of its history.

The problem with most films is that they do not share this kind of reasoning and often convince viewers that those brief moments of exotic wildlife behavior are the rule rather than the exception. The non-verbal nature film uses the same animal-centered approach, but takes it a step further, removing almost all traces of people. It attempts to put the audience in the animals' world to just watch what animals do. Successful non-verbal films have the power to engage viewers in a profound way, creating an emotional, visceral bond to wildlife. On the other hand, since media is now the primary way to teach people about wildlife, the lack of commentary is a lost opportunity to teach animal biology and behavior as well as evolutionary history. Yet the aim of most non-verbal films is ultimately not to teach facts: it is to instill curiosity about the living world and contribute to a visual understanding of wildlife that is becoming increasingly rare as people have fewer and fewer hands-on experiences with animals.

The nature film styles I have described really represent different ways of looking at animals. Any one species can be (and certainly has been) depicted in various ways from very different perspectives. Each approach will elicit different emotional responses from viewers. Academic studies on this subject will continue to be of immense value to

all filmmakers, not just wildlife documentarians. As visual media becomes more dominant, both viewers and filmmakers will want to know and understand the effects of media on the human psyche.

## CONCLUSION

It is my hope that this investigation can shed light on some of the emotional consequences of filmic choices made by natural history filmmakers. The impressions of wildlife I have outlined are by no means definitive, as each category can include a wide variety of films. It is useful to understand the implications of different film techniques, both as a viewer and a filmmaker, on the audiences' knowledge of and its emotional relationship with wildlife. Whether it is a film made for conservation, entertainment, education, social activism, personal reasons, art or any combination thereof, every filmmaker should try to understand how his or her film will affect the dialogue of human-animal relationships. One style might prove more useful for certain agendas, but it might also have unintended consequence on audiences, good or bad. For example, in the study mentioned earlier about children's environmental sensitivity and media, the researchers concluded that the non-verbal film was more effective than the explanatory film at developing environmental sensitivity (Barbas 2009). My analysis could be useful as a guide for filmmakers with specific goals in mind and could also help them understand other implications their film might have.

Most people do not have the option to travel to the remote exotic places seen in nature films, so it is important to realize the power and responsibility of filmmakers in representing animals and their relationship with humans. There are innumerable factors that contribute to a person's impression of wild animals, but exposure to more than one style of nature film may help even out and broaden those perspectives. The representation of animals should be taken seriously, since the public relies more and more on nature

films for knowledge about wildlife. Clearly, each film style has its pros and cons, and there can be no single style that contains all the positive qualities of each. For an industry so reliant on wildlife, the perception of wildlife for the general public is a serious issue and should be discussed more often, more prominently, and more openly. Obviously the wildlife film industry does not want to undermine its livelihood by pointing out all the faults of its films, but it would be refreshing to see an acknowledgment of the films' deliberate and accidental impacts from time to time. It is essential that the wildlife film industry, both corporate and independent, create and maintain a variety of film styles (that show multiple values of wildlife) to ensure that one type does not become too pervasive, with one perception of wildlife dominating the rest. We need to maintain a balance of perspectives and a mixture of values to guarantee that people's cumulative knowledge of wildlife is based as much as possible in reality, not fiction.

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