

SECULAR SPIRITUAL NATURE FILMS:  
THEIR USE, MISUSE, AND POTENTIAL PROMISE AS ROVING BIOSPHERES

by

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Jefferson Andrews Beck

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## DEDICATION

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## ABSTRACT

The central purpose of poetic techniques in nature films remains under-analyzed and the realm of spiritual motivations in filmic techniques under-explored. In this paper I examine historical and recent attitudes toward nature and the spiritual, highlighting in particular the work of Existentialists, and use those contexts to critique several broad categories of nature films. I find that all types of nature films, to varying degrees, contain a poetic impulse and often a secular spiritual motivation. I conclude that nature films, when carefully crafted, can be highly imperfect, yet highly potent proxies for spiritual experiences in nature.

## INTRODUCTION

Almost all commercial films, regardless of their genre, have their distilled and defining moments, their “money shots.” Whether passionate embraces, explosions, tearful farewells, pratfalls, or insightful quotes, these moments are essential to a film’s success in satisfying audience expectations for romance, thrills, pathos, comedy, or intellectual illumination. Nature films also have their obvious hooks, including emotionally-charged scenes of birth, play, nurture, conflict, survival, and predation. But there is another set of devices they use, whether consciously or not, to a defining degree or subtly: the use of poetic techniques to foster a feeling that I think is best described as spiritual. From recent blue chip efforts like the *Blue Planet*<sup>1</sup> series to the more innovative constructions of *Winged Migration*<sup>2</sup>, *Microcosmos*<sup>3</sup>, or *March of the Penguins*<sup>4</sup> to nonverbal films that place humans in the context of their planet like *Baraka*<sup>5</sup> and *Koyaanisqatsi*<sup>6</sup>, nature filmmakers seek to provide a spiritual experience for their audience.<sup>i</sup>

This experience need not relate to a particular religion or dogma, but it is steeped in the culture of its age. This culture includes a web-of-life philosophy with roots in ancient religions, nurtured by early preservationists and American transcendentalists, given a new packaging in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and remaining essentially recognizable in

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<sup>i</sup> In this paper I will refer to “spiritual” as something that encompasses the Other, a belief in things greater than empirical evidence can provide. Spiritual knowledge is often referred to as gnosis, a way of knowing that derives from insight, intuition, and mythic understanding. Gnosis contrasts with epistemology, or empirical knowing derived from the finite and material world of facts, reason, and logic.

that form today. While the most overt examples of spiritual filmmaking like *Genesis*<sup>7</sup> or *What the Bleep do We Know?*<sup>8</sup> may appeal most to those hungry for Gaia-infused New Age messages, other filmmakers are after a broader audience. This audience consists of all those who to a conscious, semi-conscious, or unconscious degree, have soaked in the view of nature as being holy, or those who have independently come to this point of view through their own experiences. Many people are hungry for, or at least receptive to, the idea that nature has a spirit and that we humans are capable of some special connection to that spirit. Whether or not nature does have an intrinsic spirit, or has been infused with holiness from a creator, is not for this paper to even explore, much less determine. But what I will document is that the attempt to engender a spiritual experience is central to many nature films (and related non-verbal films) and at least briefly present in the vast majority of others.

I will begin with a survey of the evolving relationship between nature and cinema with regard to developing spiritual sensibilities in film. I will then explore historical and recent attitudes toward nature and the spiritual and make the case that many people turn to nature to fulfill a certain need. I will then analyze a selection of films supporting my view and provide a blueprint for filmmakers wishing to foster a spiritual feeling in their audience.

Finally, I will argue that employing poetic spiritual techniques to illuminate the natural world can be misused in a variety of ways, but that the responsible and enlightened filmmaker can also use them to accomplish quite noble goals. The most

compelling example of a noble nature film might just be those that act as roving nature reserves.

From the early days of cinema, natural history films have been an integral part of the marketplace, and from the very beginning, those films reflected the dominant visions of nature of the day – or at least of the philosophy of those films’ audiences. Gregg Mitman argues in his book *Reel Nature*<sup>9</sup> that as conceptions of nature changed over time, nature filmmaking changed along with them. In Theodore Roosevelt’s era, a “social Darwinist vision of savage nature”<sup>10</sup> showed itself in thrilling films where white explorers pitted their masculinity against nature’s beasts. In WWII, audiences tired of war and destruction saw nature as a place to be managed kindly, and many films of the day showcased the social relationships of animals in conservation-oriented tales. And in the 1950s and early 1960s, filmmakers like Disney helped audiences see nature as an anthropomorphized mirror of their own families and communities.

But even as views of nature as portrayed in film changed over this last century or so of natural history filmmaking, many films showed they had more than one lens through which to view nature. Paul Rainey’s *African Hunt*, for example, did deliver thrilling scenes of masculine contests in savage nature, and was quite commercially successful in 1910.<sup>11</sup> But through long, peaceful takes of several species sharing a watering hole, the film demonstrated that audiences could respond to more than just “red in tooth and claw” scenes of wildlife. As one reviewer put it: “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin. That is the secret of the extraordinary success of this picture. It has that one vital appeal to all classes which makes them forget for the time their

stations in life in their absorbing interest in the domestic joys and sorrows of god's obscure, four-footed kingdom, which, after all, are much the same as their own."<sup>12</sup> And in the 1920s, the idea of the interconnectedness of all things – the “web of life” – became a popular theme in nature filmmaking.

Decades later, Jacques Cousteau was still taking audiences on adventures of exploration, but his journeys in the alien undersea world were narrated with a sense of wonder at the intrinsic beauty of aquatic life. His sentiments, like those of the more physics-oriented Carl Sagan, who quite overtly called on us to wonder at creation, help provide the modern foundation for the spiritual nature film that is the focus of this paper.

ATTITUDES TOWARD NATURE AND THE RELATIONSHIP  
TO THE SPIRITUAL

In *Reinventing Eden*<sup>13</sup>, Carolyn Merchant discusses in detail how the Biblical story of the Fall from Eden shapes the environmental and economic narratives of our Western, American age. Our fall from an idyllic state of grace informs both the main Narrative; that it is up to the forces of civilization to invent a new, capitalistic, and technological Eden on Earth, and the main Counternarrative espoused by most environmentalists; that environmental degradation is the evidence of our continuing fall and only by restoring wilderness can Eden-like spaces be restored. The Narrative invites us to have dominion over nature, whether through the English Garden, the wildlife reserve, or the shopping mall. The Counternarrative invites us to return to harmony with nature, subjugating our needs and destructive impulses to find the natural within us. (In an attempt to move beyond this dichotomy, Merchant proposes but never fully realizes a third narrative that is a synthesis between the two.)

It is out of Merchant's Counternarrative that most environmental art, writing, and filmmaking spring. But while it may provide the most raw materials for the cultural foundation upon which recent feelings about nature are built, these feelings are certainly not limited to or constrained by a purely Christian ideology. Instead they are the product of multiple points of view including Buddhism, Taoism, Jewish mysticism, New Age spirituality, paganism, the popularization of the Gaia concept, and no doubt a host of independent personal experiences in nature.

In American history, one of the first major departures from a more unified Christian ideology toward nature was the Transcendentalist movement, which was highly based on the significance of the individual, intuitive experience with the divine or sublime, rather than an institutional one. In his evaluation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature*<sup>14</sup>, David Robinson documents that this individualistic experience was also augmented and validated by Eastern religions, as Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and others even went so far as to publish translations of Eastern religious texts in their journal, *The Dial*. "Emerson and Thoreau shared this interest in Asian religious thought, which provided them with intellectual stimulation and important confirmation of their deeply held beliefs about the unity of the cosmos."<sup>15</sup> Although Emerson's beliefs were more grounded in Christianity than some of his transcendentalist peers, Robinson still highlights Emerson's quite radical views:

"Emerson proposed an idealistic conception of the universe in which all its interrelated parts, including the natural world and the human mind, mirrored and signified each other. 'A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole.' ... The mind's apprehension of this cosmic unity was an exacting intellectual discipline. But in rare moments of highly charged perception, we might undergo an experience that bounded on the mystical: 'Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.'<sup>16</sup>

Emerson saw the mystical qualities of nature, even in 1836, as essential to keeping people sane in an increasingly technological world. But already that technological world (which to us today might seem predominantly pre-technological) was helping Merchant's Narrative become dominant. Thoreau scholar Max Oelschlaeger

argues that we became conditioned by our own egocentrism and by history to believe that Western civilization is good and that therefore wildness must be lesser; that modern humans lack a sense of pre-technological human history; and that postmodern humans will evolve a sense of connection with nature that echoes the Paleolithic sense of nature as our sacred, interconnected home. Oelschlaeger sees Thoreau's later writings as the "leading edge of a postmodern view of the relation between humankind and nature,"<sup>17</sup> and therefore one of the first milestones in the development of Merchant's Counternarrative. Seeing the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution on both humans and nature, Thoreau understood that humans and nature are part of the same ecological unity. "The good life, Thoreau is confident, involves living in harmony with nature and the essential laws of human existence, and knowledge of these essentials can be found only in the wilderness."<sup>18</sup> The modern ideas of progress, human dominion over nature, materialism, and consumerism, Thoreau believed, can all harm this unity.

Robinson finds that Emerson also led the charge against the Narrative. "Emerson found a receptive hearing among young, spiritually oriented men and women who were intellectually restless. Not wholly satisfied with the standard theological answers of their churches, or with the moral tone and direction of their culture, they were seeding an alternative to what seemed an increasingly conformist and materialistic society."<sup>19</sup>

The Counternarrative was further developed by early environmentalists, including John Muir, whose ability to find the sublime beauty in nature was certainly informed by the Transcendentalists.

"His journals and letters from Yosemite are filled with references to baptism in light and water . . . . He was living in a sacred world, and as

he partook of its reality and seeking he became a part of a world which was not a chaos, but a cosmos . . . . Like Thoreau, he recognized his sacred spiritual state as opposite to the profane. He was cleansed by being converted from conventional or traditional man back into natural man. This was what it meant to be awakened. This is what he meant when he wrote to his brother that he had been baptized three times in one day and had ‘got religion.’”<sup>20</sup>

Muir had a Biblical upbringing, and the fact that he used religious allusions and metaphors in his writings was seen by some to be proof of a deeply-held Christian faith, but Oelschlaeger believes that he actually abandoned his anthropocentric Calvinism and replaced it with “a biocentric wilderness theology rooted in a consciousness of the sacrality of wild nature.”<sup>21</sup> This biocentric, pantheist belief system “restored wholeness and meaning to a world rent asunder by Modernism”<sup>22</sup> for Muir and his contemporaries.

Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, and preservationists like Muir, helped created a mental space for Americans to be able to see the sacred in nature, and opened up some acceptable room for both the validity of individual thought and in borrowing from other religions and cultures. This had a great resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s and is still echoed to this day.

Indeed, it may be that a decline in the cultural pervasiveness of purely Christian viewpoints has helped inform perspectives on the natural world. While one may have observed an increase in the influence of organized religion in national politics (and even local school board elections) over the last decade, there is strong statistical evidence to suggest that participation in organized religion among Americans is waning. According to a recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life there have been major demographic shifts in our populace in the last 30 years, with a 20 percent drop in those

self-identifying as Protestant, and “44% of American adults say[ing] they have left their childhood faith in favor of another religion or no organized religion at all. ... What we’re seeing here is much more a disenchantment with existing organized religions than with religion or spirituality as something that is going to be important to people.”<sup>23</sup> The authors of the study concluded that the country was seeing both an increase in secularism and a decrease in participation in institutional religion. The study also finds that the number of people not identified with any particular faith doubles from childhood to adulthood and that for people who attend college, a large proportion of this shift not surprisingly takes place during their time there, as they increase their reported spirituality while decreasing their participation in structured religion.

And perhaps a lack of connections between modern Christianity and nature contributes to people looking for their spirituality elsewhere. Theologian Lynn White believes that Christianity’s contributions to the destruction of pagan animism helped pave the way for a separation from nature. “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. ... Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”<sup>24</sup>

Given that many Americans report a spiritual inclination, and perhaps even need, but may be exercising it less in organized religion, where do people look for the source of that inspiration? For many Americans, I suggest it is nature. I see anecdotal evidence for this in the broader American demographic, but even more so among the college educated,

the non-poor, and the western. Googling the exact phrase “nature is my religion” results in a quite fruitful list, and there is a whole subgenre of books of inspiration, nature writing, poetry, conservation, and sociology that link nature and spirituality. Titles include *Wild Grace: Nature as a Spiritual Path*<sup>25</sup>, *On Earth and Sky: Spiritual Lessons from Nature*<sup>26</sup>, *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*<sup>27</sup>, and finally, *Earth's Echo: Sacred Encounters With Nature*<sup>28</sup>, which contains passages that nicely encapsulate the project at hand:

“In the summer nights of my boyhood, when my dad and I would spread a blanket out on the lawn and lie down on our backs, the sky was darker and the stars brighter. I recognized all the summer constellations easily then. I loved watching the long elliptical shape of Scorpio rise, followed by the teapot of Sagittarius. Somehow, I don’t remember mosquitoes back then, just the chirping of the katydids and the endless flow of the Milky Way. Now that I’m a man – or as my kids would say, “old” – I treasure those moments. Not only because they recall memories of time together with my dad and the beginning of a lifelong love of stargazing, but also because they gave me a spiritual foundation. Naturally, I didn’t think of it that way then, nor would I have cited it when I studied theology. But today I find that one of the richest and most enduring sources of spirituality in my life is nature in all its forms – from stars to starfish. While a love for nature has always been a part of my life, today I am discovering that the experiences of awe, beauty, and harmony that are so much part of my appreciation of nature are spiritual in their own right. I’m learning to appreciate that nature is not simply a setting in which the presence of God is encountered, it is, in itself, a form of divine presence.”<sup>29</sup>

This passage illustrates much of our discourse here: the immersive, experiential relationship to nature described by the Milky Way’s “endless flow” and the sounds of nature at night; the “stars to starfish” connection between biological life and the cosmos; and the vision of divinity in the sublime.

But just because many Americans are inclined to look to nature for spiritual fulfillment does not mean they perfectly successful in doing so. One could easily suppose that more Americans identify with nature as being extremely important to their personal makeup than interact with a pristine wilderness area or even a city park on any given day, or even month. “Today, almost everyone living in the urbanized centers of the Western world feels intuitively a lack of something in life. This is due directly to the creation of an artificial environment from which nature has been excluded to the greatest possible extent.”<sup>30</sup>

Looking beyond the firmly established genre of nature writing in books and magazines, I suggest that films are a highly effective way to give the public a merely vicarious yet decidedly experiential dose of the natural world. Like moviegoers hoping to get a dose of romance from a romantic comedy or excitement from an adventure film, nature films can provide their audiences a supplement to their spiritually-deprived lives.

This perspective is not entirely new. Conservationist filmmaker Fairfield Osborn, for example, believed that film, with its highly experiential components, was the best way to re-connect “the modern man” with nature, since “consciously or subconsciously, he desires intimacy with it.”<sup>31</sup> Osborn used the power of film to help create the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park, and went on to use films to raise general environmental consciousness in everyone from politicians to farmers. On a more individual basis, the popularization of the home movie camera from the late 1920s onward also helped engender a conservation ethic and a more personal approach to the outdoors. Families

were told they could return from trips to national parks with encapsulated “communions with Nature” on film<sup>32</sup>.

But if films are to stand in for a highly-experiential and sensory visit to nature, how exactly do they need to be constructed in order to satisfy a spiritual need? How can filmmakers touch a spiritual chord in their audience when spirituality is often considered highly personal and quite variable within a population? Many filmmakers turn to a poetic approach to encourage audiences to not only forget their surroundings, to cross over into the filmic space, but to receive their dose of nature in a palatable packaging.

The poetic approach is of course somewhat variable, but it is hard to imagine without a heavy reliance on the sublime. Poetic films routinely highlight well-lit, beautiful landscapes unspoiled by human activity, water in all its forms, and heavenly bodies. They almost always include wide panoramas as if to encourage thought about Creation as a whole, and perhaps also to make viewers feel small in comparison (not unlike the effect of being in a big cathedral.) Humans in poetic films are rarely shown in conventional ways. If they are shown at all, they are often shown in slow motion, which helps to make the actions of the individual more iconic, or people are chosen who are tied to cultures that seem exotic, non-capitalist, non-technological, and closer to a spiritual way of life.

Poetic films also play with time. Shooting in time lapse lets the audience see processes through a non-human time scale, making sense out of incremental or even imperceptible movements as they are sped up to reveal their grander designs. The revelation stimulated by a well-conceived time lapse can reinforce the grandeur of the

planet, and the perspective itself can easily be thought of as divine. The audience is at once empowered by their godlike perspective and humbled by the scale of the forces they see. Keeping the camera in motion – through cranes, dollies, or aerial shots – can augment this perspective, giving the viewer the position of a disembodied spirit not tethered by mass or gravity. Conversely, shooting in slow motion also lends an air of poetry to an event and can increase the symbolic power of even mundane activities. While humans lack the ability to perceive the intricate poetry of a crashing wave, a cheetah’s sprint, or a collapsing building in real time, in slow motion the minutia of those events become perceptible and profound.

For example, in addition to a spiritually-laden score by Phillip Glass, pacing and manipulation of time are key components in creating the “poetic” feel of Geoffrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi*: The slow-motion wave crashes, sends forth slowly-rotating globules of water, which after a meaningful journey through space collide with another wave, which sends forth globules of its own, which we actually get to see complete their journey as well. This slow pace and repetition of process, instead of the more typical editing style of only showing the most dramatic portion of a shot, show us not just that “waves happen” but that these actions are part of a cycle.

The editing of poetic scenes of course varies with the designs of the filmmaker, but in comparison to most styles of editing, shots are often held longer and the pace of editing slower, giving an audience time to drink in a scene. Natural sound is often kept to a minimum, sometimes because slow-motion or time lapse doesn’t mesh with sound or because the specificity of individual sounds does not match with how iconic or timeless

the imagery is supposed to be. To maintain a trance-like presentation, filmmakers can avoid including errant words, background noise, or even absolutely appropriate and fully motivated sounds made by the films' subjects themselves. Nothing is included that could get in the way of distilling the intended impact and meaning of the moment. If narration must be used, it is often minimal and reverential in tone. Music is often religiously-based, including choral music as from a Christian choir or other forms of music that have a broadly spiritual feel.

Filmmaker Kenji Williams' *Bella Gaia: A Poetic Version of Earth from Space*<sup>33</sup> combines footage of earth from space and recorded sound with a live violin performance that itself has religious overtones. Williams is highly conscious of a spiritual theme in his films, but prefers to describe his work publicly as more emotional and transformative. "I always feel this is what I am here to do - remind, and strengthen that Humans are nature, and that we keep getting into problems when we separate ourselves from nature, and the 'glue' to maintain this connection is spirituality, ritual, art." Williams' tools for doing this include his atmospheric soundtrack, large format screens on which to view his films, and compelling visuals designed to provide an immersive experience. "The trick is how to make it visually interesting without a barrage of fast cuts or tricks ... the idea is to get the mind and heart into an almost hypnotic state, but without getting bored." The combination of Williams playing on a stage near the audience and huge images of the earth rolling along in the background has achieved critical success and the approval of former astronauts.<sup>34</sup>

To further demonstrate how these filmic choices are put into practice I will look at three broad categories of nature programming. First, I will examine blue chip films that utilize a poetic mode of filmmaking, but only sparingly. Sometimes comprising merely a single shot or a short sequence, poetic moments are often used as introductions, transitions, or emotional punctuations. These moments are rarely very long nor fully developed to the point where they are experiential enough to carry much spiritual weight, but they do attempt to convey the sense of awe that is central to this discussion.

The episode of *Planet Earth* entitled *Deserts* is a blue chip film that regularly utilizes poetic techniques, beginning with the series introduction. Many of the hallmarks are there – shots of a shining blue Earth from space, big beautiful timelapses, moving camera, slow motion, and choral music. But they also weave in energetic shots of animals struggling to survive that are presented in such a fluid way that the spiritual sensibility of the sequence is not overly diminished.

From the start the show gives us beautiful sand dunes, stunning dust storms, and rising suns, all set to holy-sounding music. These are shots that if they were held longer would be more poetically fulfilling, but would run the risk of alienating viewers who have been trained to like faster edits. Often the poetry of a shot or sequence is not terminated by a visual cut, but by narration breaking the spell, and this happens for the first time less than three seconds into the episode:

“From space, one great land feature on Planet Earth stands out – desert. Deserts are found on every continent. They cover one-third of all the land. These are our last

great wildernesses. They truly seem deserted, but you'd be surprised what can survive here. In this harsh place, every day is a battle – to stay alive.”<sup>35</sup>

The solemn narration itself tries to carry a knowing sense of wonder, as it describes the speed of winds or the variation in temperature or the overall size of the Gobi Desert, but the content is designed more to inform than to bewitch. In fact, the vast majority of the show is narrative in its structure – focusing on animals and their stories of adaptation to desert life. Poetic segments are used mostly as transitions and as the film switches from poetic mode back to an animal story, the poetic rules drop away quickly; edits quicken and time lapse and choral music are replaced by natural sounds, more dramatic or fanciful music, and real time.

*Deserts* opens with several shots of sand dunes, shot from air and land, that are captivating enough to play into a poetic non-verbal film. And the footage of a rare camel species that introduces the episode's first animal characters could have been used in a more intimate, experiential way, helping the audience bond with the camels without the construction of the narration leading our thoughts in one particular direction. Hearing the sonorous bellows and whistles of the camels could have been more powerful had they not been packaged tightly between lines of narration such as: “The camels limit themselves to two-and-a-half gallons a day.” and “Winter is also the time for breeding. This is how a Bactrian male catches the eye of a passing female.”<sup>36</sup>

Critics like Chris Barsanti raved about the series, but also help categorize it in the continuum of the poetic: “Discussing the BBC series Planet Earth without resorting to some form of hyperbole is a fairly impossible task. To do anything less would seem to

diminish somehow the true scope of its overwhelming achievement. But to oversell it also seems to be a disservice as this is at heart another nature documentary, albeit one of singular beauty.”<sup>37</sup> The film brags that it took two months to film the rare Bactrian camels. Having done so, one could imagine a range of uses for the footage – including a poetic treatment. But as Barsanti points out, the film chooses instead to be “another nature documentary” instead of using its unparalleled footage to cover less formulaic ground.

As a whole, the poetic spiritual elements of *Deserts* are used primarily to elevate the film into something more sublime than the average nature documentary. While they serve as brief beautiful moments on their own, they work hardest to place each animal ecology or behavior scene into a more reverent context, as if what is playing out on the screen has more cosmic significance. But the poetic content of the film, highlighted so prominently in the series introduction, does not in the end outweigh the dominant narrative arcs lead by the voice over.

Barsanti even welcomes the narration when it brings us back to a more verbal, narrative mindset. “There are only so many unbelievable vistas of desert (the sand dunes’ knife-like edges so precise they appear computer-generated) or sky-filling flocks of migratory birds or bats that one can withstand before slipping into a sort of passive, slack-jawed astonishment.”<sup>38</sup> One person’s slack-jawed passivity, though, is another person’s immersive rapture, and another loosely-defined category of films leans more toward the rapturous. These are films with a strong spiritual sensibility, even if they are billed as more mainstream, like *The Queen of Trees*<sup>39</sup>, Jacques Cousteau’s films, or

Sagan's *Cosmos*. The spiritual moments in these films are often not fully actualized, but they are an important component of the film.

*March of the Penguins* is such a film. Like *Planet Earth: Deserts*, it is also very much invested in a narrative tale, driven by voiceover. Yet it is a more patient film, holding shots for longer than *Deserts* does, and going for much longer without narration – as much as 90 seconds of just getting to watch penguins while natural sound sometimes is allowed to poke through the soundtrack. The scenery of the Antarctic, from the title sequence onward, is treated reverently, and there is almost time to soak in the images of particular ice formations enough to gain a sense of familiarity with them. Again, as in *Deserts*, when time is allowed to proceed at its normal pace and the behavior of individual animals is referred to, the poetic feel of the piece can fall away, but the transition back into narrative mode is less severe.

The content of the narration though, is what brings this film firmly out of the third, “pure poetic spiritual nature” category. Reviewer Rob Gonsalves, who with his negative review is certainly in the minority, was quickly turned off by what he calls the “Disnification” of the film’s approach. “It's possible that the human race is the only species narcissistic enough to see itself in every other species ... it's a rather offensively human-centered approach to what should be a mystifying and beautiful experience.”<sup>40</sup> The narration tells us how hard it is for fathers to bond with their chicks, or expounds on the true nature of love, taking the audience out of the realm of nature poetry and into the realm of the human. Gonsalves finds the narration of the original French version even more objectionable, where the penguins murmur “sweet nothings to each other.”

However I feel that approach, instead of being coyly anthropomorphic, is more honest in that it informs the audience that despite the natural history framework of the film, they are also watching a constructed fable.

As the penguins are making their first migration of the movie, narration intermittently interrupts the nonverbal story with bits like: “Theirs is usually a graceful parade. But not always.” [As the nose of one bumps into the behind of another.] As the penguins approach their meeting grounds, both the awesome sight of the congregating penguins and the scenery through which they move are given primacy. A full minute of nonverbal time is allowed introduce the audience to the scene. The audience member is given time to forget his or her humanity, forget the thrust of the narration, and just feel that they are there, a penguin amongst penguins. But then the need to anthropomorphize the animals, ironically creates less of a bond, with narration like this:

“Emperor penguins are monogamous. Sort of. They mate with only one partner per year. Which means that every new season, all bets are off. Because there are fewer males than females here, hostilities among the ladies are inevitable ... the men don’t seem to mind. They just wait for the fight to end, and take the opportunity to preen. They’re not that different from us really. They pout. They bellow. They strut. And occasionally they engage in some contact sports.”<sup>41</sup>

Like *Deserts*, it is not how the film was shot that determines the film’s final impact, but what was added during post-production. Gonsalves even suggests a remedy to salvage the film: “March of the Penguins is great footage in a shotgun wedding to a sappily anthropomorphized point of view. It’ll play far better on DVD, where you can ... turn the sound down on the narration, and put on some Philip Glass or something.”<sup>42</sup> His remedy echoes reviewer Amy Nicholson’s suggestion for how to enjoy *Earth*, the

theatrically-released greatest hits reel from the Planet Earth series discussed earlier, which she faults for the “cloying anthropomorphization” of its narration. “But if you've seen the original show and just want to see it bigger, I recommend you take a cue from Pink Floyd and bring headphones cued to Dark Side of the Moon—so much the better to bliss out on beauty.”<sup>43</sup> Both suggestions demonstrate how conventional narration – a device film producers seem convinced is necessary to keep audiences interested – can come at an aesthetic cost.

The third broad category of films I will discuss are more conscious of the nature/spiritual connection and make it more central to their purpose. They are often non-verbal or only occasionally use narration. Their dominant mode of filmmaking is certainly poetic, and their narratives are often open to interpretation. Films of this genre include *Microcosmos*, *Winged Migration*, and *Koyaanisqatsi*.

*Baraka*, which was directed by *Koyaanisqatsi*'s cinematographer Ron Fricke, also sits solidly within this genre. There is no narration in the piece, and from the very beginning makes its intentions clear. In the pre-title sequence, the audience is given enough time watching five long shots of stunning mountains to feel the majesty of Creation on Earth, enough time watching stars and an eclipse to feel positioned within the cosmos, and enough time watching Japanese macaques slowly fall asleep in a hot spring to feel connected to another species. The lone human impact seen in the sequence is a small shrine-like structure on one of the mountains. The highlight of the sequence is undoubtedly that rare attempt to bridge into another species' consciousness without overt anthropomorphizing. As a macaque soaks in the springs and glances around at the snowy

terrain, it is hard not to identify with its eye movements, the subtle nod of its head, and the feeling of being in a hot spring.

The music begins minimally, with gentle, exotic-sounding flute. Gradually choral and organ music creep in, before the pre-credit sequence concludes with a single drumbeat re-emphasizing the eclipse that becomes a trademark stylistic device for the film. The film has barely begun, but already, and non-verbally, it has drawn together Creation, the spiritual, the cosmos, the pre-human, and the exotic.

The next sequence in the film shows time-worn places of worship bathed in golden light, and people devoutly immersed in ritual and prayer. The location and religion shifts from shot to shot, showing Tibetan monks, Orthodox Jews at the Wailing Wall, whirling Dervishes, and Indian sadhus. The scenes are treated reverently with choral music supporting the religious focus, and the various practitioners are shown in settings that could have existed hundreds if not thousands of years ago.

The film starts to take a turn, though, as further images of temples and the devout are broken up by short interludes of acrid fires burning, ugly urban signage, a plane flying over rooftops, and congested traffic. Poetry, it seems, does not have to be all an ode to beauty, and Baraka uses images of the worst of technology to remind us that post-industrial civilization has had a dramatic impact on the world.

Following a Kecak dance scene from Bali, which I will discuss later, the next segment features natural settings including volcanoes, timelapsed clouds, and rocks, with the drum beat announcing the first human impact seen in a while, a cliff dwelling. Unlike shots of modern urban life, the cliff dwelling is presented in an aesthetic that suggests it

is in harmony with its environment.

Natural images in the film are then interspersed with grim images of strip mines and dynamite explosions that foreshadow the human-caused destruction to come. *Baraka* leads us into the impact of humans with a scene showing a Latin American mountain town with a fairly high population density. There, kids play, smile, and eat ice cream to a soundtrack of upbeat and playful Andean flute. But when another city is shown with staggeringly huge boxlike apartment buildings, the music becomes more melancholy as if to suggest that the population density has become too high for human happiness. That music persists into images of boxlike columbaria for the dead, and then into shots of a cigarette-rolling factory. In the midst of this urban clamor, one lone penitent walks the streets ringing a bell, her spiritual mindfulness in stark contrast to the energy of the city.

The film then stays in the urban world, with timelapses of New York City traffic streaming through the streets as if the city's life blood, people likewise streaming through escalators, and baby chickens being manhandled in a painful example of agribusiness. This urban segment makes its final argument about the perils of civilization run rampant with a visit to people who survive by combing huge garbage piles, before showing the audience images of huge Kuwaiti oil field fires, military might and destruction, and concentration camps.

The film seems to have made its point and spends the rest of its time backing away from apocalypse, transitioning from the military to Chinese terracotta warriors and from there to a rehash of ancient temples, religious observances, natural beauty, and the eclipse.

Even without a clear storyline, the messages within *Baraka* are universal enough that several groups of high school students to whom I have shown segments of the film are able to articulate the film's essence. And the spiritual message is not lost on critic Stephen Holden who called the film an "aggressively spectacular exercise in planetary consciousness-raising"<sup>44</sup> and who enjoys the poetic journey as a means to an end: "The essential message that the film conveys is really a question: How is it that in the face of a collective spiritual aspiration that inspired so much exalted art can humanity still be embarked on a path that seems perilously self-destructive?" As in *Koyaanisqatsi* and its sequels, the stakes involved are what give the film its drama. In his Nature essay, Emerson makes the argument that the vastness of the world, in the mental view of the individual, so outweighs the impression made by human works, that what we have built becomes essentially meaningless.<sup>45</sup> But both *Baraka* and *Koyaanisqatsi* acknowledge that destructive human power is now on a scale to rival those of Creation, giving their poetry gravitas that goes beyond the merely entertaining.

Now that I have explored films representing the pinnacle of the genre, it will be instructive to examine a few films that attempt to engender a spiritual awe but perhaps fall short. Having a poetic impulse does not necessarily mean that one's poetry will be skillfully executed or well received by an audience. As we have seen, Ron Fricke has helped create not only the Qatsi trilogy, but the film that gave its title to the premier non-verbal fansite, *Spirit of Baraka*. However, his film *Chronos*<sup>46</sup>, though employing many of the same timelapse techniques as the more celebrated films, and in stunning locations

like Stonehenge, Mont St. Michel, and the Grand Canyon, falls far short of the other films.

Reviewer Peter M. Bracke enjoyed the visual splendor of the film, which was originally presented in IMAX, but, like many IMAX films, found this one was missing something of a soul. “If the sum of '*Chronos*' ultimately feels like less than its parts, that may be because unlike the 'Qatsi' films, Fricke and his sonic collaborator, Michael Stearns, seem to have no agenda in marrying their images and music. Nor does Fricke have any apparent desire to impart any underlying social message with his mise-en-scene. As beautiful as they may be, his juxtapositions and pastiche of natural and manmade landscapes seem arbitrary.”<sup>47</sup> Part of what is missing then, in this string of beauty shots, are the stakes of *Baraka*. The world is shown pristine and beautiful, with the evils of society and environmental destruction nowhere to be found.

In the same league is *Timeless...A National Parks Odyssey*<sup>48</sup>, another IMAX film with a poetic core but with visuals that make no particular argument. The film was created to celebrate the majesty of the U.S. national park system. It is technically wonderful and artfully provides constant movement over scenes of nature in its purest states as it dissolves from a timelapse to a dolly shot to a helicopter shot to a moving stream. It mixes very wide scenics with smaller slow motion detail shots. Considering what a film about the natural parks could have been, this one at least tries to capture the essence of being in nature, of an immersive experience in nature (that many visitors to parks may never have, ironically, as they drive around and hit the giftshops) I first saw this film in a doctor's office and that seemed to be a fine venue for it, just as a meditative,

non-thought provoking, vaguely soothing backdrop. The music never reaches for a particular climax or particular sacred moment but instead maintains a flowing consistent meditative space. But too many money shots do not a compelling film make. Like an endless stream of explosions or passionate embraces, the images quickly begin to lose meaning, and the film runs the risk of permanently over-saturating an audience to its techniques.

Given that filmmakers are trying to promote a spiritual feeling, it seems natural that they would borrow from a wide range of religions to collect music and imagery. Since so much of white-dominated Western religion has been demystified, it certainly seems natural to look at people of color or indigenous people who seem to have a more magical connection with spirituality, and of course a closer connection to nature in their worship. But what are the issues in borrowing symbolism from “other” faiths and cultures? One troubling example of this might be the intro sequence of any film on <http://www.lifeonterra.com/> The brown-skinned children, the drumming and music, the tribal-sounding language; none have any particularly strong narrative purpose [though to be fair, this is merely an introduction or “bumper” to a larger series] and all are there to support a generally exotic feel. The film *Genesis* is another potentially troubling example, where the French makers of the celebrated poetic film *Microcosmos* take a big picture look at the evolution of life on Earth. The shots are quite masterful, but the use of an African elder as a mystical narrator seems to be an unnecessary and obvious ploy to give the film’s beauty shots an indigenous spiritual packaging. Yet this narrator himself, Sotigui Kouyaté from Burkina Faso, might very well take offense at that. He comes from

a line of African storytellers dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and has a nuanced opinion of cultural representation: “Let’s be modest. Africa is vast, and it would be pretentious to speak in its name. I’m fighting the battle with words because I’m a storyteller, a griot. Rightly or wrongly, they call us masters of the spoken word. Our duty is to encourage the West to appreciate Africa more.”<sup>49</sup> If someone who has spent a career thinking about cross-cultural sharing lends his story to a nature film, does that absolve it of any charges of troubling appropriation?

Some filmmakers say they use a “world music” soundtrack, which by its very definition denies borders and cultural boundaries and legitimizes respectful cultural sharing. In describing his own work combining multiple “classical traditions with the innovations of electronica,” Kenji Williams creates music that changes “from region to region, incorporating ethnic samples from music of that cultural region to evoke the sounds and sights of the people and places.”<sup>50</sup> While there are obviously issues surrounding cultural appropriation, people from all cultures should have license to tell stories about other cultures or to celebrate examples from other cultures of people who seem to be “getting it right” in terms of a relationship to nature. Filmmakers should also be able to make a film that steps back and attempts to make a planetary representation of our species’ connection to nature. (As if, perhaps, we were making the film as a time capsule or as a snapshot for an alien civilization.)

One way in which a cultural meme may be used in a way that is less “borrowing” and more “celebrating” is to show it in context or at least give it enough time to become less foreign. The Kecak dance from Bali in *Baraka*, for example, is shown seemingly in

its entirety. The sight of dozens of chanting, gesticulating, shirtless men could be considered spectacle, if only shown for a few seconds. But the scene plays out long enough that one begins to appreciate the elaborate choreography, and to be able to study the face of the leader and see his serene enjoyment of the event.

## THE EXAMPLE OF THE BIOSPHERE RESERVE

I have looked at nature films that to lesser or greater degrees utilize poetic devices to provide a spiritual experience for an audience. But to what ultimate end could filmmakers endeavor to use these devices in regard to nature films?

There are many ways in which we manifest or compartmentalize the concept of nature, in our minds and on the planet. Films are one of them. Ronald Engel investigated another more spatial compartmentalization; what he calls the biosphere reserve (although we more commonly refer to it as a nature reserve). Although obviously very different from a film, there are some lessons to be learned from his example. As I will demonstrate later with films, Engel finds that the “explicit text” of the creation of and philosophy behind the biosphere does not tell the whole story.<sup>51</sup>

The explicit reasoning for the value of the nature reserve is that preserving a geographical area can be of great benefit wildlife conservation as well as scientific research. But for Engel they are something else entirely, both for what they mean in the present and the potential of their example for the future. He sees the ecological reserve as the most important example of a designated “sacred space.”

“For some they are places where one feels the Other, the holy. For others, they are simply places of particular qualitative richness, of unique beauty or historical importance. In either case, they evoke a depth of experience that is more than ordinary. This experience is often expressed in the feeling of nostalgia for a more perfect world behind or beyond “this” world. The spatial and temporal symbolism associated with

sacred spaces is remarkably uniform. They are perceived as ideal. Written in their landscapes and in the design of their artifacts are not only how things are, but how things ought to be. One sees in sacred space the true pattern of the cosmos, a part that uniquely symbolizes the whole.”<sup>52</sup>

A poetic nature film endeavors to capture many of those same qualities. The art of filmmaking is often about expressing nostalgia for a more perfect world, a world where every second has meaning and purpose, a world without natural sounds that distract from a distilled vision, a world that is filtered through an aesthetic lens. One sees in a film, the part – whether it be a mother bear tending to her cubs, a slow motion waterfall, or an expression of devout bliss – that symbolizes the whole.

But is it responsible, in this era of environmental devastation, to distill nature with a rosy aesthetic lens? How best to be a filmmaker and environmental activist? All nature filmmakers are faced with the question of whether it is better to show environmental degradation and fragmented habitat or if there is room for creating “odes to the world that was” in order to inspire public appreciation of the natural world that still exists. Making pleasing films that ignore environmental impacts, or only mention them briefly, has long been the dominant strategy. But if we have reached a substantial tipping point from which “nature” will never recover as long as we dominate the earth, what then is our mandate?

For the BBC, argues Amy Nicholson, the mandate in creating *Earth* and the *Planet Earth* series was “born of paranoia” as producers worked to preserve rapidly disappearing nature on film. “Bear witness to the icebergs now, or risk finding only ice

cubes. Though the project avoids playing doomsayer, by existing, it's inherently political. To watch the majesty of a shark snapping up a seal, or a panoramic time lapse of a field of trees blooming in spring and crumbling in winter, is to be struck by the fragility of life. Our responsibility to protect this ecosystem underscores every image; watching is submission to our call of duty.”<sup>53</sup> Nicholson and undoubtedly many others were moved by their visit to a pristine filmic nature reserve, but how many of them actually answered that call to duty with tangible action? Or for that matter, did *Baraka* and *Koyaanisqatsi*, which made prophesies of doom integral to their structure, motivate anyone to change their lives?

Empirical evidence is hard to come by. But it is possible to speculate on what kinds of films might make more effective calls to action, and what potential traps to avoid.

One potential obstacle to the efficacy of films lies in their very attempt to portray a spiritual or emotional message. By doing so they can easily alienate the more epistemologically-minded or give those with a conflicting agenda the ammunition with which to dismiss their message. This is not merely a problem with nature films but for proponents of conservation in general. Nasr argues that the primacy of science and technology has enabled them to infest our belief system such that non-monetary values are discounted. “Practically the only protest that is heard is that of the conservationists and other lovers of nature. Their voice, although of much value, is not fully heard because their arguments are often taken as being sentimental rather than intellectual.”<sup>54</sup> Oelschlaeger documents that even during the transcendentalist era, the most respected

thinkers of the day were not immune.

“We live in a secular world where the objective mode of knowledge enjoys cognitive hegemony, and thus any and all phenomena are increasingly brought within the rubric of (narrowly) scientific explanation. As a result, among the vast majority of our coevals, the natural world is an object only, a standing reserve to be manipulated through technology, a stockpile of resources to fuel civilization. Those few in the modern ages – such as Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold – who have suggested alternative perspectives have been at best understood as interesting men marching to the beat of different drummers and at worst as radicals out of step with the march of Modernism.”<sup>55</sup>

Filmmaker Kenji Williams once embraced New Age spirituality as part of his message, but currently seeks reach a broader spectrum of the public. “One of the reasons I am not explicitly talking about the spiritual aspect of *Bella Gaia* is because I do not want this project to be framed as overtly spiritual, as I am adamantly interested in not preaching to the choir but to reach the mainstream with a transformative experience. Anyhow it is more powerful when the audience has the spiritual transformative experience without knowing it.”<sup>56</sup>

Making more experiential films – those that make the viewer feel most like they have actually been to a nature reserve – may be one way increase that transformative experience and therefore a film’s efficacy. Recent efforts toward making films more immersive include advancements in IMAX technology, 3D filmmaking, and designing nature into virtual worlds, and one can imagine the potential of, say, hyperrealistic 3D virtual holograms. But again, little evidence exists about whether or not making a film format more immersive can translate into changes in attitudes after the film is over.

On one hand, nature films could even be said to have an advantage over being in nature. There are no bugs, no sunburns, no boring interludes through the meadow when trying to get to the lake, no annoying people with their stereos blasting distracting from the experience. However, Paul Bloom, the author of “Natural Happiness: The Self-Centered Case for Environmentalism,”<sup>57</sup> while documenting that being in nature or even being within sight of green spaces can help reduce stress and aid in recuperation, also questions the value of electronic nature.

“You might think that technology could provide a simulacrum of nature with all the bad parts scrubbed out. But attempts to do so have turned out to be interesting failures. ... Consider a recent study by the University of Washington psychologist Peter H. Kahn Jr. and his colleagues. They put 50-inch high-definition televisions in the windowless offices of faculty and staff members to provide a live view of a natural scene. People liked this, but in another study that measured heart-rate recovery from stress, the HDTVs were shown to be worthless, no better than staring at a blank wall. What did help with stress was giving people an actual plate-glass window looking out upon actual greenery. ... It might be that one day we will be able to replace the experience of nature with “Star Trek” holodecks and robotic animals. But until then, this basic fact about human pleasure is an excellent argument for keeping the real thing.”<sup>58</sup>

Ultimately, no matter how poetic, spiritual, or immersive a film may be, at least with today’s technology, it is no substitute for an actual experience in nature. But until we are able to fully simulate reality and forego our pedestrian consciousness, or until we achieve a sustainable relationship with nature, nature films can and must play a role in reminding us all of the value of nature. Poetic nature films, when avoiding pitfalls of perceived flakiness or cultural appropriation, may be one of our best tools for doing so. And nature filmmakers would do well to acknowledge that at the core of their emotional

and transformational power is a spiritual impulse, whether that is overtly inserted into their narrative or not. For society in general, Lynn White believes that secular solutions alone will not suffice. “Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny.”<sup>59</sup> Filmmakers, who are adept at rethinking and refeeling and who speak to the public through what is arguably the dominant medium of our time, share much of the burden for helping to shape that destiny.

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