

MYTHOLOGIZING THE HISTORY OF EASTER ISLAND  
THROUGH DOCUMENTARY FILMS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

November 2005

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Laura Jean Boyd  
November 14, 2005

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Dennis Aig for all of his support through the master's thesis process, especially his guidance and editorial assistance in the completion of my thesis paper. I would also like to thank Shawn McLaughlin of the Easter Island Foundation. Although I have never met Shawn, the countless discussions via internet greatly contributed to my film, thesis paper and my future on the island. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Arzt for inviting me to make a documentary about his work on Easter Island. The time, consideration, support and friendship he invested in this thesis project went above and beyond my expectations.

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## ABSTRACT

Documentaries have the power to rewrite history and perpetuate myths in our society. In the case of Easter Island, documentary filmmakers have sensationalized the history of the Rapa Nui people, dwelling on dramatic concepts such as eco-disaster, cannibalism and mysteriously vanishing cultures. As a result of poor filmmaking, we have a mythologized history of Easter Island.

In my attempt to create a science-based documentary about an issue affecting contemporary Easter Island society, this mythologizing of history became a major obstacle. It became apparent that I had to first inform audiences to the fact that they had been misinformed by previous documentaries about Easter Island and I had to change their interpretation of the alleged facts. In my thesis paper I examine the documentaries that created sensational statements about the island and reveal why documentary filmmakers rely on dramatic elements. I also examine my approach to the process of making my graduate thesis film, Caballo Loco on Easter Island, and review the methods I used to ensure the people of Rapa Nui were accurately represented.

## INTRODUCTION

In setting out to make a documentary about an invasive plant species on Easter Island, I became aware that many people have been misinformed about the history of the island. The most prevalent beliefs are that Easter Island is treeless and the ancient people mysteriously vanished, leaving only the monolithic statues for Europeans to find (Easterbrook: 10). The most recent concept to pervade public opinion about the island is that Easter Island is a metaphor for the end of the Earth, associating the great moai statues or icons of the island with eco-disaster (Diamond: 2005). I began to wonder where such harsh generalizations about the history of the island come from, and why these sensational ideas are associated with the island.

In conducting research for my documentary, Caballo Loco on Easter Island, I assembled a large collection of documentaries about the island. In viewing these films, it became apparent to me that the sensationalized public misconceptions I was encountering had originated largely from documentaries that were broadcast by major television networks.

## DOCUMENTARIES' INFLUENCE

Audiences consider documentaries to be somehow truer than nearly everything else they see on television; often they are not aware that documentaries are the filmmaker's version of events (Bernard 210). Documentaries promise information, knowledge, and insight, but documentaries are not documents in the strict sense of the word (Nichols 2001: 38). Saying that a documentary representation makes a truth claim is not the same as saying that it presents the truth. Truth claims reflect an understanding between documentary filmmakers and their viewers that the "representation is based on the actual socio-historical world" (Beattie 10- 11). This gives documentarians the power to influence the way in which people perceive the world.

Distortion of historical and cultural reality does have ethical outcomes. Sensational narratives have detrimentally affected the perception of the history of Easter Island. With the notion of film providing indexical traces of a real past, we approach the convergence of documentary cinema and historiography (Rosen 63). Documentary filmmaker and author Alan Rosenthal writes:

"As a result of some of these practices, instead of having the past clarified and illuminated, we simply have a new mythologizing of history. This is extremely dangerous. Where the mythologizing is apparent the problems are minimal. But when the mythologizing is carried out on a larger, more authoritative scale, where it can be unperceived, the dangers are far greater" (Rosenthal 429).

## THE MYTHOLOGIZING OF EASTER ISLAND

The majority of the Easter Island documentaries contain the word “mystery” in their title. For example: BBC Horizon’s The Mystery of Easter Island, produced by Jonathan Renouf, is based on the premise that “only science can hope to explain the rise and fall of this unusual civilization” (BBC). Although science has contributed greatly to constructing an accurate picture of the pre-history of Easter Island, a great deal of what we know about the ancient culture and religions comes from ethnographic and archaeological surveys conducted on the island. Katherine Scoresby Routledge led the first archaeological expedition to the island from 1914-1915 (Routledge), followed by ethnologist Alfred Metraux, of the Franco-Belgian Archaeological Expedition to Easter Island, in 1934 (Metraux). Vast quantities of information were gathered on these expeditions, including interviews with the elders of the island, preserving the history of their traditional beliefs and customs. Even so, misconceptions about the island’s history and the fate of the Rapa Nui people continue to surface in documentaries. The Mystery of Easter Island states: “The great puzzle for anyone trying to find out what happened here is that there’s no one left to tell them about it” (Renouf), thus alluding to the fact that the Rapa Nui people vanished. This statement is reinforced with images of a stark and barren landscape, treeless, and void of any sign of human inhabitants.

This documentary, made in 2003, relies on a geneticist, a botanist and an archaeologist to help solve the many “mysteries” of the island. Although the documentary does acknowledge the devastating impact of Western contact, it includes no mention of the Rapa Nui’s survival because that would shatter the entire premise of the

“mystery”. Documentarians rely on the concept of the “mysteries” surrounding Easter Island to construct narratives that incorporate scientific discoveries on the island. Unfortunately, this approach is perpetuating the misconception that Easter Island is “shrouded in mystery” (Lee).

Representing prehistory is a challenge. Archeologists are used as witnesses of the past, acting as the “specialist” on ancient culture. Archeologists also share their theories about the past by interpreting scientific clues left for us in the form of art, excavation, pollen studies and historical records. Often archeologists have conflicting theories, and in the NOVA special Secrets of Lost Empires: Easter Island by Liesl Clark, the focus is more on exploiting the personalities of the scientists than introducing the existing theories on how the Rapa Nui moved their giant statues. What had the potential to be a cutting edge program, testing the different theories of how the statues were moved, becomes an embarrassing duel between scientific egos. Archaeologist Dr. Georgia Lee worked on the NOVA piece and was unaware of the filmmaker’s intentions. Dr. Lee feels that the representation of the scientists “was bogus and uncalled for,” “the responsibility of the filmmaker is to show things accurately, not to try to create controversy and go for the sensational.”

The History Channel produced an hour long special, In Search of History: Mysteries of Easter Island, by producer Tom Jennings. The film eschews the entire historical timeline, leads the viewer to believe that the islanders depleted all of their resources in a period of 50 years, and creates horrendous re-enactments of savage warfare. The entire documentary is infused with accusations wrought by Western

ideology, depicting the Rapa Nui as bloodthirsty savages. The most sensational example of narration states:

The islanders are horrified: how could their gods let them become so evil? Filled with hate for what they have become they feverishly destroy the symbols of those that are supposed to protect them- the moai. The destruction of the moai is seen as one way of liberating the island from the curse of cannibalism. To cleanse themselves of their bloody deeds they create a new religion.

The narration is reinforced with a reenactment of savage warfare; a “cannibal” carries his victim on his shoulder.

Deciding how an early society behaved toward nature from surviving, non-decomposable artifacts is enormously difficult. It is all based on conjecture and extrapolation (Merchant 37). There is no historical or scientific evidence to support that the Rapa Nui threw down their statues to rid themselves of “the curse of cannibalism.” This particular documentary constructed the Rapa Nui as a degraded savage, devoid of Western civilization (Beattie 47).

In an obvious attempt to combat this mythologizing of history Films for the Humanities and Sciences produced a series called History’s Artifacts: Separating Fact from Fiction. The film, Easter Island in Context: From Paradise to Calamity, produced by Peter A. Steen, is an excellent example of an evenhanded attempt to represent the archeologists and their different opinions. Using a very academic approach, the documentary includes the majority of the leading experts on the history of Easter Island and skillfully weaves their differing theories together, allowing the audience to come to their own conclusions about the ancient history of the island.

But why do most documentarians gloss over today's Rapa Nui, creating the impression that there are few people on the island and that they are primitive technologically? According to author and historian Shawn McLaughlin: "Little coverage is provided on contemporary issues like education, health, cultural issues, land management or those dealing with autonomy from Chile" (2005: January). To be fair, the reason Easter Island's past gets more attention is that is where most of the intrigue lies. Archaeologist and author Paul Bahn feels that "filmmakers dwell on the sexier aspects, such as the stone heads that everybody is familiar with and wonders about. Dealing with the recent history of the present of the place would take them into less attractive areas such as politics and oppression."

The danger documentaries have in misleading audiences is that assumptions and incomplete impressions function as knowledge. McLaughlin believes there is a tendency to search for meaning instead of knowledge where the island is concerned, and simple misinterpretations have given rise to theories that have no substantiation (2004: 56). Archaeologist Jo Anne Van Tilburg agrees: "The island, because of its incredible megalithic accomplishments and dramatic isolation, has been the reluctant center of fantastic speculation, bad research and pseudoscience"(Van Tilburg: 1994). Many theories have been developed in the absence of evidence. Marine Biologist and archaeology enthusiast Thor Heyerdahl led the infamous Kon-Tiki Expedition in which he sailed 4,300 miles by raft from South America in an attempt to prove his theory that Easter Island was settle by South Americans (McLaughlin 2005: 47). The documentary of the expedition, entitled Kon-Tiki, won an Academy Award in 1951 (Oscars).

Geneticist Erika Hagelberg later disproved his theory. She extracted DNA from the skeletons of early Easter Islanders and identified a genetic marker called the Polynesian motif, confirming that the island was indeed settled by Polynesians (BBC).

Unfortunately, popular non-fiction literature further contributes to the mythologizing of the history of Easter Island. Thanks to evolutionary biologist Jared Diamond, and his extremely popular *New York Times Best Seller*, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, Easter Island is now synonymous with eco-disaster. “Easter’s isolation makes it the clearest example of a society that destroyed itself by overexploiting its own resources” (Diamond 2005: 118). An excerpt from the *New York Times Book Review* reads: “Centuries ago, the deforestation of Easter Island allowed the wind to blow off the island’s thin topsoil: starvation, a population crash and a descent into cannibalism followed, leaving those haunting statues for Europeans to find” (Easterbrook 10). In *Collapse* Diamond glosses over a significant period in Rapa Nui history, the impact of European visitors to the island, slave raids and small pox. Archaeologist Van Tilburg acknowledges: “The metaphor for disaster... is a projection of Western values which emphasizes the self-destruction of Rapa Nui culture over the actual, near-annihilation of its contact with the West” (Van Tilburg 1994: 164).

## THE TRUTH ABOUT EASTER ISLAND

Although it is a generally accepted theory among archaeologists and Pacific island specialists that the Easter Islanders denuded their landscape, many factors must be considered when examining the disappearance of trees on the island. Historian Shawn McLaughlin clarifies, in his recent publication on Easter Island, that unlike forest clearance methods of today, the deforestation occurred over a period of 1000 years and the island was supporting a population that peaked at an estimated 9,000 people (McLaughlin 2004: 221). Erosion, introduced species, and climatic fluctuations, all contributed to the deforestation of Easter Island. “So pinning the environmental degradation entirely on the islanders is hardly fair or balanced reporting, however dramatic one may want to be” (McLaughlin 2004: November).

Determining what is “truth” and what is purely speculation in the case of Easter Island is difficult because much of the history of the island has been lost due to a sequence of unfortunate events that are directly related to European contact with the island, not through a self imposed eco-disaster as many of the current documentaries lead us to believe. Slave raids and small pox managed to bring the population of the Rapa Nui people down to a mere 110 people by 1877; the near annihilation of their population was a direct result of contact with the West (McLaughlin 2004: 223). Due to the impact of encounters with outsiders it has fallen to archaeology combined with salvage ethnography, or recording what is left of a culture, to write a history of the island (Rainbird 448).

The pre-European history of Easter Island is based on the interpretation of scientific evidence combined with what is known about the history of the island in the form of legend. “Much of what the modern-day islanders know about their own heritage derives not from their ancestors, but scientists, explorers, anthropologists, and archaeologists who have managed to dig up long-buried information, including knowledge that was truly lost to the Rapa Nui” (McLaughlin 2004: October). Legends are seized upon in the absence of anything else definitive. Mystery, cannibalism and eco-disaster have become as common in our associations of Easter Island as the giant monolithic moai statues. There is no standard in documentary filmmaking for misrepresenting reality; nothing to gauge to what extent the impression of authenticity has been sensationalized. This legal exercise of freedom of expression gives the documentary filmmaker the power to shape the way people perceive history and factual information about the world they live in. Filmmakers have taken the liberty to create a history of the island based on the most sensational possibilities for the sake of securing ratings for television broadcasters, and thrusting themselves into the danger zone of mythologizing history for the sake of advertising dollars. For the most part, documentary filmmakers are not free agents but employees of one sort or another; “the provision of entertainment complicates the ethical position” (Winston 115).

## DOCUMENTARY PRESSURES

Documentary filmmakers are under a great amount of pressure to attract viewers. Producer Charles Saltsman of the Monterey Bay Aquarium believes that sensationalism is the side effect of “network pressure to create a dramatic feel with minimal budgets which leads to formulaic approaches.” Ultimately, the job of the filmmaker is to bring audiences to advertisers. Producer Martha Conboy of National Geographic Television believes that airing sensational-type programming, in a commercial environment, is a safe bet to win ratings and that’s why producers resort to it so frequently. Conboy commented, “I liken it to a sideshow: audiences know they’ve got no content, but they like the form as its own kind of entertainment.” But by “doctoring” the work of scientists to make films more exciting, dramatic producers are misleading audiences. Ultimately the motivation is job security. Producer and film professor David Sheerer believes the financial pressures are great, especially in today’s very saturated television market; broadcasters require ratings, and “films garner ratings when they are exciting and dramatic.”

Producer Chris Palmer believes that producers need to “counter the current trends towards sensationalism and show that it is possible to produce films that are highly entertaining without being irresponsible.” Scheerer feels that “sensationalism is the tool of the ignorant and foolish filmmaker who disregards their intrinsic responsibility to their audience or somehow doesn’t believe it is an issue to betray this public trust.” There are conflicts inherent to trying to present a visually interesting story while at the same time trying to get the facts straight and actually present some useful knowledge. McLaughlin

thinks “there are actually two responsibilities: one to the audience that watches the documentary, another to the scientists who participate in the production.” These have not always been well combined (McLaughlin 2005: January). Scientists need to understand there is more to the process than just preparing and filming a documentary; there are marketing and distribution issues and their accompanying demands, financial and otherwise. He does feel that the filmmakers should never shirk their responsibility to present the material as accurately as possible, even if that means subordinating dramatic elements. Saltsman disagrees:

“Having great material does not relieve you of your responsibility of entertaining the viewer. It is hard work to create a good film; to really get to know people and the stories they have, to wait for the magic hour lighting and to haul a camera to unusual places. Creating a great film recognizes that your viewers time is valuable and that they have a choice as to how they spend it. Make them want to spend it with your story”.

A good storyteller anticipates the audience’s confusion and meets it in subtle and creative ways, relying on pace of editing and the release of information where and when it is needed and not before. In her book, Documentary Storytelling for Video and Filmmakers, Sheila Curran Bernard states: “Audiences are willing to do quite a bit of work to figure out what the story is and where you are going with it- that is part of what makes viewing a good documentary an active rather than passive experience” (Bernard 160). In Caballo Loco on Easter Island I relied on my audiences sense of wonder to build the plot for the story. By presenting information to stimulate questions I developed a plot where the audience was led through the process of investigating the “caballo loco syndrome” along with Dr. Arzt.

## REALIZING THE FILM

In my documentary, Caballo Loco on Easter Island, the greatest challenge was in developing the story, while remaining true to the vision of veterinarian Jonathan Arzt and his scientific discoveries. Using observation, reasoning, hypothesis, prediction, and tested theory, the model of scientific method was employed as the basic structure for telling the story. In the film, we follow Dr. Arzt as he goes through the trials and tribulations of scientific practice to come to conclusions about the toxic plant problem on Easter Island. Through the natural progression of his scientific investigation he brings the audience to an understanding of the complex scientific concepts introduced in the film. As producer Conboy says, “people should know that science is a process, a method for gathering data and ultimately quite comprehensible. What is difficult is analyzing what all those ‘results’ mean. That is the imaginative and interpretive part” (Conboy).

Although my film attempts to convey complex scientific concepts, it does not attempt to provide a history of the ancient culture of Easter Island. Instead it portrays contemporary life on Easter Island through the eyes of an American veterinarian. My needs did require, however, that I educate the viewers on the current status of the island, and in doing that I confronted the many myths associated with the island. This mythologizing of history became a major obstacle in building my story. I had to first make audiences aware that they had been misinformed by previous documentaries about Easter Island society and I had to change their interpretation of the accepted facts. The challenge was how to accomplish this in a science-based film that was limited to 25

minutes due to the broadcast requirements of the Montana PBS series TERRA, where I planned to broadcast the film to satisfy the requirements of my graduate degree.

Another challenge was how to portray a group of people to an audience that has been misled by documentaries to believe that the Rapa Nui had vanished from the island prior to European discovery. For the most part, Western viewers have no concept of ancient or contemporary Easter Island. They are familiar with the giant monolithic statues, the isolation, and the mystery surrounding the island. To counteract this, I used a montage to open the film, including Rapa Nui people, statues, horses and cows, and ocean scenics, set to traditional Rapa Nui music. The goal of the first montage was to establish that this was, in fact, Easter Island, and to introduce the viewers to the thriving indigenous population on the island.

My film is not a historiography – it is a science-based film and is more topical and specific than the existing documentaries about Easter Island. It relies on the findings of Dr. Jonathan Arzt, Governor Enrique Pakarati Ika and Hotu Araki Tepano, a local ranch owner who has endorsed Dr. Arzt's work for years. Through these characters, and the narrator, a contemporary history of the island is revealed. It was crucial that I carefully and thoroughly weave the history of the past one hundred years on the island so that the viewer had the appropriate context in which to understand the story. I used narration, specifically a woman's voice, to provide this background and balance the dry tone of Dr. Arzt's voice. The history included how horses arrived on Easter Island, how Chile came to govern the island and how the invasive species, the plant Cho Cho, arrived.

Throughout the documentary the Rapa Nui speak Spanish and few people are aware of the fact that Rapa Nui was annexed by Chile in the late 1800's.

Caballo Loco on Easter Island was created as propaganda. Documentary, like propaganda, sets out to persuade us to adopt a given perspective or point of view about the world (Nichols 2001: Xi). I feel that Caballo Loco on Easter Island accomplishes this; it effectively relays Dr. Jonathan Arzt's interpretation of the issues surrounding the toxic plant problem on Easter Island, and it provides a factual contemporary history of Rapa Nui. I was fortunate in the fact that Dr. Arzt was aware that the footage we acquired needed to fulfill both the needs of my graduate filmmaking program and to create a film for potential funders for his non-profit organization Veterinary Relief International. The 25-minute version for Montana PBS subdues but does not eliminate the solicitation aspect; it is a very important part of the story because it demonstrates his dedication to this cause. Dr. Arzt supported the work of my thesis project, both personally and financially, and was extremely patient while I went through the pains of producing my first documentary. Upon the completion of my graduate thesis requirements, I will fulfill my obligation to Veterinary Relief International. Caballo Loco on Easter Island will be edited into a 7-minute piece, created specifically for fundraising purposes.

Dr. Arzt has been working on Easter Island since 1998. He realized that all of the elements contributing to his work, including the fact that all of this was occurring on the most remote, inhabited island on Earth, made for a strong story and wrote a treatment for a possible documentary. In 2001 he purchased a prosumer Sony digital video camera

and began creating a self-portrait, including footage of his work and on-camera commentary. Jon knew he wanted a documentary made about his work on the island, but filming it himself proved to be impossible. What he filmed on Easter Island, combined with his treatment, later became the model for shooting the film Caballo Loco on Easter Island.

In the summer of 2003, while working in the Pribilof Islands of Alaska, Jon met filmmaker Paul Hillman, also a graduate student in the Science and Natural History Filmmaking program at Montana State University. Jon approached Paul with his film idea and Paul suggested that Jon contact me, since I had many years of experience working in the South Pacific as an expedition tour guide. I had been to Easter Island, and I was looking for a graduate thesis project.

I received Dr. Arzt's scientific paper, "Livestock-Related Problems on Rapa Nui (Easter Island); Assessment and Proposed Mitigation Strategies" and was immediately interested in the project. Although I knew nothing about horses, I was introduced to the concept of animals and plant toxicity in a mammology course taught by Dr. David Willey at Montana State University. I found Jon's paper to be fascinating and, most importantly, understandable by a non-scientist, proving that Jon was capable of communicating complex scientific content to a lay audience.

Within four months of my initial contact with Dr. Arzt we were on the island filming. His scientific papers, the Veterinary Relief International website ([www.veterinaryreliefinternational.com](http://www.veterinaryreliefinternational.com)), and a website created by the University of California at Davis that sets up an investigation of the disease syndrome, proved to be

invaluable resources for compiling the history of Dr. Arzt's work on Easter Island ([www.calf.vetmed.ucdavis.edu](http://www.calf.vetmed.ucdavis.edu)). Funding also came quickly, although it was minimal. Veterinary Relief International provided \$3500 for my initial trip to the island and I matched the \$3500 with personal savings. The Easter Island Foundation, an organization dedicated to research on the island, provided \$1000, and in 2004 I received a \$2400 grant from money allotted to the graduate program from The National Science Foundation. The rest of the funding, approximately \$5,000, came from my personal resources.

The most important discussion between Dr. Arzt and me, prior to the first trip to the island, was not about the direction of the film, but about the sensitive material I would be recording. I would be filming animal euthanasia and necropsy. How would I handle this sensitive material? The question was twofold: How would I personally respond to seeing animals being euthanized, and how would I use this extremely sensitive material in the film? We both agreed that this footage needed to be handled very carefully; if presented out of context, it had the potential to turn people against Jon's work on the island. Dr. Arzt and I agreed to create and sign a contract that stated he had the rights to all material, and that we would film the euthanasia sequences on separate tapes, for educational purposes only. The necropsies were filmed in detail; close-up images of afflicted organs, parasites and abnormalities were described on camera. This footage has the potential to aid Dr. Arzt in describing the disease syndrome and will be used as a teaching tool for pathology instruction. The footage is extremely graphic and was recorded for medical purposes only.

Twenty terminally afflicted animals were euthanized during the making of Caballo Loco on Easter Island. Dr. Arzt never put down a suffering animal without the consent of its owner and often people refused the euthanasia services. Some also refused the opportunity for population control services, such as castration and contraceptive injections. Easter Island cannot sustain the number of roaming livestock on the island, but influencing the Rapa Nui to limit their livestock populations is beyond the scope of science. Livestock animals are a fairly new introduction to the island and there is a great deal of pride associated with owning large numbers of horses and cows. I feel I was able to convey the cultural importance of animals to the Rapa Nui through interviews with rancher Hotu Araki Tepano, but I was not able to convey the overpopulation issues thoroughly due to broadcast time constraints.

Filming the euthanasia sequences was not difficult. The animals were extremely ill and it was a relief to see them put out of their pain. Personally, I found the necropsies to be fascinating. I did not feel that including footage of euthanasia was something that would contribute to the story. I needed to portray the problem at hand, and the reality that there is no cure for the “Cho Cho syndrome”. Euthanasia is the only means to prevent the animals from dying a slow and painful death. I believe this point, as well as the numbers of animals dying, are very clear in the film, through interviews, commentary, visuals and the necropsy footage included in the film. Dr. Arzt and I felt that euthanasia, although justified and necessary, is disturbing to watch, and something we chose not to expose our audience to. I do not think that I have misled the audience in any way by eliminating actual euthanasia footage from the film.

Interestingly, this approach worked extremely well in editing the footage of the necropsies. I found that it was effective to show a live, sick and dying animal- and then cut straight to the necropsy. Removing the moment of actual death from the sequence created enough separation from the idea, and became less disturbing for the audience. I observed this phenomenon when I utilized an adult education Spanish class I was attending on campus as my focus group. They were the perfect captive audience: the class was largely made up of scientists running various labs on the Montana State University campus. Not only could they critique my Spanish translations for accuracy, they were also familiar with the scientific method. The class unanimously agreed that the images of the animals suffering with the Cho Cho syndrome provided enough information to support the story: actual footage of euthanasia was not necessary.

This technique was used in the beginning of the film, with Hotu's first horse and later in the film, during the night necropsy sequence. After attempting numerous cuts of the night scene, with the mare dying at the side of the road, I decided to include an image of the needle containing the euthanasia solution, but cut to the next scene before the actual injection. I found this approach to be the most visually and emotionally effective in portraying the reality of the situation. This night scene also includes a very touching scene of a foal attempting to nurse from its dying mother. Dr. Arzt and I recognized the capacity of the particular scene to create a dramatic emotional response from our audience. The power of this particular image stems from our ability to project our emotional responses on the animal kingdom. Great care was taken in filming this scene, for we could not have created a better one if it had been fiction.

There is one scene I was adamant about including in the film, but it was ultimately eliminated at the urging of the editors, Moses Malekia and Milton Manesco. While shooting ocean scenics, the sound recordist, Eric Burge, came across a horse that had died along the rocky ocean coast. Its body was writhing with maggots, and Jon speculated that the horse, prior to its death, was most likely disoriented from the Cho Cho syndrome. It had come down to the coast to drink from the fresh water springs located in the area, could not find its way back out, and consequently died there. We had a great interview and visuals to support the fact that it is not uncommon to come across dead and decomposing horses on the island. But the editors found the maggots to be too disturbing and I compromised. Instead, I included a long shot of a decomposing horse at the sacred site of Ahu Tongariki.

My initial approach to shooting Caballo Loco on Easter Island was to film in the observational mode, and not to intervene with the events at hand (Nichols 1991: 38). I quickly realized that this approach was going to be completely impossible. For the most part, the horse necropsies attracted audiences and the conversations that occurred during the necropsies were in a mix of English, Spanish and Rapa Nui. A fascinating mix of dialogue, but very difficult to edit and translate. Considering this was my first film, and that my time on Easter Island was limited, I chose not to include any dialogue or interviews in the Rapa Nui language for the sheer purpose of simplicity. (I do, however, plan to have the film translated into Rapa Nui upon my return to the island this December 2005.) Instead, I employed the expository mode of filmmaking, shaping the film around commentary directed at the viewer using images to serve as illustration or counterpoint

(Nichols 1991: 34). The end result is a combination of the two modes, using interviews directed at the viewer throughout the film and narration to link the interviews, and observational footage to illustrate Jon's commentary.

I chose situations where there were few or no people for Dr. Arzt to take the time to make commentary on his work. In these instances, Dr. Arzt would drive the dialogue, by describing the animal's symptoms and walking the audience through the procedure. We chose to stage the interviews in the archaeological sites; it proved to be the perfect means in which to include the stunning archaeology of the island in the film. Interviews were dictated by the information needed to piece the story together. I was planning to use Dr. Arzt's voice throughout the film for narration and personal interviews. Although there was plenty of material to accomplish this, it became too monotonous to hear the same tone of voice throughout the film. The film called for a different character, and the use of voiceover narration was employed. Initially, I only intended to provide the scratch narration for the film, but it became important to me to be the narrator. I had invested so much time and energy in creating the film: I wanted to narrate Dr. Arzt's story.

I did not rely on any existing science documentaries to construct my approach to making the film Caballo Loco on Easter Island. I did, however, rely heavily on methodology and approach to making documentary films outlined in Michael Rabinger's book Directing the Documentary. Dr. Arzt was not opposed to having me conduct interviews with the government officials that did not support his work, namely the Servicio Agrícola y Ganadero (Chilean Ministry of Agriculture or S.A.G.), and even invited me to attend a meeting with the group. I quickly realized that filming this

meeting would put him in a compromising position and had the potential to put an end to his work on the island. His presence on the island is high profile. He is in high demand because he offers services to the Rapa Nui for free, and he receives overwhelming support from the Rapa Nui. S.A.G. officials refuse to acknowledge the problems Cho Cho is causing on the island, and, consequently, there is some suspicion that one of their motives for introducing the plant was to reduce the numbers of grazing livestock. There is great dissention between the Rapa Nui people and their Chilean government. Jon spends a huge percentage of his time dealing with government factions on the island. I did not want to complicate matters by pushing for an interview. This does, however, make the film seem a bit one-sided, and even though Veterinary Relief International sponsors the film, I did not feel any pressure from Dr. Arzt to exclude the other side of the issue. I made the decision not to stir up the political situation.

Also, I felt the need to reinforce that Dr. Jonathan Arzt never accuses the Chilean government of introducing Cho Cho to the island in the film; his only accusation is that they are not recognizing the problem. Rather than stir up any suggestion of conflict of interest, I was able to use the Governor to overview the situation. For legitimacy and authenticity, Chilean Governor Enrique Pakarati Ika reveals that the plant was introduced by CONAF, a Chilean Organization in control of Rapa Nui National Park, to control soil erosion. If anything, I feel that the film does not accurately portray the amount of oppression and suffering the Rapa Nui have endured as a result of Chilean rule.

In making Caballo Loco on Easter Island, I feel I was successful in remaining true to the goal of the Master of Fine Arts in Science and Natural History Filmmaking

program, which is to work cooperatively with science, develop a trusting and collaborative relationship with a scientist, and to tell his story accurately. I feel that I have not included any sensationalistic statements and that the film is devoid of any “unfortunate distortions, inaccuracies or outright misrepresentations of the subject matter being presented within the program” (Tobias 2001).

Another important point regarding the film script is that every word, excluding narration about the island’s history and the interviews with Hotu Araki Tepano and Governor Pakarati, came from interviews with Dr. Arzt. The transcriptions of these interviews were invaluable sources for the construction of the film. I cannot stress how important it was to have this information organized in such a way that I could refer to it time and time again, and ultimately convey his story through his interviews. The film is told through the voice of Dr. Jonathan Arzt. I do not attempt to conceal this fact in any way; he is listed as executive producer in the credits and he is included in the copyright at the end of the film.

After having examined all of the material captured in December 2003, I realized there were some important points missing from the film, visual and transitional, for the way I wanted to tell the story. One of the greatest luxuries I had in the production of this film was the ability to return to the island following the first shoot, with a very specific list of shots and interviews I needed to acquire. This second trip proved to be invaluable because I was able to craft transitions based on a rough cut of the film. I was able to re-shoot interviews that needed clarification, and I was able to film the all important slaughterhouse scene. This scene, I feel, is pivotal for the film. It establishes the urgency

of the problem, that animals with the Cho Cho syndrome are being processed for human consumption. What better place to exemplify this than a slaughterhouse?

In 2003 I had turned down the opportunity to film in the slaughterhouse, believing it to be too morbid. I felt confident that I had captured enough information in the eight necropsies and interviews with Jon. On examining the footage, I realized I had made a grave mistake. Never pass up an opportunity to shoot, especially when you are invited to shoot in a place like a slaughterhouse. Rarely do you get invited into such a place. Images of the slaughtered cows, butchers preparing meat, and Jon taking scientific specimens, provide the graphic reality of the urgency of this situation. The narration states: “There is the possibility that just about everyone on Rapa Nui could be consuming toxic alkaloids that are present in the beef of the cows that are consuming the plant Cho Cho.” This plant is not only killing animals, but has the potential to kill people.

To ascertain that these concepts were clear in the film I asked Plant Scientist Dr. Gary Strobel, as well as James Richardson, extension officer for the South Australia Department of Agriculture, to evaluate the final version of the film. These scientists have firsthand experience in dealing with plant issues identical to the problems caused by *Crotalaria grahamiana*, and I wanted to be sure my use of scientific plant language and facts stated in the film were accurate and widely accepted. My knowledge of toxic plants was limited to textbooks, and my exposure to the “caballo loco syndrome”. After viewing [Caballo Loco on Easter Island](#) they both felt that I had presented the plant issue in a correct and comprehensible manner, and they also felt the film was extremely

informative and entertaining. Strobel also commented that he was very pleased with the presentation of the scientific method in the film.

Dr. Arzt does provide solutions to the problem at hand, but they are beyond the scope of what a veterinarian is capable of accomplishing. Ultimately, he realizes that determining the cause of what was causing “caballo loco” on Easter Island was just the first step, educating the Rapa Nui about how to avoid exposing their animals to the toxic plant was the next step, and, ultimately, the Chilean government needs to recognize the potential of this plant’s toxicity to humans and remove the invasive weed they introduced to this fragile island ecosystem.

The final interview in the film, also my final interview on the island, was instrumental in developing the character of Dr. Jon Arzt. Throughout the film we see a serious scientist, dedicated to his cause and angry about the political situation with Chile. But it is never revealed as to why he has devoted so much time and effort to this cause until the final scene of the film. Arzt confesses:

When you come to a place as wonderful and mystical as Rapa Nui it is hard to feel like you really deserve to be here. The changes that I have seen, based on my work, make me feel that my presence here is justified, and that I do need to keep coming back. Not just for my own benefit, but for the benefit of these animals, and their owners.

At the very last possible moment, we are allowed some insight as to why this young veterinarian continues to make the journey, year after year, to the most remote, inhabited island in the world.

## CONCLUSION

One does not have to look very hard to determine how popular culture has been misled by sensational literature and documentaries about the history and current status of Easter Island. The documentaries on Easter Island run the gamut from reasonably conservative discussions of the subject matter to sensational content that appears to be emphasizing “entertainment” over education (McLaughlin 2005: January). I was fortunate in the fact that the subject and approach of my film did not rely on interpretations of the ancient history of Easter Island, and feel that my film was effective in informing the audience about aspects contemporary Rapa Nui society necessary for understanding the story of Caballo Loco on Easter Island. In order to ensure that my film was historically accurate and respectful of the Rapa Nui culture, I relied on both Dr. Georgia Lee and historian Shawn McLaughlin, of The Easter Island Foundation, to evaluate the final cut of the film. They were very pleased with the end result and enthusiastically offered to include information on the film in the academic periodical the “Rapa Nui Journal”.

There are great challenges in creating a product that is based on both scientific and historical accuracy, as well as fundraising and entertainment. You cannot solve the problems of a culture with science, but the stories of people using science to solve problems are the perfect vehicle for relaying the concepts of science to us through documentary.

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