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PERCEPTION, DECEPTION AND REALITY: A question of morals in natural history filmmaking.

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ABSTRACT

PERCEPTION, DECEPTION AND REALITY (A question of morals in natural history filmmaking)

We live in a society, a McDonaldized society where everything must be seen to be visually dynamic with the emphasis on the real. However, the real is not reality, it is but a paper tiger spinning within its own vortex a vortex full of *mise en scène* manipulation and unscientific reasoning. Nevertheless, there will be those who disagree they argue that today's aural/visual representations are a new art form, a way to project uncertainty, a story without end.

Unfortunately, this discourse has engulfed the world of natural history where its inhabitants are used to support the idiosyncratic whims of the actor/presenter. Strong evidence of this can be witnessed on the UK's BBC and on Finnish and Swedish television. Moreover, we are constantly bombarded by myopic American rhetoric. The problem here is that whilst networks are willing to broadcast this mythos, those who produce this form of entertainment will continue to do so.

Arguably, a filmmaker lives in two worlds an internal and an external. The internal where reality expressed through filmic art is guided by morality and good judgement, the external a world of deception where technological and mechanical devices are used to enhance the thirst for realism. The problem is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external and as the poet Thoreau points out. "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep."

This paper will argue the problems surrounding perception, deception and reality with the question of 'who controls who' as the central peg. Does society control the media or does the media control society.

PERCEPTION

I will begin by asking the following question, how do we define the perception of a natural history film? Arriving at a satisfactory or acceptable answer is not that easy as the word *perception* does not offer a straightforward definition. The New Penguin English Dictionary informs us that perception is “Intuitive discernment; insight or understanding.”¹ If this is the case, then perception could mean a general awareness of knowledge of events that have occurred.

However, there remains much argument concerning the word perception “Some hold that perception is the occurrence of sensory ideas in the mind, which in some way reveal the nature of their external causes.”² Others contend that perception is a direct awareness of the external unmediated by prior knowledge of anything internal. In addition, there is a related debate about whether sensory experience is itself conceptual. If it is not, the word is not presented to us in conceptual form; rather, we impose such a form on what we receive, by categorization or conceptualization. For example, “In Gregory’s thinking objects have a past and future, because an object transcends experience and becomes an embodiment of knowledge and expectation.”³

“Perception is an active and constructive process.”⁴ which, derive from deciphered or analyzed information, knowledge and expectation that forms a platform for further process of deduction and or evaluation. This in turn leads to additional hypotheses in deduction and analysis and this being the case, perception can be considered an on-going phenomenon. But could perception be linked to conditioning meaning that what we perceive or interpret has been governed by what we have been taught or experienced? There is a long-standing tradition in philosophy that perception (especially touch and vision) gives undeniably true knowledge.”⁵ I would argue that this ideology should be extended to incorporate our other senses including hearing sense of smell and taste because. “They are internal parts belonging to a perceivers perceptual cycle.”⁶

Science has often pointed out that philosophical understanding of what we perceive to be true is not necessarily the case, especially if one has not experienced the phenomenon at first hand. In many respects, this is true. Nevertheless, I would argue that science often creates internal conflicts because it cannot arrive at a satisfactory conclusion over a certain issue and because of this, the perceiver is left to make up his/her mind. The conclusion the perceiver draws from the information albeit right or wrong creates further argument that often denies ratiocination. It can be argued that the audience’s expectations are generally

based on previous experience, both with other films and of life itself. The basic assumption is that what we see and hear is connected in some way, to the real world. As many academics including Nichols, Renov and Winston suggest these represented events possess an historical foundation, something to indicate as actually happening or having happened.

Before the turn of the century, this point of view could have been accepted as a standard principle, but today, using this pigeonhole or stereotype formatting would be considered as inappropriate. The reason for this occurrence is that society has changed, as has the world of film and television and with these changes new styles of production and presentation have evolved; simply categorizing new productions using yesterday's philosophy is idiosyncratic.

Consider a program on sharks made twenty years ago compared with one made today, how does one differentiate between the two? As science often informs us sharks have been in existence for millions of years and their behavioral patterns have changed very little. The only notable difference would stem from technological advancement and the format of presentation as is the case with most of today's wildlife films depicting the animal kingdom. What was portrayed from a scientific standpoint has now been infiltrated by fauna interaction a 'hands-on' approach as can be witnessed in such programs as Animal Planet's *The Jeff Corwin Experience* (2003) and *O'Shea's Big Adventure* (2004). Thus, I would argue that there are two schools of thought here, one of purism and one of modernism.

THE SWORD OF PURISM

There exists much argument between the purists and modernists over the presentation of natural history films. The purists argue that flora and fauna should be depicted from a scientific viewpoint where the subject's behavior is demonstrated naturally because this approach lends itself to authenticity or reality. Whereas the modernists claim that the natural history film needs the assistance of realism in order to maintain entertainment value therefore, it would seem that a dilemma has been created because each faction is pulling in opposite directions. Arguably, the practice of purism, "Keeps strictly and often excessively to established or traditional usage."⁷ and the problems with purism are that it tends to confine the wildlife filmmaker within certain parameters. Therefore, "To capture something real and to present it in a way that it will allow it to look real."⁸ become much more difficult.

Many natural history filmmakers have tried to solve this problem by incorporating human presence into the film to add a sense of realism to the images but “The propagation of these images is all about us.”⁹ and not about the subject/s we are trying to portray. This approach then, “Presents a spectator with a world which is absolutely discontinuous with the real world.”¹⁰ and as this is the case with many of today’s wildlife films, the purists have valid argument.

But how can we incorporate realism into a wildlife film and still maintain a purist perspective? “One will arrive at different ways of letting the real declare itself.”¹¹ To explain this further the Natural History Unit of the BBC have been aware that this is a long-standing phenomenon. To solve the problem they have relied on the camera to inject realism into the film rather than rely on the exuberance of a presenter.

For example, in *The Blue Planet* (2001) series episode *The Open Ocean* part two we see a pod of Common dolphin *Delphinus delphis* chasing a bait ball of fish. On the surface, a huge flock of Cory’s Shearwaters *Calonectris diomedea* waits for the dolphin to drive the fish towards the surface. When the bait ball is in range of the Shearwater’s diving capabilities these aquatic birds dive from great heights into the water to join the dolphin feast. As the dolphin swim away, Yellowfin Tuna *Thunnus albacares* move in to take their place and the feeding frenzy continues. It is only when the tuna move off that the remains of the bait ball can dive to deeper depths to escape the marauding birds.

When we look at this scene, we note that the camera is placed at strategic points above and below the surface of the water to capture the realism produced by the participants. For example below the surface, the camera looks up from below the bait ball to give dimension and perspective revealing its immense size and to portray the hungry predators dolphin and Shearwater’s tearing into it. On the surface, the camera slightly elevated above the water captures images of the birds plummeting into the sea to attack their prey. At no time is there any indication of human presence although we know that someone must be there in order to record the images. Nevertheless, when these scenes are edited together, we see realism and drama at its height therefore, and in this instance, I am inclined to agree with the purist viewpoint. But the problem is capturing the real and presenting it so that it looks real and this comes with experience which by today’s portrayal of many wildlife films is sadly lacking.

Alfred Hitchcock once stated that, “In the documentary, the basic material has been created by god, whereas in the fiction film the director is god, he must create life.”¹² from

Hitchcock's statement one can clearly see that there is a remarkable difference between fact and fiction. Why then do wildlife filmmakers try to incorporate the two in the search for realism when it is not needed?

The problem with this approach as American novelist Tom Clancy pointed out when asked for his definition of fact and fiction; he mused that the difference between fiction and reality is that fiction has to make sense. This is true of many modernistic approaches to the natural history film because their content does not make sense, much of what we see is not realism but manipulated action. However, least we forget the wildlife film albeit from a purist or modernist perspective, is still an art form in that it depicts our natural world. But categorizing these art forms is difficult because individual taste is the deciding factor regardless of how these entities were perceived in the past and "The measure of this difference is rooted in film history."¹³

THE MACE OF MODERNISM

To give an example of this phenomenon, consider Discovery Channel's *The Snake Buster* series (2005). In this series presenter Bruce George, wanders the Australian countryside evicting serpents from the homes of citizens in which they have taken refuge. In an episode broadcast in February 2005, George explains to the audience his apprehension in handling two of Australia's most notorious snakes; suggesting impending dramatic tension.

The two snakes in question are the Inland Taipan *Oxyuranus microlepidotus* reputed to contain the world's most toxic venom and the mainland Tiger snake *Notechis Scutatus* said to be one of Australia's most aggressive reptiles. George visits a fellow snake wrangler who proceeds to instruct him in the handling of these reptiles. Using a nonchalant approach, the Inland Taipan shows little aggression when handled by the wrangler however; when the same approach is adopted with the Tiger snake, the wrangler is bitten and is subsequently rushed to hospital.

I would argue that this example contains little reference to natural history filmmaking due to the fact that, the emphasis is on the presenter and not the subjects they describe. Surely, the object of the natural history film is to portray a scientific and authentic aural/visual representation of flora and fauna. It is not as some believe a portrayal of hyped realism a concept that seems to be the most important criteria in wildlife filmmaking. Moreover, there exists much controversy over *The Snake Buster* series according to

herpetologist/zoologist Raymond Hoser [¶] George has little or no knowledge and experience in dealing with these reptiles. Hoser's argument has foundation because as you will recall George visited a fellow snake wrangler who; proceeded to instruct him in handling reptiles and was subsequently bitten due to amateurish approach. Surely, a bona fide herpetologist would not require 'handling instruction' unless it was to make a strategic point let alone from one whom like George, also lacked experience. In addition, many of the snakes featured on *The Snake Buster* programs were actually no danger to humans. "Footage in the programs includes inoffensive snakes being grabbed with potentially back-breaking metal tongs and other improper implements. Harmless snakes are effectively crash-tackled in headlocks and the images are distressing indeed."¹⁴

From this evidence, one is able to conclude that *The Snake Buster* films are a complete fabrication consisting of hyped realism and as Hoser points out. "The whole emphasis of the show is dangers posed by snakes, including by kinds that are clearly harmless or of little real risk."¹⁵ As for Prospero the Film Company, that made this series their sole aim was avarice and by jumping on the 'band-wagon' hoped to reap financial rewards offered by Foxtel, Optus and other carriers of films for the Discovery Channel. Further information concerning the legal battles surrounding George and Prospero can be found on the following website. <http://www.smuggled.com/medre164.htm>

However, George is not the only culprit. Further evidence of this can be witnessed in many of the Discovery channel's programs including; *Steve Irwin: Crocodile Hunter* (2003-), *O'Shea's Big Adventure* (2003-) and *The Jeff Corwin Experience* (2003-). But there will be those who disagree saying that programs today warrant a more realistic approach to natural history filming and thus the subjects contained therein need to be depicted in a new way. If this is the case then where does the concept of science fit in - if it fits in at all. As I have indicated our perception of what a natural history film is and what is not, boils down to what has already been established and through or by the tastes of the individual. Thus, defining or categorizing wildlife films is an extremely difficult process regardless of whether one takes a purist or modernist standpoint.

DECEPTION

[¶] Zoologist and herpetologist Raymond Hoser has authored nine books, including the definitive Australian Reptiles and Frogs (1989), Endangered Animals of Australia (1991), Smuggled: The Underground Trade in Australia's Wildlife (1993) and Smuggled-2 (1996).

The authentic illusion of what audiences think they are seeing is often questionable. Defining authenticity is not that easy to ascertain because much depends on the aural and/or visual content. Nevertheless, an individual's interpretation of truthfulness does not always coincide with another's. In Bruzzi's (New documentary A Critical Introduction) Chris Terrill gives this version of truth.

“Our stock in trade has to be honesty; not necessarily truth, whatever truth is – truth is a construct. We deal in perceptual truth, personal truth, not absolute truth. Who deals in absolute truth? Nobody does. It's continually an interpretation, a relating of events as we see them to our audience.”¹⁶

If this is the case then where is the dividing line between the two if we accept the fact that such a dividing line does exist. If it does not, then the difference between what is truth and what is fiction becomes much harder to define. However, this phenomenon is not a present day idiosyncrasy, *mise en scène* manipulation has been with us since the days of the Zoetrope. ¶ Arguably the founding fathers of this rhetoric were William Douglas Burden and Walt Disney.

THE BURDEN FACTOR

The natural history film wondrous in its content thrilled its spectators because the majority had never seen such creatures in the ‘flesh’ although they were portrayed through a celluloid medium. This observational footage considered adequate to satisfy the demands of the museums and other scientific institutions lacked the efficacy required by movie moguls to warrant major support. Although naturalists were adamant that any visual representations remain scientific, the need for financial input was a major problem that affected much of natural history filmmaking sector. Nevertheless, “Film could also accommodate the conventions of realism so central to the traditional representational practices of the museum diorama and to the study of nature in the wild.”¹⁷

¶ An optical toy invented by William Horner in 1834 but which lay undeveloped commercially until 1867 when it was patented in England by M. Bradley and in America by William F. Lincoln (it was from him that the device received its name).

Thus came the dilemma, a ‘Catch 22’ situation,¹ on one hand realism and financial assistance on the other scientific reality and isolation. If a filmmaker chose, the former then he/she was bound by the dictates of those who held the purse strings namely Hollywood. Because “Hollywood had decisively defined the terms in which the medium would be used, seen, and understood, and no one who partook of this technology could evade its influence.”¹⁸

One such filmmaker who eventually succumbed to the Hollywood ideology was William Douglas Burden with his film *Komodo Dragon* (1927). Burden having heard of a new species of giant lizard discovered in Indonesia realized that here was an opportunity not only to capture the creature for scientific evaluation, but also to gain financial reward through exhibitions. His expedition to film and capture the Komodo dragon *Varanus komodoensis* in 1926 was successful from both a scientific and financial point of view. The Bronx zoo was the fortunate recipient of Burden’s two live dragon specimens where attendance was said to have increased dramatically. Unfortunately, the dragons did not live long in captivity and any indication as to their wild ferocious behavior as witnessed in their natural habitat was not apparent.

Faced with this dilemma Burden whilst writing his article *The Quest for the Dragon of Komodo*, for the Natural History journal 1927 decided to edit his factual expeditionary notes in order to create an account of drama and tension. However, herpetologist Emmet Reid Dunn who had accompanied Burden on his expedition argued that Burden was misrepresenting the facts by telling a story of realism and not reality. The dispute between Burden and Dunn focussed itself on the ethical practices involved in the popularization of science and realist representation.

Burden’s original chronicle of events although gave an indication of reality in his eyes did not go far enough to awaken deep interest from a spectator point of view. Burden’s ideology of injecting realism into his accounts cast aside the scientific reality and as Dunn argued, Burden had crossed the line between fact and fiction. Nevertheless Burden was adamant, he needed to provide an experience for the spectator that exhibits in museum or zoological establishments alive or dead could never do. Returning to his expeditionary film Burden sifted through thousands of feet of film looking for events that would assist him in

¹ ‘Catch 22’ from the film of the same name (1970) An American pilot Capt. John Yossarian, (bombardier) played by Alan Arkin tries to be certified insane during World War II, so he can stop flying missions. His dilemma is that he must fly a number of missions in order to qualify for medical leave. As he nears the

creating his film of realism which, would give the audience the impression of actually being there.

However, Burden was faced with a problem because the scenes needed to enhance his film could not be staged or reenacted therefore, Burden had to discover “The elements of a story in latent form within the real.”¹⁹ which, is a practice that all natural history filmmakers attempt follow (although by today’s standards this is debatable). Although Burden had a vast amount of footage to work with it would seem that the critical images were not there. Thus, the finished film did not portray its subject (the Komodo dragons) from a natural history point of view rather of Burden as the ‘Great White Hunter’.

In an analysis of the film’s final scene, one is able to decipher Burden’s constructive methodological approach to editing that of constructive realism. The scene opens with an unidentified Indonesian porter bearing the heavy camera equipment entering the enclosure followed by Burden in true ‘White Hunter’ form carrying a firearm and Burden’s first wife Katherine White.

As Burden seals off the enclosure White begins filming. The scene then cuts to reveal a wild boar carcass center stage with a large dragon entering from screen left and a smaller dragon already present screen right. As the large dragon attempts to feed, the scene cuts to a close-up of the creature with the carcass within its jaws. A mid-shot portrays the feeding dragon, head raised in a protective mode. The action is enhanced by a reverse shot revealing the camera lens camouflaged in the enclosure and an interior shot of Burden filming and White holding the firearm. The action then returns to a close-up of the dragon feeding, which tells us that part of this sequence of footage derives from the previous scene. The scene then cuts to a mid-shot of White operating the camera whilst Burden firearm in hand fires and kills the dragon.

It is evident from the film’s final scene that the emphasis on realism was very much to the fore, and any reference to natural history had been discarded. Burden’s Komodo dragon film rejected the long drawn out observational footage in favor of drama in order to retain the audience’s attention span; who were led to believe that this was a true representation of the Komodo dragon’s natural behavior. The actual shots of the dragon, head raised and the carcass within its jaws gave a spectacular representation but these were very short in length and juxtaposed; they actually never occurred together. Nevertheless,

required total, the mission flight quota is increased; therefore, he never reaches the required amount. This is known as a ‘Catch 22’ situation.

through his constructive editing techniques, Burden was able to use raw footage of Komodo dragons in the wild and create for the audience. “ A scene of their life in their natural habitat, with Hollywood elements of entertainment and drama spliced in.”²⁰

WALT DISNEY

Walt Disney followed Burden’s rhetoric by releasing a variety of ‘sugar coated educational films’ from 1948 onwards. These films including *True-Life Adventures*, a natural history film series that included *Beaver Valley*, *The Living Desert*, *The Vanishing Prairie*, and *The African Lion* were not true scientific representations for example. Disney’s film *White Wilderness* (1958) featured a segment on lemmings, which detailed their strange desire to commit mass suicide.

According to an investigation undertaken in 1983, Brian Vallee a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation producer concluded that the lemming scenes were faked. In an article in the *Alaska Wildlife News* 2003 Riley Woodford states that, “The lemmings supposedly committing mass suicide by leaping into the ocean were actually thrown off a cliff by the Disney filmmakers.”²¹

Disney’s film *White Wilderness* was filmed in the province of Alberta, which is far removed from the Canadian coast and not the natural habitat of the lemming. Thus, to film the required sequences the Disney entourage purchased the required lemmings from Inuit children in the province of Manitoba. Due to careful camera angles and close-up shots, any indication of human intervention in lemming natural behavior was removed. In the final sequences, we see the lemmings scampering across the landscape in mass and as the film’s narrator Winston Hibbler explains.

“A kind of compulsion seizes each tiny rodent and, carried along by an unreasoning hysteria, each falls into step for a march that will take them to a strange destiny.”²²

According to Disney ideology, the lemmings’s destiny is to hurl themselves into the sea and as they reach the cliff edge (a riverbank). The closing shot portrays the sea awash with dying lemmings.

It can be argued that the wildlife representations as produced by Burden and Disney do little harm as they are just forms of entertainment; a window into the world of natural

history. If this were the case then I would not have much to complain about. - But, Burden and Disney's theatrical portrayals and those from others who have followed this rhetoric have clouded the differences between science and entertainment to the point of obscurity. For generations, scientists have battled to dispel the myths, legends and old wives tales concerning the planet's flora and fauna and this has resulted in heated disputes not only from an educational standpoint, but also from a scientific perspective.

REALITY

It would seem that today, our main forms of communication and entertainment are; film, television, radio, print and the world-wide-web (Internet) in that these mediums offer information relating to events past and present with predictions of the future. However, this delivery of information has become part of the McDonaldization syndrome with its 'fast food' delivery of sugar coated packages wrapped in the niceties of fiction that often cloud our judgement as to the perception of reality. "Determining the truth-value of information has become increasingly difficult in an age of increasing diversity."²³

The problem is ascertaining the difference according to Mark Twain. "Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't."²⁴ Twain's statement has good argument in attempting to keep fact and fiction apart however, as we are aware the line between the two is shrouded in a gray mist. Moreover, this line if such a line exists moves in accordance with each argument therefore, it is difficult to establish an accepted datum. But by arguing the case of authenticity/reality in the natural history film are we not in danger of creating a paradox.

Some will argue that manipulation of *mise en scène* is necessary to make a strategic point of view. "Natural history filmmakers inevitably and perfectly properly transform and certainly change in many ways the reality of what we try to show, we have no alternative if we are to make it into a film that is visible on television."²⁶ This is a valid argument nevertheless, the problem with natural history films is that the story line often demands more than both the aural and visual can accommodate. "With these pressures it becomes easy to see why program makers are, firstly, prepared to promise what they cannot be sure of filming and, secondly, to fake it when they fail."²⁵

Furthermore, we have come to accept that the need for the aural and visual to be more dynamic is mandatory. The problem is that flora/fauna does not behave as in this visual dynamic way unless of course provoked and provocation gives a false impression of the subjects behavior. However, there is a way to enhance the visual via technology, “Our techniques of filming animals have increased beyond measure in the last few decades.”²⁷

Lightweight electronic cameras the size of a man’s little fingernail can be used in numerous situations for example. In the BBC series *Animal Camera* (2004), two are attached to an eagle; this gives a new visual dimension to the film. A panoramic representation as the bird flies allowing the spectator to view the situation in much the same way as the eagle. In addition, we are able to attach similar equipment to the backs of marine subjects and follow their movements as they cruise through the ocean. Technology has come a long way and because of its robust lightweight configuration and availability, it has become an aid to the natural history filmmaker.

However, for some improvement in technology is not enough. Moreover, with the emphasis on dynamic realism, films such as *The Future is Really Wild* (2004)[¶] resort to digital technology to create visible evidence of animal species that have not yet emerged. In addition, this series is explicitly based on the premise that in five million years mankind will have ceased to exist. Which “Is a piece of evidence in the *futurum exactum* tense: something that will have happened in the future.”²⁸

How this evidence has been formulated remains unclear more to the point this supposition is only hypothetical, how is it possible to predict what is yet to come. One can hypothesize indefinitely, but it does not necessarily mean that an event or happening will occur. (Debatable) *The Future is Really Wild* series. “Marks a significant step in the recent development of natural history documentaries in that it reconfigures temporality in wildlife films in significant ways.”²⁹ Meaning, it can portray natural history from the past and in the future.

It can be agreed that natural history films have followed to two main modes of temporality. (a) These films are educational insomuch that not only are they records of conservation, but visual documentation of rare and threatened species who soon may be extinct. (b) They are scientific records of flora and fauna society available for future

[¶] A companion to the much acclaimed *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999). This television mini-series of three one-hour installments depicts the natural world in the future. This series, co-produced by the Discovery channel, BBC and Germany’s ARD uses digital imagery together with on-camera remarks from evolutionary experts to extrapolate future evolutionary developments from known geological and fossil records.

generations, that may not be fortunate enough to see the depicted species alive whether in captivity or in the wild.

In these two modes of temporality mankind is the observer and from this position, these modes of observation and configuration depend on natural time. However, *The Future is Really Wild* creates a paradox because from our position as privileged observers, how are we able to hypothesize what is yet to come if we are tied to this present time frame - or “The established forms of the natural history film?”³⁰ In truth we can not we can only speculate a possibility, which has no actual scientific evidence to support its hypothesis.

In *The Future is Really Wild* the continental landscapes have changed dramatically, the deserts have enlarged, the rain forests have shrunk and any evidence of mankind’s existence has been totally eradicated. Some of the creatures depicted in the series have a dinosaur appearance similar to those depicted in the opening scenes of Spielberg’s *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997). Other creatures include huge winged beasts flying vast distances in search of sustenance, giant arachnids weaving intricate webs over chasms and gorges. Fish of gargantuan proportions able to catch their prey by using some advance sonar technique, all of which make for acceptable entertainment but in reality, is mere fanciful supposition.

In addition, the sound effects assigned to these mythical creatures consist of electronic clicks squeaks and squawks probably based on the animals found in the Jurassic Park trilogies. Whether or not the predictions made in *The Future is Really Wild* will come into fruition is a matter for further debate. But in reality the outcome is immaterial because as the series states mankind will be extinct so who will witness and record the events.

Arguably, natural history filmmakers try to occupy a scientific approach aiming to represent those without a voice but this is “A noble but often delusional role.”³¹ Just as Burden and Disney incorporated the Hollywood touch in their films much of today’s natural history representations adopt the same approach.

But the wildlife film is predominantly scientific and science being what it is does not depict Hollywood fantasy thus, the problem for the filmmaker is how to portray wildlife from a dynamic point of view. “We are betwixt and between the past and future, the old and the new.”³² and our attempt to reveal flora and fauna subjects in reality, is dictated by both the media and society with the scientific perspective a poor contender.

Then what is the answer if there is one? Natural history films from the 1970s, 80s and 90s are constantly being broadcast not to as some would hope to sway the minds of the

‘tooth and claw’ brigade but to fill the gaps during a 24 hour broadcast period. It can also be argued that these wildlife presentations bring a little sanity into this world of hyped futuristic realism, but in reality, we can not turn back the clock. The progression of natural history film production can be likened to a heavy goods train that has started its long descent to the terminal. As it gathers momentum it increases its speed and without control driver/brakeman, it becomes a runaway and the problem for this train is that at the terminal the track runs out.

BEYOND THE BOUNDS OF MORALITY

Some may argue that nature appears to mirror culture but does it? The ideology that the natural world has progressed in parallel to a humanistic way of thinking is debatable. True our invasion into the world of flora and fauna has left its distinctive mark in that the subjects we film are relatively used to human presence, but I would argue that this is as far as it goes. However, there is a manifestation of a second nature, that which is gesticulated by the present entourage of filmmakers. Where, the subject/s actions are induced via provocation and/or the interaction between them and the presenter/actor.

Evidence of this can be witnessed in many wildlife films including; Animal Planet’s *O’Shea’s Big Adventure* series, Discovery’s *Steve Irwin: Crocodile Hunter* series and the BBC’s *Jungle* series with Charlotte Uhlenbroek. But can this form of rhetoric associate itself with natural history in the true sense of the word, some may lay claim that it does, it is wildlife portrayed from a new modernistic approach. Nevertheless, I fail to see the significance of a man (O’Shea) dressed as a ‘modern-day white hunter’ dragging sleeping reptiles from their nests and discarding them wantonly after a brief examination.

Irwin attired as the ‘all Australian hero’ leaping onto the backs of restrained crocodiles to deliver dialogue or Uhlenbroek decked in ‘sweat-drenched’ jungle combat gear consuming large insects. I would argue that this discourse has little connection to natural history, it is merely a subjective perspective garnished with innuendoes staged for the camera; a modern-day Burdenistic (Burden) ideology. Nevertheless, there is a market for this form of entertainment and in some quarters, presenters have taken this form of animal interaction beyond the bounds of morality for example.

Consider MTV’s *Wildboyz* (2005) a spin off from the American television series *Jackass*. In this present series a group of adults, pit their wits against those of the subjects

they deliberately provoke. In one particular episode, an antagonist entices a Burmese Rock Python *Python molurus bivittatus* into striking out biting his forearm resulting in bloody lacerations, which he subsequently covers in ink. In addition, another provocateur dresses in a makeshift suit of armor and irritates a group of Komodo Dragons *Varanus komodoensis* into an aggressive response.

From this, it would seem that for the present we are riding a roller coaster through the world of iniquity where natural history films and the technology required to produce them consist of dubious ways where. “The required cheating and choreography of the presenter and/or subjects has become second nature.”³³ According to specialist underwater cameraman Doug Allan, he believes that camerapeople have now taken over from naturalists as observers of animal behaviour.

These observers, “Cater to a lucrative market and current audience consumption of human - animal - plant co-dependent ‘new age’ narratives in ‘theme park beautiful’ environments.”³⁴ This ideology now puts the observers under tremendous pressure, in order to deliver what is/was promised, thus the use of technology mechanical and/or digital is incorporated. “To deliver good looks, get wildlife points of view, and simultaneously habituate themselves to animal surroundings.”³⁵

But with the media heavily saturated by an abundance of natural history films, filmmakers are forced to find new ways in which to satisfy the needs of the spectator. Thus, a third manifestation of a new nature concept is emerging, eager to infiltrate and stamp its authority into the production of natural history films; the malleability of the electronic image. In the fiction world, this has already been established with such films as the *Jurassic Park* trilogies and *Jaws*.

In natural history, this has been achieved with such representations as *Walking with Dinosaurs* and *The Future is Really Wild* but these have been unable to include the human presenter for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that through combining electronic images, the human presenter/actor will be depicted face to face with a ferocious animal that oddly enough refrains from eating him/her. Good evidence of this rhetoric can be found in the BBC’s *Sea Monsters* (2003). Where presenter Nigel Marvin takes a trip through the seven deadliest seas, risking life and limb when encountering some of the planets most voracious creatures including, huge sea scorpions *Arthropods* and giant Hainosaurus *Mosasaurus*.

SUMMARY

The story that the camera cannot lie is of course a fallacy. In reality, the camera is the biggest liar we have as it weaves its web of inimitable deceit. But the question remains how far will filmmakers go to satisfy the demands of spectator consumption? Will aural/visual authenticity be engulfed into the red mist of realistic fantasy, so that the ability to determine the real from the unreal becomes impossible? Is it because that in our McDonaldized cultural society we should accept what is offered because it is deemed a recognized standard? Is television is a shop window where its commodity intake is determined by its output; more to the point does the media control society or does society control the media.

In America it would appear that the former is in control, good evidence of this can be witnessed through the country's presentation of its many media forms. Moreover, the constant battles between rival television companies including ABC, Fox and Buena Vista are brought to a new height with each attempting to gerrymander their own ethos to a new level. One may argue that this phenomenon is a natural occurrence in the world of entertainment or indeed any business. Nevertheless, American television screens are constantly bombarded with hyped realism, a directive of television moguls whose sole aim is to dominate the market with this rhetoric. Moreover, the American public conditioned through this Alice-in-Wonderland perspective; accept this as a natural way of life.

In Europe, society has control of the media, if dissatisfied the people have the power through broadcasting commissions to force companies to maintain an entertainment directive that is generally acceptable. However, this perspective is changing due to the spate of American programs and broadcast networks see these as way not only to fill their television schedules, but as a way to save their financial resources. The problem in following this directive is that it often prohibits the production of homemade entertainment thus, that which is deemed as worthwhile in reality, has little chance of production.

Are we then in danger of losing our identity? Are we becoming part of a McDonaldized society where individualism is deemed as outdated ideology? Whatever conclusion the reader formulates from this argument, the most important criteria is that. "One day it will have to be officially admitted that what we have christened reality is an even greater illusion than the world of dreams."³⁶

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