

What's Wrong With Nature Films?

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From the Interspecies Newsletter



With the environmental agenda packed with issues of crisis management, who has time to give attention to a subject as abstruse as the aesthetics of the nature film? But it's important. The nature film could be inspiring the general public; ideally, reaching them before all those tough environmental issues ever reach the crisis stage.

Unfortunately, the genre has deteriorated into a dull stereotype, perhaps best symbolized by the redundant image of a field biologist lying close to the ground with binoculars hung around his or her neck. He or she is pointing off into the distance at some animal species while whispering into the microphone so as not to scare the beast away.

Every so often the audience is treated to a tantalizing glimpse of the animal in question flying or eating or otherwise engaged in some kinetic behavior. And all the while, a famous actor ostensibly transmits a sense of authority by reading a script that describes the sober facts concerning the particular human/nature cusp being depicted. Sound familiar?

If so, then why is it that so few nature films bother to present nature in the traditional sense, as a place of spirit or enchantment. Or why are there so few of them that describe the cusp between humans and nature in the deep ecological sense of being a primary source of communion? Instead we get experts doing the best they know how to present data in the most entertaining way they know how. Nevertheless, it's still data, and thus, nature is still treated as a bag full of numbers and facts. There's also a hidden message implied by the ubiquitous presence of so many experts. It is as if there are no children, no artists, no dreamers, no poets, and very few women or elders who have anything to teach the rest of us about the human relationship to nature.

Instead, year after year we watch a continuing parade of field biologists pointing and whispering and ultimately promoting the classic scientific schism between observer and observed favored by field biologists. This stereotype also demonstrates why so few films ever get made that depict nature as anything beside a vast wildlife laboratory presided over by stewarding scientists. And an entire generation of people has grown up believing that the fine art of comprehending nature is primarily a matter of astute observation and unwavering objectivity; and (need I say it again) a realm best left to the experts. The stereotype of the nature film is thus revealed as the public media face of the biologist.

Probably no person has mined the nuances of the format more deeply and more successfully than Jacques Cousteau. But though his underwater footage is consistently breath taking, a careful examination of any one of Cousteau's films leaves the viewer with far too much show-time devoted to featuring some new and exotic technology. We are seen vignette after vignette of his manly crew (always men) unloading, constructing, maintaining, and finally using that new gadget in the 1950's cause of "expanding the frontiers of our knowledge". It is a grand romantic vision of nature as adventure and laboratory, conceived and perpetrated by engineers serving biologists.

Marshall McLuhan told us that the medium is the message. That declaration implies that Cousteau's recurring technological imagery does not jibe very well with his very sincere environmental message of treading softly on the planet.

Times change, the images linger on. The times now demand that we create new visual symbolism describing new relationships that avoid stereotypically-masculine solutions based upon gadgetry and/or control. It no longer serves the Planet to continue promoting images that, either subtly or graphically, promote dominance over nature. Let us stop rehashing that essentially

voyeuristic image of outsiders peeking through binoculars. The old cliché simply magnifies the separation, while also accentuating mastery through technology. Likewise, let us all recognize that whispering is nothing if not a powerful metaphor for invisibility. And it's a lie. Look around you. Humans are not invisible anywhere else but in nature films.

Given the impasse, it seems we need to invent a new kind of nature film, a form of documentary that tinkers with the edges of allegory and myth; a film concept that takes full responsibility for the symbolism contained within the gestures and postures of all its protagonists. It brings up this question: what is a nature documentary? Or couched in a far more provocative manner: Does a documentary mean that we edit out our own skewed human perceptions and emotions whenever they stray from the story line called objectivity? Does such a method equal truth? Or for that matter, do other story lines also qualify as tellers of truth? In answer, I would turn inscrutable, and ask you to regard the film image of the cheetah. Just about every cheetah I have ever seen in a nature film is first shown outrunning an impala, and then five minutes later is shown getting tranquilized "to save it". Is that the only truth about cheetahs?

Then there are the eminently practical questions, such as this one: do we shoot for movie theatres or TV? It's a good question because it hints that any film maker who draws the distinction is already painfully aware of the crucial differences between the two.

Anyone who's ever seen a film in a movie theatre and then later watched the same film on TV, can attest that the depth of image is almost always the first casualty of the translation. This occurs because the medium of TV has a difficult time presenting more than one image at a time. Lamentably, the practical limitations of the smaller screen strongly imply that it may not even be possible to translate the true-to-life fractal image of nature onto a TV screen without also corrupting nature itself. It leads us right back to the earlier question about how we go about presenting truth to an audience.

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The re-enchantment of the nature film

There's another constraint of TV media, and unfortunately, it cuts quite a bit more deeply. Wendell Berry has commented that, "after 40 years, the evidence is everywhere that television, far from proving a great tool for education, is a tool of stupefaction and disintegration." In other words, the problem lies not only in the medium of the Television screen, but also in the very act of watching. Berry's pronouncement signifies that the viewing audience is rarely going to act upon anything they see on TV, because they are being tranquilized at the same time. Ironically, that also offers one possible explanation for the resounding success of Cousteau's heroic vision. He's been right all along to present his crew and his machines as heroes. Otherwise the audience would have fallen asleep long ago.

Any young film producer confronting either the fractal or the tranquilizer problem, might do well to take a long hard look at liberating his or her next nature film from its TV prison. Instead, shoot a new kind of feature film that's exciting and poignant enough to be shown in movie theatres.

Still more questions arise, this time pertaining to the mechanics of delivery. For example, When will some rap star go on location to improvise the narration to a nature film where the resident expert is some weathered old native woman who's been collecting herbs in that locale for years on end? Or for that matter, when will somebody take a chance and format the environmental issues of our day as a five minute music-video fit for MTV? One thing seems certain. Until that happens, there will remain a vast audience of young people totally disinterested and ignorant about the severity of the issues we face.

So many questions to pose, and yet so few prototypes. Actually, as I write this piece, three prototypes quickly come to mind. Intriguingly, only one of the three could, by any stretch of the imagination be called a nature film. They are: *Roger and Me*, *Koyaanisquatsi*, and *My Dinner with Andre*. If you haven't already seen any of them, then all I can say is that each one paves an

unconventional path towards the re-enchantment of the nature film. Not coincidentally, each is a feature documentary. Each one is both gripping and entertaining. Each one is a distinct nonconformist that bucks the form upon which it has been based.

They're all worth a look. For the first example, *Roger and Me* did more to connect to an audience with its curious blend of humor, staging, and actual documentary footage than any number of pious rust bowl documentaries. Why not take the same kind of sardonic chance with a nature film? Imagine utilizing that same brilliantly dogged interview style in the Arican Veldt? Reinvent the usually boring "expert" interview format by personalizing it. Find some articulate Namibian whistleblower to act as host. Let him go interview rhino poachers, rhino scientists, starving native people, South African militia, insurgent guerrillas, officials of the World bank, Hong Kong pharmacists, and the King of Kuwait showing off his collection of rhino-horn daggers.

Or for another example, imagine an entire series of nature travelogues based on the speeded up wizardry of *Koyaanisquatsi*. I for one, would love to see that same style employed to shoot a film about the year, 1991, set entirely in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Or remember the three grey whales stuck in the ice in Barrow? That was a golden opportunity lost. How much better the story might been told if any one of the networks had simply gone ahead and stuck a TV camera on a tripod to beam a half-hour, an hour, even a day's worth of events into our living rooms in real time? What would that film have told us about the souls of whales fighting for their lives in a situation imposed by nature, herself. What would it have told us about the human beings who traveled so far to save them? I know. I was one of them.

Or following the lead of *My Dinner with Andre*, how about an entire genre of nature films that show creative people—artists, children, musicians, poets, native people, and seekers—interacting and communing with animals as if they really were peers and teachers instead of merely subjects and specimen.

How about, for just one example, still another Arctic whale film entitled *Talking to Beluga?* And instead of the usual gang of whale scientists, why not ask a few creative artists up to the Arctic and then film them attempting to communicate with one of the most intelligent, fascinating, beautiful, and least known creatures on the planet. Invite a guitarist, a rap musician, a ceremonialist, a synchronized swimmer, an ice sculptor, a psychic, a chanting Tibetan Lama? How about a tap dancer on a metal raft. Or a neon artist. How about placing an ad in OMNI magazine... am I making sense yet? And be sure to let the whales, themselves, initiate the interaction. That way, there's nothing to scare away, no need for binoculars, no need to whisper. Hmmmm, I think I'll make this one.

Someone once said that war is too important to leave to the generals. Likewise, I somehow believe that nature is too important to leave to TV producers. On that note, creative film makers of the world, unite. Go forth and re-invent the nature film. We need a new vision of nature and we need it now.