

Derek Bousé: Oral History Transcription

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Derek Bousé

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Bob Prince

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1. Education and early history

Int: This is a recording made for ARKive in Bristol on the 12th October, the year 2000. I'm interviewing Derek Bousé is that how you pronounce it?

DB: Bousé

Int: And my name is Bob Prince. So, to start off with, just tell me a bit about your history and how you got to -and where you are at the moment?

DB: I grew up in, around Los Angeles. I wanted to study film. And found that I became more interested in film history and film theory at the time. And so I left Los Angeles, went to the University of Montana, kept on studying film but got an English degree. They had a very good English programme. And after a few years there, which were very important formative years, I went to New York City and studied film and then went down to Philadelphia to a place called the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and studied film and television, media studies basically, from a different perspective a more social science oriented view and more research oriented, empirical research I mean.

And undertook this book on wildlife films for, well I don't know for what reasons exactly, that's a difficult



question, but I came to it because my years in Montana had really given me a great deal of love for the outdoors, and in those days we watched – that was when the Marty Stouffer’s programme and the WNET programme Nature (1) first came to PBS – and we watched those programmes and thought, this is redundant, I mean we live here, we don’t need to watch it. What’s the point of all this? And then I got to New York City and suddenly I understood the point.

It was a vicarious experience that became very important to me and I watched those programmes faithfully because I had no access to that sort of outdoor experience through any other means, in the heart of Manhattan. And I went down to the Annenberg school and began to study documentary filmmaking and everyone there wanted to make a film about the homeless, and I said “well what about wildlife?” and people said, “you don’t make films about wildlife, those are animals”, and I, some lights begin to go on; I begin to see some problems with people’s attitude towards wildlife and natural history film. So I undertook to do an MA thesis on wildlife film, which I did. In the course of which I found that film historians and media scholars of all stripe had ignored wildlife films, basically.

They were paying attention to soap operas and political ads and commercial ads and music videos and comic books and all sorts of things, but not wildlife films. Couldn’t find really anything scholarly written about them at the time. And so did the thesis on minimal information but everyone kept telling me, well you know you’re kind of in this field alone so there’s an opportunity here. You should pursue it and write a book because no one else has done this. And I let about six years go by. I did a PhD thesis then on Environmental documentaries, closely related. Many of the people here at Wildscreen I think don’t really perceive a difference, and it’s the same people in some cases making both types of film. But I see them as quite separate. And then came back to this idea of doing a book on wildlife film. I thought there needed to be one, for this reason.

I persisted in thinking, in seeing that the genre was being overlooked. By all sorts of serious scholars, it was not getting the respectability, or I should say the respect that it deserved and if you look at some of the filmmakers working in this business, they’re superb filmmakers. And yet they’re not included in any film histories any film encyclopaedias, in any references of any kind. It’s as if they don’t exist and here it is a very popular genre on television getting very high ratings and with a growing audience, at least, until the year 2000 there’s some fear that that’s coming to a halt but it’s been growing steadily for quite a few years and it seems to be still ignored among critics and scholars and so forth. So I set out to write a thesis and later a book to kind of right this wrong.

And of course coming to all of these festivals, to learn about the industry and get information that I couldn’t get from outside and change my perspective so I’ve tried to write this book – Wildlife Films (2) – not as, not in the form that I think a great many other scholarly books take, and that is I think scholarly writers tend to take a position of superiority to the subject. Now of course some of that is inevitable so people are going to read my book and say “well he’s done that” but what I mean is the kind of superiority where it’s implied that you know I could do better, well I couldn’t. There’s no way, these are superb filmmakers I really believe that, wonderful filmmaking going on. That doesn’t exempt the genre from some kind of criticism. And I have in this book ventured some criticism as I said somewhere in the preface or something, in a spirit of good will and collegiality such as we’ve all had at these discussions. So I don’t quite know at this point sitting here now how it’s going to be taken in the industry. It wasn’t really written for people in the industry it’s really written to bring attention to what they do and to bring, as I say, scholarly respectability. Now that may not mean much to people in this industry, they may not care if scholars pay attention, but it’s important to me and I think that if we’re going to enter the 21st century as I guess we have, if we’re going to do that and bring wildlife film along in the realms of culture that are acknowledged as important and significant and so forth then we need to have more of this attention.

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2. How wildlife television has been overlooked

Int: Do you have any real reason to think why the genre was ignored by the critics; do you think there is an explanation?

DB: I don't think there's an explanation; I just think there are traces of various explanations. The documentary tradition has a very strong humanist bent to it. Here we are we're in the UK, if you go back in history here. John Grierson, the father of British documentary, at least of what is now called Griersonian documentary, stipulated that he saw documentary as serving a social purpose. He sometimes said that he planned to use film as a pulpit, or I think he might also have said somewhere as a hammer, basically a propaganda model, that is, to call attention to social problems, we might today say environmental problems but I think those are social problems as well. Call attention to them and propose solutions and then call people to action. I don't think that's what wildlife films do, that's a separate argument, and perhaps we can get to that. But, as I say there's this humanist bent to the documentary tradition, such that if it was about animals it wasn't considered to be a documentary. Now, we have science documentary of course, and again the lines between environmental and other forms of documentary, science documentary and wildlife film, the lines are always, you know, fairly fluid. But I think that's one reason.

Now this reason, I think is related to a long tradition in art and culture generally of considering certain content areas to be unworthy. I mean we know that in the Renaissance art was commissioned by the Church in many cases and by wealthy patrons and for someone to go out, this is before the birth of realism, for someone to go out and paint peasants collecting the crops, as in the gleaners, it was just considered an unworthy subject for legitimate art. You know we see that today, a lot of people say that well television is not real art, it's a popular form and so forth and those things are being argued. But I think wildlife film has been kind of over there in the realm of tabloids and comic books and things, popular culture considered a form of popular culture but not art and therefore not perhaps not worthy of serious scholarly attention, but as I say these other forms have been getting it, so I think it's time wildlife film got it. My purpose has been to stimulate a little interest in the hopes that this will happen.

Int: So how can someone looking at wildlife films, and we know there's lots of different types, how can they use the kind of tools you bring to bear in your book to understand the way that wildlife films work —?

DB: I originally approached the subject from the standpoint of visual communication, which is a kind of academic sub-discipline. Which means to look at how visual images work, if it's not too much of a cliché, to look at how they work on people, but from the standpoint of empirical research that is don't just propose that this is how viewers perceive things but let's do some research and find out how they, how they, really do, let's do some audience analysis, let's collect some survey data or something let's get something solid, let's bring some rigour to the discussion rather than just proposing a lot of theories that can't be tested. Now that's what I consider the shortcoming of film theory, is that virtually all the theories can't be tested, they don't lend themselves to empirical testing so we never know if they're true or not.

In the field of visual communication there's a greater emphasis on theory and methodology that is a bit more scientific. Where we really ask the question, you know, how do you know? What is your evidence? Can you prove that? Or at least can you verify it? So I begin to look at more, I hope more substantial criteria, I begin to look at things like research on, since there wasn't anything on wildlife film, I begin to look at research on viewers' perceptions of minority groups. And we have found in a great deal of research that's been done over the years, a good deal of it at the Annenberg School, where I was privileged to study. There's been a good deal of research on how audiences form their opinions about things, based on the amount of television that they watch, especially in certain content areas. Now, for example, I've done this to students many times, I've

asked them, in the United States where I was teaching, what is the population of senior citizens over 65 and most of the time students will say, oh, three, four, five percent. Well it's not, it's 13 percent and it's growing and the reason they perceive it that way is because of the way it's - that segment of the population is portrayed on television, because if you add up the population of prime time television, senior citizens are about three percent. And we find that the more television people watch, that is, the heavier their viewing, the more likely they are to give that answer; the television answer. Light viewers in contrast, tend not to see things in television terms. These tendencies are very clear over the last 30 years, the more television people watch the more they tend to see social reality in TV terms. Which is to say they tend to think there is a great deal of car chases and violent crime going on when in fact in the United States the rate of violent crime is down precipitously in the last few years. I haven't been to New York City, but I hear the streets are safer than they've ever been.

3. Derek's theories on wildlife filmmaking

Int: Let's move on into wildlife films.

DB: Now my point is, right now the only data that we have is from these other areas. So what I've tried to do is generalise a bit to the study of wildlife film, and I've tried to draw from these other areas of research, so that I have at least something substantial to make certain assertions on. For example, it's my contention that viewers who watch a great many kill scenes in wildlife films, might, in fact I'm quite sure they do, might tend to think that predators make kills very often, many times a day because when you watch them on television they always do, always. Now you might say that cheetahs, I think it's been said that cheetahs have one successful kill for every nine attempts and yet what we don't see on television are eight or nine failed attempts, those are cut out. So what the viewers get tends to be a bit of a skewed picture. Now this is understandable because television thrives on that sort of action content, you can't really spend an hour showing these constant failed attempts, viewers I assume might tire of that.

Many films do put them in, or many films will show one failed attempt and then say in the voice track, they actually fail eight or nine times before they make a successful kill. But we find in other research and here again research on political advertising for example that what viewers hear, as they say goes in one ear and out the other, and that in fact what they see they can very often remember after one exposure but what they hear often takes 2 or 3 or more exposures before they internalise it. So you see it's not enough to say on the voice-track this is the way it is, these lions actually sleep 20 hours a day, if you don't show that, than it's not really going to be internalised, but you can't show lions sleeping 20 hours a day in a wildlife film or you'd have a 52 minute film with lions lying around doing nothing for 45 minutes - that's not good television. Good television I don't think is an aesthetic measure; good television is basically a measure of the ability of a programme to garner ratings. To attract viewers. To generate ratings numbers and therefore to generate dollars and pounds ultimately, that's what really defines good television. So my point here is that some of the realities of nature such as lions lying around resting for 20 hours, 20 some hours a day is inconsistent with good television. Now, anyone from the industry would say "well that's why we don't show it, we're here to make art in a way; we're here to make captivating images".

And what I've been saying to people in this industry over the last couple of years is "you do a very good job of it, and I love your material, but let's not, let's not confuse that with reality, let's be very clear here that what we're showing is a fabrication, it's a concoction" but the problems is that viewers don't perceive that. And again I'm generalising from other research but there's a great deal of it. Not only in minorities but in violence and sexuality and in all these other content areas where there's been a great deal of research on how viewers make up their opinions about things, the voting patterns and everything else based on the patterns of what they see on television. Now in wildlife films the patterns are very clear because there are certain formulas that go into making a good wildlife programme. It's fairly predictable, I don't mean that every

programme is utterly predictable but I mean overall you can't really break with the familiar patterns or viewers have no context for it. It's like walking out of a film and saying "I'm not sure what that was" and I think when audiences do that filmmakers say well, you know, "I've failed". Viewers should have some context for it; it shouldn't be too different from what they've seen. It should be somewhat similar but not the same. And that's what every filmmaker in this industry is trying to do. I think is, is make something that grabs viewers because it's a little different, but doesn't leave them disoriented because it's so much different that they're not even sure what it was. But never-the-less, that means that we're still making use of formulas. It's essential.

Int: Where do we draw those formulas from – have you got any ideas about that?

DB: Well, I have argued, and again, I've tried to present good evidence for this in the book, [Wildlife Films (2)] that the safest formulas, well in television the safest formula is what worked yesterday because that's the most likely to work tomorrow. But if you really look at the formulas that really have been successful, they're not just something that's been invented from whole-cloth, in the 20th or now the 21st century. They are really drawn on, what I call traditional narratives, I'm searching for a generic term here, I think if you start saying myths and fables and tales and everything else I don't know, maybe viewers eyes glaze over because they think this has got nothing to do with what we're doing, we're not generating myths and tales. But if you look at the narrative structure of many wildlife films you do find you can kind of boil it down to something very traditional.

What I have pointed to in the book, in a chapter that I have called 'The Classic Model' is a variation on a kind of quest theme, a kind of an arcing – I guess I should say arching – narrative, with an arc to it. A quest that goes on, a variation on the rites of passage, there's usually some sort of journey motif woven into it. So I'll describe a kind of a case, it would be the story of a young animal, who leaves his or her pack or herd, and wanders out to experience life, undergoes trials, becomes an adult, and then either re-enters the community or meets a mate, which is to say re-entering the world of the society of that species, re-entering the community by becoming bonded with another one. Giving rise to its own offspring, creating its own offspring, and the cycle begins anew. Now, you say what's wrong with that, there's nothing wrong with that but it is a kind of formula that you see repeated over and over.

Now, I'll throw some titles out there, I suppose most recently you could point to Hugo van Lawick's *The Leopard Son* (3), a very good example. But unfortunately for some, who wish that this genre would be something different, it's really not much different from Disney's *The Lion King*, (4) the animated feature from 1994. If you look at the two narratives there, they're very similar.

But then I can give you many more titles. I'd like to point to an example by Allison Argo who is a valued acquaintance of mine. She did a very good job in bringing this classic model to a story about a little alligator and a little crocodile – it was parallel narratives going on. She gave them both names, Cleo and Ali, and you think well how could anyone become involved in the drama of these kind of unlovable reptiles? But because the film (5), for National Geographic, made use of this classic narrative, and because it makes use of certain formal devices, which I guess I'll discuss in a moment, it succeeds in creating a kind of emotional bond, even for someone jaded like, as I suppose we are. It creates an emotional bond between the viewer and the subject. And I found myself starting to worry, you know, what's going to happen to Cleo? And so you become involved in their lives and they go on this journey and try and find a new home.

Even Des Bartlett for whom I've got a great deal of affection, there's an interesting story. Des Bartlett made a film about Beavers in Jackson Hole (6) back in late 1960's early 1970's and when it finally came to television after Colin Willock had scripted it, it followed this model perfectly. And I guess Des accused Colin of writing a



Disneysque script, but Disneysqueness, is I guess a code that we've used for this classic model, you'll see it many times, there are variations on it of course but it's a traditional narrative. It's in our mythology, it's what Joseph Campbell describes and the three elements he describes there separation, initiation and return. And that's basically what it is, the animal is separated, undergoes initiation and returns. Northrop Frye in his study of romance narratives came to the same conclusion, the hero goes on a journey and returns in exaltation, and is exalted. It doesn't have to be that kind of triumph, but surely the happy ending and the reconstitution of the family, you know, she now has a pack of her own, that kind of thing, in a wolf narrative.

So at the narrative level I think wildlife films are very traditional and I think that's the basis of their appeal. We know this narrative is tested over centuries, it has worked in a number of stories and it's very easy to put people in those human roles, it doesn't mean you're humanising them, it's easy to put – I think I might have mis-spoken - it's easy to put animals in those human roles, not necessarily because you humanise them but through formal elements. That is to say through an editing structure borrowed from Hollywood. Shot, reverse shot, creating identification, I come back again to my earlier comments about research.

We have research in viewer identification, what creates viewers' emotional involvement with subjects. Now this research has been done on political debates, such as we're seeing now in this election season in the U.S. They've tested this very often, looking at how to create emotional involvement. Now, I've seen studies done on this often, but it works something like this. I think a lot of people think that creating identification with a character means subjective camera. So it means walking around kind of seeing the old shaky-cam as if you've got a camera mounted on someone's head. It's not just that. What creates the most intense emotional involvement with the character; in fact what creates a character, from an anonymous animal is the alternation of close-ups with subjective point of view shots.

There's an example, and I'll just describe it for a moment, that I use from Brian De Palmer's film *Dressed To Kill* (7) I've used it in a classroom, a woman is in the shower and there's a stalker outside, we have no context for that when I show it to classes, nobody knows who these people are, they don't care about them emotionally, but it's a textbook case. He starts with a long shot, and the woman looks frightened, we see it in her eyes, cut to a pair of feet, under the curtain or behind the door, cut back to her now, it's a little tighter shot, she's still looking frightened, cut back and you see someone's feet moving across the room, cut back to her now in close-up, now we're really tense, and this goes on and I cut the tape before the climactic scene and the students are almost in some cases shouting out loud, because it's so tense. And then if you take that technique, you don't have to create suspense, but if you take this cutting structure basically and then apply it in a kind of loose kind of fashion to animals, you can create emotional involvement. It is a technique that doesn't really depend on having a lovable subject, which is why Allison Argo and National Geographic could do it with an alligator and a crocodile.

So what I'm saying is, there is a certain repertoire of technical devices that filmmaker's use that can create a narrative out of just two simple shots and suddenly there's a drama, will something happen? You can do it in two shots. You can create a question in the viewers mind that has to be answered and then you proceed to another question and this is a kind of narrative structure.

Now, why is it significant to talk about form? Well, in the case of this industry, because the formal structure is borrowed from Hollywood and we hear a lot of talk at film festivals about wildlife documentaries, nature documentaries but if you go back as I said earlier and look at the documentary tradition, documentary proceeds by different codes. If you've got cross cutting in a documentary and you've got that kind of careful framing that smacks of set-ups that can discredit a documentary. That can make it look slick, as they say and destroy its credibility, its trustworthiness with audiences. In fact, what I have written in this book, and I think elsewhere, there's something called the Zapruder quotient that's considered essential in documentary.



Now Abraham Zapruder was the one who filmed the president John F. Kennedy in 1963 being shot at Dealey Plaza, it was an 8mm film, it's been blown up, and everyone in the western world has seen it. But it's really shaky and very rough and there's something so real about it, so authentic, well it is real. But there's something about that style, which documentary filmmakers have continued to employ as a guarantor of authenticity because if documentary filmmakers set up tripods very carefully, and you know, put marks on the floor, and direct their subjects and so forth, then it's really not a documentary. And so the Zapruder quotient, that is to say the degree to which, in a documentary you've got this roughness, is very often seen as a good thing, it's a guarantor of authenticity as I say. Now, let's look at wildlife films. If you have Zaprudaesque roughness in your wildlife films it's considered failure. I think part of it is that wildlife filmmakers operate under a certain status anxiety they have not been given their due, which I feel they should've been, and so I think a lot of them, I don't mean to psychoanalyse them, but I think at some level they feel a certain need to come up with really first class images, and they do, so they are not criticised for being amateurs, which I think for many years was a common criticism of wildlife filmmakers, "well they're just amateurs", now we who spend time in this industry know that they're consummate professionals but I think a lot of people out there regard them as amateurs and I think the beautiful images - brilliantly shot and edited - in some way act as a hedge against this charge of amateurism, but the problem as I see it is you've now got formal codes borrowed from Hollywood which are inconsistent with documentary. So if you're going to call these documentaries you'd better think twice, they're not included in documentary film festivals and they're not included in documentary histories and collections of essays about documentaries I don't think they should be. I think they should be elsewhere in separate books that acknowledge this genre as a genre, as a unique entity unto itself. Not as a second cousin to documentary not a poor relation to anything else, but something that operates by its own codes.

4. The presence of science in wildlife films

Int: So we've talked about the way in which effectively the aesthetics of television and film have affected the way the message is conveyed and the way that creates identification with the subjects and things like that. What about the people who talk to us and say well you know, wildlife films are about science and they're based solidly in fact and although we do some cutting like this we're really trying to get across a scientific message. How do you see that? You know, how does that - ?

DB: I think that may be true, you know, the keyword there is trying, I think they may be trying. But, in the United States where I lived for many years until recently, we really do have a low percentage of the public with college degrees, surprisingly low, shockingly low I'd say. You can't presume that the audience can make sense of a lot of complex scientific material. I mean I don't, I'm not a scientist, to some extent I needed a bit pre-digested for me, as well, when it comes to really dense scientific literature.

So filmmakers are correct in their assumption that it needs to be treated, the term nowadays is dumbed-down, but I suppose you can let it stand. They're right in that because nobody wants audiences to turn away. But that's again an economic motive, if audiences turn off the channel, if they go to the zapper and they change the channel, what's really happening there is the programme is going to get lower ratings which means lower revenue, that's what it's really, ultimately about. The thing you have to bear in mind is that virtually all the companies producing wildlife films are run for profit and there's no escaping the political economy of this. There's no pretending that this is all being done for the noble cause of art, I mean people are making a living here and stockholders are gaining a return on their investment, so in one sense everything is a kind of an economic decision. What has that got to do with the way that science is portrayed? Well it means that it has to go into these formulas that I mentioned earlier, in a way, because they are tried and true, they are proven successful. And if you've got stockholders, for example, saying, "don't take too many risks with our money" then what do you do? You look back and you say well what has worked? What is

working now? What model? Let's get more of that, until it stops working. And by then something else will have emerged. This year it's Survivor (8) – is that the right title? These, I don't know I'm kind of in a country where we don't get these things anymore.

A new model will have emerged and we can all emulate that one. But what I'm saying is, you have to eliminate a certain amount of economic risk and if you pepper your film too liberally with scientific facts and everything– it's widely thought in the industry here - that you will lose viewers. Now let me make the point perhaps a bit more simply, and, I can say it this way, if you go outside in any of these locations where you've seen wildlife films have being shot, the first thing that strikes you is that it's very quiet and there's not very much going on. And in a way, as I said in my example of sleeping lions, that is a certain bedrock reality of nature, it's an uneventful place, there's not a lot going on. But that's not true in wildlife films, there's something going on all the time. And so in one sense, right away you've got a certain distortion – maybe too strong a word – but a certain exaggeration of the pace at which life proceeds. Now because television and film generally rely on some of these formulas - narrative, primetime television (because these are programmes competing in primetime with other primetime entertainments) because they rely on these formulas it's very difficult to get scientific - good science to mesh perfectly with that. I'm not saying that can't be done. I've given in the book [Wildlife Films (2)] the example of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (9), in which science and storytelling come together quite nicely, and there have been many other cases. Silent Spring is now considered a piece of impeccably researched, science writing, but in its time it was roundly denounced in the scientific community and in industry for using emotional techniques, for putting storytelling, you know, for somehow wrapping science in story. Now of course that's what this industry does, and so I think you're right they are trying to present science wrapped in story telling.

Int: Can I take you back a bit, also outside the North American continent? One of the most successful wildlife films this century in Britain was Life on Earth (10), which was not designed to convey specifically an emotional message, although,

DB: and non-narrative.

Int: Yes, and non-narrative. Those things exist and Europe is littered with people who make films of that sort, have you got any comments to make about that?

DB: I tend to see films like that as being closer to what has been called TV science, television science documentary, than to wildlife film. Because in many cases the way those films are divided up is thematically rather than narratively. According to certain thematic issues, let's look at flight, let's look at locomotion, let's look at reproduction, ok, looking at issues that way. But I think what you're asking is how are, is there a failure to convey these adequately.

And I just came from seeing two hours of the Triumph of Life (11) the other day, in which they've taken on this difficult area of evolutionary biology, so let me talk about that for a moment not about the film but about the subject. What we often see and I think that it's true even of television science documentaries, what we often see is, in order to attract viewers, the use of individualisation, and I suppose if you wanted to say you could say personalisation, trying to personalise, individualise a very abstract concept by focussing on one animal as an illustration. Now that makes sense in a way because it's very difficult to go out and watch evolution taking place, fruit flies you can do it because the generations turn very quickly – but it's very difficult to see it, and I come from a country where many people don't accept that evolution has even occurred. So how do you do that? How do you put that into a film or television and communicate it to audiences. Well the traditional way is to individualise it focus on one animal or one pack or whatever.

And that's I suppose legitimate, although there has been debate over the years. Darwin [Charles] was kind of ambivalent on this, Julian Huxley was of the opinion that Darwin did mean that evolution took place among individuals, that you could see it at the individual level, and since then the discourse has gone on to inclusive fitness and it's become much more abstract. So how do you convey that in a film? Well by individualising, but here's where we get into a problem. You take a concept like, you take this catchphrase of Darwinism, survival of the fittest, which Darwin actually inherited from Spencer [Herbert] and then put it into a later volume of his work, and it wasn't his originally. Survival of the fittest, what does that really mean? I have argued in the book and I'm sure some will disagree with me, that it's probably best understood to mean the ability of a species to adapt to its environment over time. But that doesn't make very good television. Even in a science documentary that's kind of dull to say that, over time, how much time do we need to get here? So very often these concepts are illustrated through some kind of on-screen struggle. Between two males, for example, one wins the other loses and you very often hear it said, even in the most respectable of films, unfortunately I regret to say, you'll hear it say "well, there's an example of survival of the fittest", meaning one bull beat another and he was more fit to survive, but let's look at that, it doesn't really mean that at all because the losing bull might go off and win the next battle and pass on his genes. It does not mean that he will not reproduce, but clashing bulls fighting it out is good television. Now, you used the example of David Attenborough, and I don't want it to be thought here that I'm accusing David Attenborough of doing that; I'm not citing specific cases here.

DB: No, I was not talking about David Attenborough. I was using your example of Life on Earth (10) to get into a somewhat slightly related discussion of the general depiction of evolutionary biology in this genre. What I want to do is avoid pinning it down onto a certain film here, that's not my intention. What I'm really trying to do is point to a level of inconsistency between the demands of film and television and some of the realities of science. I attended a discussion the other day and someone said science is a process of asking questions, television is a process of giving answers. So right away you see that it is difficult to marry the two. I mean we have sessions at these festivals all the time in which we debate it.

If I can go back to your example of Life on Earth (10). What Life on Earth (10) did when it came to the US was really crack the market open. British natural history and wildlife films had penetrated the American market around 1968, 1969, 1970. But there was a kind of a lull and by 1980 there wasn't much wildlife content on American television. PBS ran Life on Earth (10) and suddenly they realised there was a niche there after all that hadn't been explored, and through the '80s we get a kind of a boom in a way of wildlife content on television. In 1985 Discovery goes on the air and as a commercial venue competing with PBS. So now there's a great of – there's an American market out there, bigger than it had ever been, hungry for content, production starts going up but there's more competition. And as we've discussed here off camera, the BBC is forced into competition around that time, they have to compete for ratings, everyone does.

The whole industry has become very competitive in the last 15 years since around 1985. Again, what we're really talking about here is the economics of the industry, it's rating driven, it's largely ratings driven. What I've also pointed to elsewhere is the emergence of a kind of international style in which if you're producing a wildlife film from India or somewhere, and you want to sell to the big markets and make money, it has to be in a style that they'll buy, that their viewers are comfortable with. So we get this kind of generic style. Now that doesn't mean generic storylines or anything. There doesn't mean there's just one. But that means that when you go to these wildlife films you're not seeing anything that's so different that, as I said earlier, you're not sure what to do with it. There is a kind of a genericism if you will, kind of creeping into the content I think because it is a global market. The distributors right now have to sell to a global market because the budgets are so huge now, they have to sell to the global market. These things have to travel across international boundaries, cultural boundaries. They have to travel well, have to export well. So they need in a way to conform to certain standards that are imposed on all films. So there is a kind of an international style. I don't want to push it too far, you can always find exceptions of course.

5. Educational value of wildlife films

Int: Often wildlife films have been vaunted as a medium for educating people. How effective do you think it will be in the current context?

DB: Educational?

Int: Yes. I mean all the early ones done in England said, like Secrets of Nature (12) was all stuff to do with teaching. They did things like, they had subsidised seats in cinemas for children to watch and things like that.

DB: When I was young, when I was growing up, we were shown the Disney films in the classroom because there wasn't anything else. They weren't bringing over whatever the BBC was producing at that time. We were shown the Disney films in the classroom and they were considered educational material. One of the reasons I went back into so much history in this book is because this is not new. This was going on before film. This was going on with written material much earlier.

Just as early wildlife films were taking off, around 1907, there was a big controversy in which written stories about animals, narrative adventures, were being used as educational materials. Excuse me, 1903, I think, I mis-spoke there. Theodore Roosevelt jumped into it. I mean people looking through my book [Wildlife Films (2)] will wonder why Theodore Roosevelt is in this book. But he was very vocal in saying that these are not good for educating children about natural history. They're stories and many of them are fabricated, they're not even well researched. It's an interesting bit of history but it has surprising parallels to what's going on today. I'm not saying these films aren't well researched. I'm saying that we've got a great many narrative adventures now that are seen as being educational, and indeed they may well be. Many of them are quite well researched. But there are some who feel that again narrative stories about animals and you can find many of them among this year's entries here at Wildscreen, may not be the best way to educate people about wildlife biology and natural history and so forth. But education, if you ask are these things educational, I think this is just the middle of something in a way broader.

You use the word 'effects' and this is kind of an ongoing argument in which I've been involved with several people. People say, well, my film educated people; it made them aware of something. Well, okay. I happen to have – I was fortunate enough to go to a graduate school where they did a lot of this research. It wasn't what I did but I certainly read a lot of it and I developed a different perspective about what it means for images to effect people. For one thing, we don't often retain them very long. I know that I have walked out of movies when I was young quite pumped up, as they say, emotionally but not the next day. A week later I might have forgotten it, you don't retain that very much. So retention is a problem. When you say my film educated people. Well, yes, if we give them a questionnaire immediately after the film they will seem very educated. But if you then give them a delayed test, give them the questionnaire a week later, you find that they don't remember much. Give it to them a month later and they may not remember the film title or anything. So that's a tricky business to say my film educated someone. If we say the genre educates people, in a way we have to ask the same questions and deal with the same doubts I think.

The big argument here is many people believe that their films are having an environmental or conservation effect. They're helping save nature. Well, again if you look at research on persuasion and influence and things, you find that it's not that easy, it's difficult. I'm glad I'm not trying to do it because it's very difficult to



use media to persuade people effectively. You can say, well, advertising works. Well, it does but advertising works through repetition. No ad is really meant to be seen on its own. Political ads are meant to be seen once and stir up a controversy; people wait for them to come out, that's something different. This is in the U.S. commercial advertisements are really meant to be seen so many times that you start to sing the little song in the back of your mind without knowing where you got it.

That's very different from one exposure. Your film is on Thursday night at eight and that's it. One exposure is not enough as I indicated earlier. People need a certain amount of repetition and you can say, well, but the genre is repetitive. We're on television two nights, three nights, four nights a week. Well, yes, but the films are very different and let me start with a kind of a difficult statement and then I'll untangle it. My response to people who think that there's an easy one-to-one relationship between exposure to a film and effect, and I'm not sure what effect is, I mean how we measure that or how we define it. Does that mean I went out and wrote a cheque to the Worldwide Fund for Nature? Does that mean I tried to block a shipment of hazardous waste? What does it mean? How do we measure effect? Does it just mean I felt good, I was emotionally moved?

People that see this very close relationship between film exposure and effect, and many of them do. I think what they need to look at, for example, is – viewers, for example, can be predisposed in different ways and it's very difficult to know what's going on in viewers' heads. So this kind of summarising statement I was going to give goes like this. Some media messages can affect some people, under some circumstances, some of the time, and I think my reading of media research over the years brings me to about that conclusion. Some images, can affect some people, under some circumstances, some of the time, and you might add in some ways.

But to say I've made this film and now watch out because nature's going to be saved. The problem with any kind of media designed to be persuasive in this way, advertising or documentary or anything else, is it doesn't work systematically, so you can't predict. So therefore you can't say if we put on 20 hours of this programming a week here's the result we expect to see, with an 80% probability. In fact, the probabilities are very low. Sure there really are some films that seem to have achieved a great deal of good. They generated hundreds of thousands of letters but I'm not sure if that's a good effect. I mean that's just a letter but whether or not that helps I don't know.

But we don't know what exactly it is that we can use from that film that will do it in the next film. There's no way to predict that their film did this and it helped save this nature preserve out here. So let's put that thing, that element, whatever it is, in our thing and we'll do it because if it were that easy we'd all be doing it and everything would be all right. It's like saying, look; I examined the ingredients in a best seller. I'm going to use those ingredients, I'll write that best seller and I'll retire early. It just doesn't work that way, it's very difficult.

The last thing I'll add here is there are many, many films made each year in this business and most of them don't have that effect. They greatly outnumber the few that do seem to have some effect. But as I said about predisposition, even the ones that do seem to have some effect, if you look at the audiences you find that these people were not suddenly converted. Conversion experiences like that don't happen in influential media, in the study of these things. This kind of religious conversion where someone just suddenly turns their life around, really almost always occurs because they were predisposed in some way.

So what I'm saying now is it wasn't even the message, it wasn't even the stimulus, it was in the person. There is something there and you may say, well, I was the trigger, I triggered it with my film. That may be true. Something else might have. But if you triggered that person it doesn't mean you triggered another person. What I'm saying is, is that this genre is just not a tool that you can wield very easily to get these great

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conservation effects we all wish we could have. It just doesn't lend itself to being easily manipulated that way. Because people – this is where social science research is so important. We're dealing with people and you can't presume rationality, it's very difficult.

Int: Right, okay. So moving on from there, then if the evidence for the educational value of wildlife films is fairly dubious.

DB: I don't want to say dubious, your word.

Int: No, my word, right, okay.

DB: I'm just recommending caution.

Int: Yes, and fine, that's great. But what I'm trying to say is science is also not best conveyed through this medium or it may be best conveyed but it's not always conveyed, probably very rarely properly conveyed.

DB: Well, let me say this, I am on record as having written that I think because of the way film and television work they are very effective science popularisers.

6. Relating wildlife films to human life and attitudes

Int: Okay, yes. Just wanted to move on to another thing. Do you think wildlife films are doing something else? I mean are they providing models from human behaviour? You talk about in your book about analogies to family life and things like that. Do you think they are commenting on human life?

DB: If I use the word **anthropomorphism** here people will say, oh, we don't do that anymore. It is still done, but let me put it this way. It's almost impossible not to project our own values onto any kind of media content we make, it's very difficult. Look, if you're a film maker and you grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and you were kind of ideologically indoctrinated or socialised or enculturated in a certain framework, it's very hard to set that aside and say that doesn't enter into my films however. Oh no, it just doesn't enter into it. It's very difficult to say that.

If you say, for example, well the values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and Western patriarchy and late capitalism, and all these things, have nothing to do with my films because I'm just making films about animals. So I don't have any of these things in there. What you're really saying is I grew up in a vacuum and I don't have a perspective, and I'm value free and value neutral and none of us are.

You find, for example, a great many marriage metaphors used in wildlife films, even in the highly respected David Attenborough films. Attenborough in *Paradise*(12) in particular which is not a part of a series, one of the mega, multi, huge series. It's a separate film, it's a standalone film. You find marriage metaphors used there. Okay, it's a term of convenience, it's just a metaphor. I argued in the book [Wildlife Films (2)] in one case it's simply not used appropriately but that's how we see the world. We tend to see the world that way and it's very difficult not to project those values.



If you even look back at Darwin [Charles], Darwin projected a certain model, even Marx [Karl] wrote this and Engels [Friedrich] after him. They both wrote that they felt Darwin had projected a model of human competition onto nature. There's a letter that Marx wrote to Engels in which he specifies this, I've even cited it in the book. I mean it's very difficult for anyone, even Darwin, to get around this and I do think there has been a certain amount of projection of our values onto nature. Why? Why is this happening? Well, not only because it's hard for us to escape but because audiences respond to it, and I'm not saying anyone's trying to deceive audiences and I'm not saying that they're being conned. But I'm saying this is part of the formula or this is part of the formulas plural, formulae that are used in wildlife films because audiences do respond to it. If you do talk about family and you do talk about family values and things, and you put it into that framework audiences understand that. Well, okay, I see. I see.

I remember one film about parrots, I wrote about it in the book. What they were really dealing with as extra parrot copulations which is a survival strategy that many bird species have. The narrator says, I happened to see it in the US with a different version I'm sure. The narrator says these birds have affairs on the side. Okay, a term of convenience but it has a moral dimension to it. In human society having affair has a very clear moral dimension to it, so the term is a loaded one. Now you can use it in a film like that, it has a certain nice ironic sound and we all say, well we know that he really doesn't mean it. Yes, we do but I don't know that every viewer does. I think these things have to be used with some caution. But it's very common because people understand it. If you go into terms like extra parrot copulation, I can just see some of my friends in the industry saying; their eyes are going to glaze over when you start using those terms. Can you use a simpler term? I mean we're told this all the time. Can you use a simpler term? Can you simplify it a bit? I don't mean dumb it down in this case but I mean use something to which they can relate, that makes sense to audiences. So there's a certain imperative there to put it in terms they can understand but we've seen what happens.

I do think there's a lot of this projection that goes on and now I'm starting here at this festival, Wildscreen 2000, I'm starting to hear it acknowledged. I know I had one producer acknowledge it to me in a letter, a very nice eloquent statement which I've cited in the book. I can't remember it verbatim but he said in my view our wildlife films are basically, they kind of re-enact certain social myths, and for the purpose of demonstrating social values. I'm not stating it as nicely as it was by the original. I thought that was a very candid, very honest statement. I didn't hear it much, this is about four years ago. I'm starting to hear it now and to get back to your question here's what I think is happening, and it's odd because when I was writing an MA thesis on this back in 1989, my adviser immediately picked up on this, a very trusted mentor I had who said the same thing. He said are these films really about people and I said, well, what do you mean? He says, well, I don't know, the stories you're uncovering here, these are human stories. Are these films about people using animals as kind of to displace human conflicts into a safe realm where they can be examined? In the Freudian sense, the word 'displacement' is appropriate here. I have argued in the book I think that's some of what does go on.

We've got a lot of difficult things in human society right now that we're trying to deal with. For example, sexual minorities, gay and lesbians in society, that is still an area of controversy. So we start to see, for example, just several years ago films about bonobos which of course have all sorts of sexual practices which, if practiced by humans, would be too shocking for audiences. But that subject area began to be explored, not just because it hadn't been done and not just because research was being published, new research, but because the atmosphere was right, the time was right. We could start exploring the topic of sexuality among animals and maybe learn something about ourselves. Maybe learn that, by God, homosexuality, or at least same sex relations is a more accurate term in this case, goes on in a number of other species. I don't think –





Some would say audiences weren't ready for it 10 years earlier. I like to think producers weren't ready to let audiences see it 10 years earlier, that's a slightly different statement. But certainly our interest in these subjects is what makes a film like that possible. It's what makes a producer take a chance on that and say, you know there may be an audience for this now. We're talking about these things in society. But some would argue that by exploring it in the case of bonobos what we're really trying to do is get it out there, get the broader subject out there so that we can get it into the human realm of discourse.

But I do think again, and I have argued in the book in a whole chapter, that a lot of our family models continue to be projected on animals. There are very explicit examples that I've given. But I think again I have said throughout this book, I don't see any of this, and I should have said this upfront, I don't see any of this as an attempt to deceive or really even to dumb down. I use the phrase 'the tyranny of formula'. I've talked about formulas here. The 'tyranny of formula' is a media studies term that means that there are certain pressures in the industry that force producers to use formulas, and it's very difficult not to use them because there's an expectation formed. They find themselves trapped in formulas. I don't see deception; I don't see attempts to fool. I see producers working within conventions that are imposed on them by a ratings driven industry. If you're going to work in this industry those are the rules by which you have to play and everyone accepts that. So there's certainly no –

I want to say once again that because this is a ratings driven industry it's very competitive, and that I have argued in the book and elsewhere this really explains a lot of the recourse to formula and the reliance on formula. So the last thing I want to do is give the impression that I see wildlife filmmakers as talking down to their audiences or trying to deceive them. Again, they're working in an industry that has certain rules, certain models, and those are the rules that everyone has to agree to play by if they're going to play in this arena.

I'll just tell you. I may sit here and try and bring attention to these things which I hope is not construed as criticism. But by trying to call attention to them it doesn't mean I'm exempt from them. When I'm out in the field filming I immediately fall back on these models. I immediately find myself saying we've got to shoot for editing; you've got to get that close-up. I have to pull back because I'm right back in the conventions that everyone else is in.

7. The future of the wildlife film industry

Your question to me though is, what about the future? and I have never been a very good prophet. So that's not what I'm going to try and do but I'd like just to say a couple of things about some trends that I see happening now. Right now, year 2000, we're on the cusp of HD, high definition, it seems to be happening. But something else is happening also as a result of digital technology such as we're using now. That is little cameras, like this one, are all over the place, everyone can get them, and because they can be upgraded successfully for a broadcast, it has meant in a sense that it opened the market up for small players.

There's one other thing that did this. The profusion of satellite and cable channels has created more demand for product, and there just isn't enough big, expensive blue chip to go around. So in the last five years, seven or eight years, we've seen a market for cheap product with fast turnaround, and people wonder what explains all of this presenter led, handheld, downmarket stuff. They're all worrying about the threats it poses to blue chip. It's because there is such a demand for product out there and not enough blue chip to fill it, and because it creates an opening for people with low budgets and inexpensive equipment but good ideas for fast paced product that can be generated very quickly with very fast turnarounds.

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So we get a lot of Animal Hospital (14) and Animal Rescue (15) and things, some of it using home video because it's not expensive to produce. In a way what we're seeing now with digital technology is two things. We're seeing the industry, in my view; we're seeing a sort of high end, very expensive, high definition programmes. But at the same time we're seeing this kind of democratisation; with people coming in saying have video cam will travel.

So what's going to happen now? Is the industry going to be bifurcated? Is there going to be hierarchy? I don't know and I don't want to predict but I do think if trends continue the way they are now, we may see something like this. We may see the HD market kind of consolidate, blue chip, high definition. And if that happens, the small players will be excluded because that's a very expensive thing, and if we look at the past 10 years we see that budgets are way up. It's so expensive to produce these films that it's excluding a lot of the small players which is why they fall back on the new formats. The new formats really aren't new. They're television formats that have been left behind for forty years in which we've seen blue chip films which are basically movies. Now we're seeing televisual formats, if you will. In other words, they exploit the unique properties of television, whereas a blue chip film is basically a cinematic movie put on a small screen. It's cut to movie codes and conventions.

Now we're getting this kind of handheld, presenter led stuff which is television in its purest form in a way, it's not movies. So these things that people say are new are really not new. If you look back at what the BBC was doing 1954 and 1955, I'd say it's returned to that tradition. In a way it's a revolution because to revolve means to turn back. Revolution doesn't always mean forward. It very often in history has meant bringing something back.

So right now I think that's where we are at, at a junction and I don't know what's going to happen. But I do see a high end market with high definition and big budgets, that's happening. They're getting – in that end it is so expensive they're trying to bring shooting ratios down, and that raises some questions too because if you're trying to film spontaneous nature, and you're trying to shoot it on a 10 to 1 ratio instead of 25 to 1, then you've got impose controls. You've got to bring, as one producer said two years ago here at Wildscreen, you've got to bring some discipline to your shooting. Well, I interpret that to mean more staging, more setting up, because you can't leave things to chance when you've got huge budgets and you're paying people and their time is very expensive, and you've got a crew.

The old model was go out there and just burn film and something will happen and we'll have it. Film was cheap and some ratios were at 50 to 1. Now with video that can be done again but it's considered downmarket. It's considered a threat in a way by some in the industry to this kind of edifice of fine gloss, glossy productions. So I don't know what's going to happen but I certainly see digital technology as having created a kind of a schism. It'll be interesting to see how it resolves and the image I used in the book [Wildlife Films (2)] was right now we've got a kind of a high wall which represents the industry. There's a lot of young outsiders with digital camera in hand and they're banging on the door saying let us in, we want to play too. And unfortunately it seems that not very many are being let in. A survey done by Doug Allan a couple of years ago indicated about one new camera person was being let in per year. That's not much.

The other thing to bear in mind is we're now, in the year 2000, kind of looking at possibly a large wave of retirements. The people who've dominated the industry for the last 30 or 40 years are all of a certain age, if you will, and there's going to be a turnover. If you look back at film mainstream, feature film history, what happened when the earlier generations finally stepped aside, what did Hollywood do when it hit this point in its history? Film schools, and since 1970 we've seen the leading film makers come out of film schools. That may have to happen here if we're going to keep this industry healthy and vibrant, or who knows, it might just be absorbed into mainstream entertainments even more than it is now. But there are natural history film production schools starting to emerge and I think this is a good trend. I don't think it means making academic

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films but I certainly think it means maintaining quality or perhaps improving it. But beyond that, who knows?

END

Glossary

Anthropomorphic: To attribute human form or feelings to a non-human species or object.

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