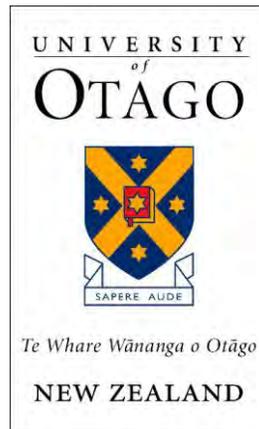


**University of Otago**



**Reframing perceptions of anthropomorphism  
in wildlife film and documentary**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science Communication

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December 2010



## **Abstract**

The influence of anthropomorphism in wildlife film and documentary is often misconstrued and underestimated. Critics of anthropomorphic techniques simplify them as pandering to an audience's cultural ideologies and expectations. Anthropomorphism, including personification, characterisation and narrative structure, are nevertheless inseparable from the wildlife filmmaking process. Inherently subjective, nature on screen is depicted as per the production and post-production choices of the wildlife filmmaker. Furthermore, film, as a medium for entertainment, has ensured that representations of animals reflect those that are popular and will provide entertaining viewing for a particular audience. This anthropomorphism has great importance and potential influence in increasing audience numbers and has the potential to inspire conservation action through greater awareness and science communication. Understandings of anthropomorphism need to move away from criticism of its validity as a filmmaking technique and be reframed towards its potential to inspire audiences.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Carla Braun-Elwert, my partner-in-crime in making our documentary *Love in Cold Blood*, for her patience, empathy and skills as a filmmaker.

Thanks to Sue Harvey for her administrative wonders.

Thanks to my supervisor Ross Johnston for his filmmaking advice and feedback, and his excellent guidance on this thesis.

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Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilisation surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion.

Henry Beston, *The Outermost House*

## INTRODUCTION

*‘We cannot remember too often that when we observe nature, and especially the ordering of nature, it is always our selves alone that we are observing.’*

- G.C Lichtenburg

### 1.1) Anthropomorphic Instincts

Humans have an inherent tendency to understand the world in light of our own experiences. This leads naturally to anthropomorphism- ascribing human attributes to non-human objects. Animism and personification are culturally naturalised and instinctive behaviours, evident from a young age (Blanchard 1982, Boyer 1996, Sullivan 2006). As Ellen (1988) states, ‘we are bound to model our world directly on those experiences which are most immediate, and these are experiences of our own body.’ We use anthropomorphism to bring non-human objects and experiences into our realm of understanding.

Anthropomorphism can take many forms, from our use of metaphoric language (clouds ‘racing’ by or plants ‘thirsty’ for water) to seeing human faces in inanimate objects like the prosaic ‘man in the moon’ (Blanchard 1982). Instinctive anthropomorphism is perhaps most apparent in our depiction of animals. From the beginnings of human civilisation we have shown a desire to capture the natural world and our relation to it in illustrations, stories and belief systems. The cave walls of Lascaux in France reveal that even the earliest known modern humans painted bison, deer and other important prey species. As culture developed our representation of animal life became more complex; the myths and religions of many ancient cultures feature animal-human creatures. The ancient Egyptian’s hieroglyphics depict animals as gods; in Aesop’s fables the ancient Greeks humanised animal behaviour creating moral lessons and guidelines (Hambly 1954, Howe 1995). Anthropomorphism has been used to assist us in understanding our place in the natural world and our relationship to the animal life contained within it for as long as we have had the ability to conceive of such an association. Anthropomorphic constructs are therefore evident in most representations of animals in human culture- from literature and art to film and documentary.

## **1.2) Animals on Screen**

Given our anthropomorphic tendencies it is perhaps no surprise that animals have been central ‘characters’ in film since its inception. One of the first moving image devices, a zoopraxiscope, was designed with the purpose of determining how a horse galloped. The fast-motion series of still photographs entitled *Sallie Gardner at a Gallop*, produced in 1878 by Eadweard Muybridge, led to the development of modern motion pictures. From this original scientific intent, the popularity of documenting animal lives on screen has been constant (Mitman 1999, Horak 2006). Our appetite and fascination for filmed nature has continued to the present day, from the safari adventure films of the 1900s, to Walt Disney’s animal stars, to the BBC Natural History Unit’s large-scale blue-chip documentaries, to the current televised animal docu-dramas.

When we place animals on film we remove them from their natural context and place them within a human construct. Characterisation and personification, emotive music and the imposition of a narrative structure all place human-like motivations and emotions on animals (King 1996, Porter 2006, Mitman 1999). *How* we anthropomorphise animals on screen may reveal more about the filmmakers’ choices and cultural background than the reality of the natural world and animal biology (Porter 2006, Mitman 1999).

## **1.3) Film and Thesis Link - Anthropomorphism in theory and practice**

The film we made as the creative component of this thesis is part of the historical development of anthropomorphism in wildlife film. *Love in Cold Blood* (two DVD copies included) is a 25-minute documentary co-produced with fellow Masters student, Carla Braun-Elwert. The film aims to highlight the success of tuatara conservation in New Zealand.

*Love in Cold Blood* is structured around a number of significant events in the lives of Henry and Mildred, resident tuatara at the Southland Museum and Gallery in Invercargill, New Zealand. Their keeper and museum curator, Lindsay Hazley, relates the tale of their courtship and successful captive breeding through a series of humorous and anthropomorphised anecdotes.

The film also investigates tuatara as a threatened species, showing how they were brought back from the brink of extinction through careful conservation and captive breeding. Henry and Mildred's anthropomorphised courtship, as entertaining as it may be, is revealed to be an important part of the tuatara rescue program.

Throughout the year long filmmaking process developing a story about tuatara conservation that was both visually interesting and informative proved challenging (Appendix 1). We wanted audiences to connect with a species that is commonly considered static and dull. Therefore, we chose to weave Henry and Mildred's anthropomorphic, amorous misadventures into the story of tuatara conservation. We hoped to encourage viewers to identify with the on-again off-again love story of Henry and Mildred so that through their story they would better understand the plight of the tuatara species.

The film premiered at Dunedin's Regent Theatre in November 2009, and given the very positive audience response, laughter and loud applause, we concluded that our strategy had been exceptionally successful. That conclusion was further supported by the fact that the film went on to win two awards at the Aotearoa Reel Earth Environmental Film Festival in May 2010 (Appendix 2) and was nominated for a Newcomers Award at the International Wildscreen Film Festival 2010, suggesting that the anthropomorphic characters in the film had successfully delivered our broader underlying conservation message.

On the basis of our filmmaking experience and an analysis of the relevant literature and filmography, this thesis will explore and review the common assumptions and criticisms surrounding the use of anthropomorphism in wildlife film. This investigation aims to evaluate the two assumptions made during the filmmaking process for *Love in Cold Blood*:

1. That anthropomorphism can be a powerful and useful tool in influencing an audience's response and that
2. That anthropomorphism has the potential to enhance environmental awareness.

#### 1.4) Rationale

In wildlife film and documentary there has always been a tension between two objectives– the desire to deliver scientific information to an audience and the desire to entertain an audience. The use of anthropomorphic techniques has frequently been criticised as an easy means of increasing profits and ratings through sentimentalism and sensationalism (Mitman 1993, Bouse 1998, Mitman 1999, King 1996, Bouse 2000, Pierson 2005, Porter 2006). This is particularly apparent in the constant criticism of ‘ratings-driven’ or ‘pie-slice’ syndicated factual programming broadcast on cable television (Bouse 1998, Bouse 2000, Pierson 2005, Kilborn 2006). Popular animal programming like *Meerkat Manor* and *Orangutan Island* often centre around highly anthropomorphised constructs and are criticised as factual ‘entertainment’ and for lacking scientific or educational value.

Very little research has looked beyond anthropomorphisms' supposed lack of ‘scientific value’. This thesis seeks to reframe perceptions of anthropomorphism and investigate *why* and *how* we anthropomorphise animals on film. It seeks to understand anthropomorphism’s potential to create connectivity between audiences and the animals on screen and its potential to change the public’s environmental values.

#### 1.5) Outline

The constructs of anthropomorphism within nature documentary and its possible influences on environmental conservation will be discussed.

I will argue that anthropomorphism is essential if humans are to understand wildlife in documentary and film – these representations becoming an extension of our own social and cultural understandings. I also seek to examine this paradox, for while anthropomorphism can distance us from the realities of wildlife it appears it can also allow nature to become an integral part of our worldview. I will suggest that it is this anthropomorphically created empathy that may have influenced the growth and support of wildlife conservation.

I will explore:

- The history of wildlife documentary and film and the dichotomy that developed between programmes that sought to primarily inform and those that sought to primarily entertain.
- Anthropomorphism as a means of placing animals into an understandable human cultural and social context.
- The criticism of and support for anthropomorphism in various case studies of popular wildlife film.
- The potential power of anthropomorphism to encourage wildlife conservation.

## CHAPTER 2) DOCUMENTING NATURE: THE SUBJECTIVITY OF FILM

*'A film about a jungle where nothing happens is not really what you turned the television set on to see'*

- David Attenborough

### 2.1) Wilderness on film: Reality versus Entertainment

Our anthropomorphic tendencies indicate that depictions of wildlife in film and documentary cannot represent the reality of nature and indeed, it is difficult to find evidence that they ever have. The 'Wilderness' is arguably a human construct, a concept of nature that is a product of a civilisation's particular cultural values (Cronan 1995, King 1996, Mitman 1999, Bousé 2000, Horak 2006). With the onset of industrialisation, many of our immediate connections with animals were lost. The majority of humans no longer directly interact with animals through traditional hunting or subsistence farming and agriculture (Cronan 1995, Porter 2006). Once 'tamed', nature became a nostalgic world representing the "antidote to our human selves" (Cronan 1995). Never is this more apparent than in wildlife film. Through the camera lens 'real' nature is translated into 'reel' nature, a palatable excerpt of wild life based on the social and cultural beliefs of the time (Mitman 1999, Bousé 2000, Pierson 2005).

Wildlife documentary has often been seen as a bridge between film and science (Apple and Apple 1993, King 1996, Bousé 2000) and as such has caused controversy because of the way the science has been manipulated for popular entertainment. This development is evident even in the first widely distributed wildlife documentary, Theodore Roosevelt's filmed safari expedition, *Roosevelt in Africa* produced in the early 1900's. The film, despite its much-lauded educational and moral value, was a disappointment to audiences because it lacked drama and excitement (Mitman 1995). John Burroughs highlighted the emerging problems of balancing fact and fiction in his 1903 *Atlantic Monthly* article about 'nature faking', where he accused nature writers of heightening moments of drama to make nature seem more exciting (Hedgpeth 1993). Wildlife filmmakers, however, found that audiences craved drama over authenticity. To engage viewers and be a commercial commodity, nature had to be made into melodrama (Mitman 1999, Bousé 2000).

The tension between authenticity and entertainment is particularly relevant when considering the current renaissance in factual and wildlife programming on cable television (Bouse 1998). This conflict is illustrated by Bousé (2000), who uses an apt example from the production of the BBC's *The Trials of Life*. The American promotional trailer for the series for cable television broadcast was cut into an action-filled aggressive sequence to satisfy a US audience habituated to high-tempo entertainment, but was criticised by the BBC for misrepresenting the story they had originally filmed. The 'pie-slice', ratings-driven market means broadcasters are competing for advertisers and viewers, to meet a bottom line that is often accused of having little room for anything other than viewer engagement and entertainment (Bouse 1998, Pierson 2005, Kilborn 2006).

## 2.2) Is wildlife film documentary?

In order to investigate criticisms of entertainment-driven wildlife film and documentary, it is important to determine whether they should be judged as part of a factual or entertainment genre. Within the industry, filmmakers, broadcasters and publicists often use 'documentary' to describe wildlife film. The term 'documentary' is so seamlessly attached to the genre that few critical theorists have questioned the association. However, under further scrutiny, particularly by Bousé (1998) it appears that definitions of documentary apply only in part to wildlife film or wildlife filmmaking techniques.

Bousé (2000) argues that film and television are unsuitable media to represent the 'real' nature that occurs in real time and space. Dramatic occurrences in nature are few and far between, and yet any action-packed wildlife documentary would have us believe otherwise – nature has been made to fit to the dramatic story conventions of film and television. If there were a documentary made about the biology of lions for example, a biologically accurate, objective representation would show hours of a pride of lions sleeping under a tree, which would not make entertaining television for the majority of viewers. Moments of drama, such as predations and mating, are frequently used to enliven these programmes (Bousé 1999, 2000 Porter 2006).

Their subjects and stories may be based on reality, but Bousé (1998) argues it is the very act of filming *animals* that undermines the objectivity of wildlife films. Unlike the human subjects of a documentary, animals on screen cannot contribute any explanation

of their filmed behaviour or biology. As a result there is a greater need to interpret and contextualise their behaviour into the narrative and character-based structure of film. Given such filmmaker's editorial control and subjectivity, it is important to redefine wildlife film away from the expectations associated with the documentary genre.

This conclusion was also confirmed during our own filming for *Love in Cold Blood*, as the methodology we followed was also more fitting to a film rather than to the documentary genre. In early 2009 we traveled to Nga Manu Reserve in Waikanae, New Zealand, to film captive tuatara, having already storyboarded and scripted the narrative we wanted. Throughout the filming period we waited for long periods to film the 'natural' behaviour we had scripted. Time constraints meant that we did create some behaviour- placing the captive tuatara where we wanted them in shot (Figure 1.1), or deliberately feeding them insects to obtain predation sequences. Carla and I did not consider this invasive or unethical- the captive tuatara were normally fed live insects and were often available for public interaction and handling. However, as Bousé (1998) suggests, it does cause complications when defining our film as documentary. Natural behaviour was contextualised as re-enactments. Therefore I believe our film, along with other so-called documentaries, should be re-defined as a 'wildlife drama', whereby anthropomorphism can be considered a legitimate and necessary characterisation technique.



**Figure 1.1)** Staging weta predation; filming captive tuatara for *Love in Cold Blood* at Nga Manu Reserve, Waikanae. (Photo by Jane Adcroft).

### 2.3) The Nature Fakers

Wildlife films cannot be considered true documentary, yet are often presented as such. Audiences expect or assume they are viewing reality. When the ‘truth’ of the filmmaking process is discovered, public outcry and criticism has been harsh. The *Wild America* (1996) series came under fierce scrutiny after it was revealed that captive animals had been falsely represented as ‘wild’. The popularity of the series was such that the legitimacy of the entire wildlife film genre came into question and the series’ high-profile producer, Marty Stouffer, was deemed a ‘nature faker’ (Bouse 1998; Mitman 1999). A similar, more recent criticism came with the much-lauded ITV series *Survival* (1998), when it was revealed the filmmakers had also been using captive animals to simulate scenes supposedly shot in the wild (Hellen 1998). As indicated earlier when discussing *Love in Cold Blood* (Chapter 2.2) we also contextualised captive tuatara predation of a weta as ‘wild’ behaviour. Industry representatives and producers of both the *Wild America* and *Survival* series defended their actions, a spokesperson for the *Survival* series saying, “The behaviour being shown is authentic, as it would occur in the wild, and could not feasibly be obtained in any other way” (in Hellen 1998).

This paradox calls into question the responsibility of wildlife filmmakers to accurately represent nature for a reality-assuming audience. It is important to remember, however, that because wildlife films are made for an audience, they are subject to the demands of an audience seeking entertainment and drama. Wildlife filmmakers have a responsibility to entertain, unless they are presenting themselves as purely an educational source. As the producer of *Survival* indicated, misrepresentation of animals and nature is unavoidable, as illustrated earlier with the reference to lion behaviour. Audience criticisms of nature ‘fakery’ are only valid when wildlife film is presented as documentary.

## CHAPTER 3) ANTHROPOMORPHISM: AN ACHILLES HEEL?

*'With names, the chimpanzees made their way into people's hearts.'*

-Jane Goodall

### 3.1) Anthropomorphic Constructs

As discussed in Chapter 2.2, subjectivity is inherent in wildlife film, as it is with anything that is filmed, depicted or documented (Bouse 1998, Ward 2005). As such, anthropomorphism, when defined as humanising non-human objects, is a natural by-product of the filmmaking process – the camera lens is also a ‘human-lens’. As Elliot (2001) concludes, films, as with other forms of artistic creation, are produced ‘... by humans for humans, by cultural groups for cultural groups’.

Despite this axiom, anthropomorphism is often considered an un-scientific, sentimental method of representation- an unnecessary technique to be avoided by ‘serious’ natural history filmmakers (Mitman 1999, Elliot 2001, Horak 2006, Porter 2006). Trusted and respected BBC wildlife presenter David Attenborough suggested a dislike of deliberate anthropomorphism in the introduction to *Wildlife through the Camera* (The British Broadcasting Corporation 1982), published in celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BBC Natural History Unit. He claims the aim of the series *Wildlife on One* was ‘... not to concentrate on furry, cuddly creatures even if these do have an obvious and immediate appeal, but to look into all parts of the animal kingdom.’

However, one must not forget that film and television is made for an audience. In order to allow viewers to empathise with the dramas of wildlife, it is helpful if it is associated with recognisable and identifiable behaviour – our own (King 1996, Pierson 2005, Bousé 2000, Porter 2006). The photographer Jack Couffer wrote ‘Since no one *knows* what an animal thinks, what an animal does must be interpreted – put into human terms – for us to understand’ (in Mitman 1999). Easily identifiable characters are often represented as an extension of our perception and understanding of human behaviour. There are the ‘good guys’ fighting the ‘bad guys’, the happy families, aggressive males, and maternal females, all of which reinforce conceptions of class and gender that exist in the dominant human culture (King 1996, Pierson 2005).

This personification of animals has become a widely used technique in wildlife film—attributing personalities and names to non-human wildlife. Respected primatologist Jane Goodall acknowledges the advantages of using names in particular; when discussing her films about chimpanzees she states; I don't think people would have been as interested if David Graybeard had been number 29... With names, the chimpanzees made their way into people's hearts.' Goodall accepts that the chimpanzees needed to become named characters' in a story before audiences were able to sympathise with their plight.

While makers of blue-chip' natural history film may assume to have greater scientific purity, this claim is undermined by their use of music and sound. Attenborough's *The Private Life of Plants* series (1995) uses a classical score to evoke a range of emotions, subconsciously associating plant life with the gentle, the dramatic or the passionate. Musical instruments are often used selectively to denote particular animals; NHNZ's *Wild Asia: At the Edge* (1999-2000) is a large-scale, blue-chip' documentary that heralds the arrival of the elusive Snow Leopard with mystical pan-flutes and emphasises the comedy of marmosets with jaunty flutes.

We applied the same principles in *Love in Cold Blood*; it also contains many anthropomorphic constructs. Tuatara were named and had their personalities delineated through interviews, text on screen and narration. Our intent is clearly evident in this excerpt from the programme where the demise of Albert the tuatara is described in the narration script and interview:

**Narrator:** Albert was over-represented in the captive gene pool. The program needed more diversity.

**Lindsay Hazley:** By not being in the program, Albert became incredibly stressed, over the mating season- he couldn't have access to his girlfriends, and I personally believe he was so stressed, his immune system failed him ... and that was his demise. So poor old Albert ... died because of his lovesickness, basically.

Carfeully composed music also assisted in defining our characters – a pastoral theme was used for Mildred's appearances to signify her femininity and sweetness, whereas pompous, regal drums and bugles accompanied Henry's appearance on screen. These

constructions of tuatara ‘character’, through narration and music, brought their story into the realm of human understanding, helping the audience to empathise with Henry and Mildred’s tale. Given our own experiences and a review of other wildlife films and literature, it is my conclusion that almost all wildlife film and documentary utilise to some degree, anthropomorphic constructs to support their story. Even wildlife filmmakers critical of the technique are not above using anthropomorphic music, narrative structure or personification. The landmark BBC ‘blue-chip’ series *Blue Planet*, narrated by Sir David Attenborough, used moving and emotional music to emphasise the animal stories. Indeed, the series’ musical score was so popular that a CD Soundtrack was released and live orchestral concerts were held.

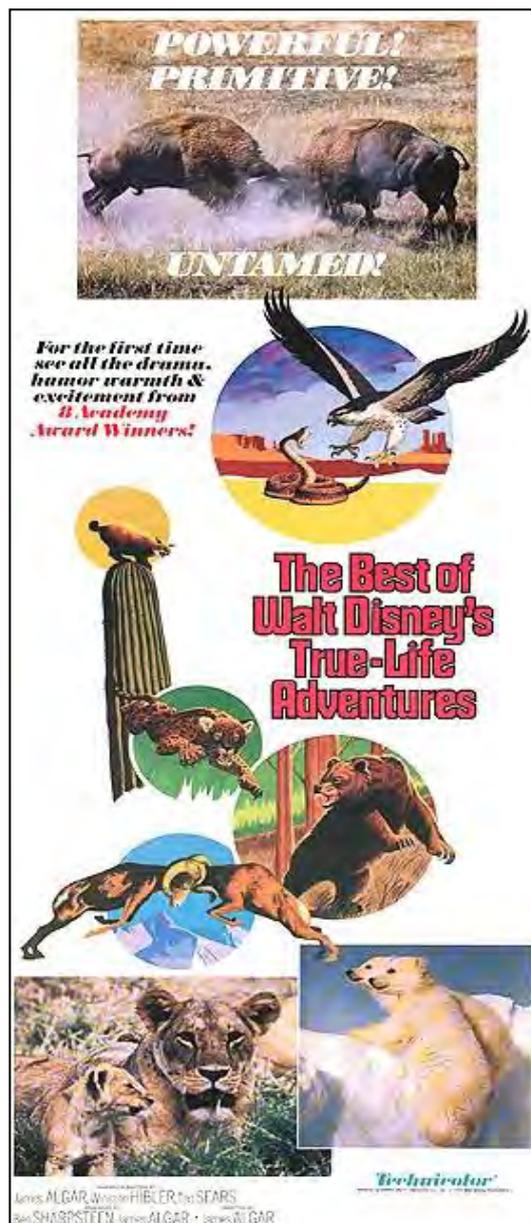
### **3.2) The Disney Formula and its Narrative Byproducts**

Analysis of Walt Disney’s pioneering wildlife films, the True-Life Adventure series, provide insight into the original popular anthropomorphic constructs that have shaped viewer expectation of animal representation to the present day. Disney’s original use of anthropomorphic techniques and the ensuing popularity of his formulae, indicate why anthropomorphism has become an integral part of wildlife film. Well known for animated children’s feature films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938) and *Bambi* (1942), Disney is also responsible for creating the first narrative wildlife films during the 1950’s. Indeed, in his study of American culture, Denney (1957) states, ‘No one has paid greater attention to animals – first in cartoon form and later in natural form – than Walt Disney’, and indeed, no study of the use of anthropomorphism in wildlife film would be complete without exploring the influences of Disney on the public’s perception of nature.

After the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney released three feature-length animations, *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and the nature-inspired *Bambi* (1942). Unlike *Snow White* they were all financial failures at the box-office, returning only a small percentage of their production costs (Mitman 1999). In an effort to recover costs Disney branched into wildlife films. Compared to the time and personnel-intensive animated features, wildlife films were relatively cheap and quick to produce and proved to be a surprising hit at the box-office (King 1996 and Mitman 1999). The first of Disney’s ‘True-Life Adventures’ was *Seal Island* (1949), focusing on the antics of a seal colony on the Alaskan Pribilof Islands (Mitman 1999). The film went on to

win an Oscar in the specially created category ‘Short Film, Two Reel’. *Seal Island* was followed by another sixteen films, including seven of feature-length, and another eight Oscar nods for the ‘True-Life’ collection (Figure 3.1).

Walt Disney became the first to produce nature dramas for commercial release. Prior to the hugely successful True-Life Adventure films, nature and animals had been seen as something to collect, capture and control (King 1996). Disney re-styled the humanisation of nature into the ‘Disney formula’; he bestowed personalities and story lines on individual animals, encouraging previously unexplored concepts of an animal’s individual status and rights.



**Figure 3.1)** Poster advertising the eight-time Academy Award Winning *True-Life* Adventure series as *The Best of Walt Disney's True-Life Adventures* (Poster from [www.movieposter.com](http://www.movieposter.com)).

Many of the producers involved in the True-Life Adventures films had previously worked in the animation departments at Walt Disney Productions (King 1996 and Mitman 1999). The success of the True-Life Adventures was in part due to extending the established creative pathways established for the animated features onto the wildlife films (King 2006 and Mitman 1999, MacDonald 2006). Disney may have been fond of saying that ‘Nature writes the screenplays’, but the True-Life Adventures introduced the concept of real animal ‘stars’ to the American public, naming and personifying otherwise indistinct wild creatures. In 1957’s *Perri*, squirrel biology became part of ‘Perri’s adventures’ – following her as she fights enemies, makes a home and eventually finds true love (Figure 3.2). Personification of animal characters is also unmistakable in this excerpt of narration from *The Living Desert*:

**Narrator:** Now, in the cool of the morning the ground squirrels appear. These are the Round-tails whose favourite breakfast is the prickly pear cactus... Breakfast often lasts all morning - unless there’s an interruption. It’s old Nosey Parker, the roadrunner. Incidentally he’s a member of the cuckoo family – a charter member as far as the squirrels are concerned! Still *they* know how to handle this clown - just give him a taste of his own medicine! But no sooner are the rid of one nuisance then another appears. This time it’s Sweet William, the spotted skunk...

Interestingly *Perri* was billed as a True-Life Fantasy instead of a True-life Adventure, a category specially created in order to avoid the ties to real-life squirrel biology (King 1996).



**Figure 3.2)** Record sleeve art for the musical soundtrack to Walt Disney’s feature film *Perri* showing photographs of various animals with character descriptions. (From The Disneyland Records Blog: <http://disneylandrecords.blogspot.com>)

Audiences were able to see themselves in the struggles of *Perri*, or the sweet, tough little ground squirrels in *The Living Desert*. Nature, previously something distant or ‘collectable’, became a familiar set of characters with identifiable belief and value systems – the audiences own (King 1996, MacDonald 2006). Audiences, particularly in post-war 1950’s America, looked to the natural world to reaffirm their family values, gender roles, and distinguish between moral and amoral behaviour. They found validation in Disney’s True-Life animal stars and their stories (King 1996, Mitman 1999, MacDonald 2006). Indeed, King (1996) argues that it was the very subjectivity of the True-Life Adventure films that gave them such powerful cultural leverage.

Disney’s method has been both lauded and criticised by biologists and critical theorists alike. Supporters such as King (1996) claim that Disney’s socio-specific

personification and narrative structures are approachable and humanising, allowing audience empathy and intimacy with the events on screen. Critics accuse Disney's True-Life Adventures of sensationalism and of displaying a patronising attitude towards their animal 'stars' and of imposing a social ordering or ranking on the animals featured. This is evident in *The Living Desert* transcript quoted earlier. The cuckoo and the skunk are annoying, 'nosey', smelly and laughable, compared to their counterparts, the friendly, busy ground squirrels. Bestowing animals with names and status encouraged a simplistic ordering and understanding of nature, liked and disliked individuals, good or bad animals, much like the popular and unpopular characters on a teenage television 'soap'. The denoting of status raises issues of ethical representation. The relationships between animals in the natural world are based on instinctual behaviour and they are clearly not deliberately ranked. Disney's personifications probably helped form a generation's sentimental attachment to some animals and a distaste or dislike for others (King 1996, Horak 2006). He has also been accused of perpetuating misinformation about a species' biology.

Suggestions that Disney used the 'natural' order of the animal world to indicate 'natural order' in the human world may be well founded. However, it is important to note that Walt Disney himself had no scientific or educative intent, stating: 'our intent is not formal education in natural science. Our main purpose is to bring interesting and delightful entertainment to the theatre' (in King 1996). Disney therefore presents an interesting paradox for biologists and conservationists. Real nature may not be 'scientifically accurately' represented, but 'real' nature allows for increased empathy and awareness.

As Denney (1957) stated, Disney's influences on public perceptions and the audiences expectations of wildlife filmmaking have shaped the industry to the present day. Disney began what would become a global corporation profiting from animal anthropomorphism. His construction of animal 'stars' allowed audiences to empathise with their behaviour, understand their life cycles and view their habitats, providing a view of wildlife that could be easily understood through the 'human-lens'. It was this pioneering empathetic construction that helped fuel the eco-political movement of the 1960's and 70's and helped establish wildlife conservation 'charities' like WWF and Greenpeace (King 1996, Barnes 2009). The 'curiosity' style films of the pre- True-Life era became obsolete as the audience's craving for drama and story grew. Disney did not

invent interest in nature, he simply recognised a mode of presentation most likely to be popular.

More recently, Disney Corporation has re-visited nature filmmaking with 2009's *Earth* (Fothergill 2007), produced and distributed by the newly launched subsidiary, Disneynature, a production and distribution label that will work with international wildlife filmmakers to release one feature length nature film each year. *Earth*, based on the successful and lauded *Planet Earth* series, and *On Crimson Wing* [Aeberhard & Ward, 2009 (USA)] was soon to be followed by *Oceans* (Perrin & Cluzaud) in April 2010 (USA release date). The launch of Disneynature was prompted by the unprecedented success of the highly anthropomorphic *March of the Penguins* (2005, discussed further in Chapter 3.3), which Disney co-produced and distributed. The films have a similar formula to the original True-Life Adventures, following an animal's personalised struggle for survival within the harsh wilderness. Disney Corporation extols *Earth*, saying 'No film has ever captured the epic scope of drama of an entire planet, yet told it with heart-breaking and heart-warming intimacy of real animal characters'. Disneynature has now become part of the neo 'green' fever and eco-political climate fuelled by a generation of Disney-influenced nature-lovers. On their website they explain;

'Disneynature will reinforce an understanding of the interrelatedness of all life on earth. Working with conservation organizations on each film... will let people know how, through their actions, they can affect the story's ending.'

Disneynature has built on the formula established by their founder to create a message that was not immediately evident in the True-Life adventures – animals are not just for our entertainment, but part of a wider global eco-system of their own. Disneynature have indeed confirmed their conservation credentials recently joining The Nature Conservancy, an international conservation organisation running the 'Plant a Billion' tree-planting campaign. They planted 2.7 million trees in the Brazilian Atlantic Forest, in conjunction with *Earth*'s opening week ticket sales.

Whether it's animated animal adventures like *The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff 1994) or epic cinematic documentaries like *Earth*, Disney's 60-year influence on nature programming has been far-reaching. The 'Disney formula' is evident in today's

wildlife television broadcasts and has shaped our expectations of how animals should be represented on film (Pierson 2005). From BBC's epic David Attenborough *Life of* series to the quirky internal monologue narrated *The Bear*, individual animals battle against the odds inherent in their harsh natural surroundings, just as the seals first did in Disney's *Seal Island*. King (1996) correctly defends the Disney formula, saying that it does not matter if representations are naturally correct, only 'humanistically correct'. By portraying the animal world in ways the audience could readily understand, Disney's films elicited empathy from the audience and simultaneously allowed generations of audiences to form a good general understanding of nature.

### 3.3) March of the 'Fuzz-u-mentaries'

The cinematic release of *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet) in 2005 (US release date) signaled a new era of criticism of sentimentalised anthropomorphic techniques. The film heralded a sub-genre of its own, Thomson (2007) calling it the 'fuzzumentary.... in which creatures of the wild are turned into almost-human characters on the big screen.' Yet, whatever film theorists may have called it and however much they criticised it, *March of the Penguins* was a worldwide phenomenon. It is the second most financially successful documentary ever made, earning over \$127 million in gross profits (Miller 2005 and Thomson 2007) and revealed that even an audience two generations removed from the Disney True-Life Adventure formula, are receptive to the influences of anthropomorphism as a filmmaking technique.

The largely unexpected success of the film helped to instigate the recent emergence of co-producer and distributor, 'Disneynature' and may herald a renaissance in wildlife cinema. Of nearly 300 documentaries that were released from 2002 through 2006 in the USA, only eight were wildlife documentaries, including *March of the Penguins* (Thomson 2007). However, their combined gross of \$163.1 million was a significant 26 percent of the \$631 million total gross, revealing the growing financial gravitas and importance of the cinematic wildlife genre (Wade Holden quoted in Thomson 2007).

The film *March of the Penguins* follows Emperor Penguins on their annual migration to their breeding grounds. It was marketed as a love story set against the harsh realities of nature (Figure 3.3) – a theme evident in many of Disney's first True-Life Adventures. The penguins undertake an epic journey, walking thousands of kilometres to reach their

breeding ground, with no guarantee of mating or hatching success. There they have to survive extreme weather, predators and possible starvation. The original French version of the film gave the penguins spoken, scripted dialogue, much like an Antarctic *Milo and Otis* (1986). The American version of the film, re-invented by National Geographic Films President Adam Leipzig, features Morgan Freeman as a ‘voice of god’ narrator telling the story of the penguins’ struggles as an, albeit G-rated, epic survival saga. Mayell (2005) claimed it to be ‘too lovey-dovey to be true’ and indeed much of the penguins’ biologically motivated behaviour is suggested in the narration to be something more meaningful. For example, biologically motivated mating rituals became stories weighted with love and grief (Mayell 2005, Miller 2005 and Wexler 2008). Excerpts of narration script from the cinematic trailer reveal the heroic character construction and story arc:

**\_\_Narrator:** ... And every year, they embark on a nearly impossible journey to find a mate. For twenty days and twenty nights the Emperor Penguin will march to a place so extreme it supports no other life. In the harshest place on Earth love finds a way. This is the incredible true story of a family's journey to bring life into the world: *March of the Penguins*.

It was this anthropomorphic construction that ultimately caused the audience to feel a deep emotional connection with the characters and made the penguins’ story so globally likable (Thomson 2007). The humble animal heroes are ‘marching’, ‘embarking’, ‘journeying’ and overcoming unbelievable odds, all for love. The musical score helped to emphasise these constructions, turning the death of a chick into a grief-filled tragedy, a mating ritual into a romantic tête-à-tête. Leipzig himself terms the supposedly re-invented cinematic genre, ‘wildlife adventure’, as opposed to wildlife documentary. The films are entertaining and emotionally powerful and are not, as he claims, “good for you” as is usually expected in wildlife or scientific documentary (Thomson 2007). On the other hand, they provide a much needed authenticity and basis in reality rarely seen in a family movie market saturated with computer generated 3D animation.

Given the success of *March of the Penguins* it is fair to claim that newly ‘green-aware’ audiences are ready to re-visit the style of Disney’s 1950’s True-Life Adventures. Indeed, off the back of *March*, National Geographic Films released *Arctic Tale* (2007), an audience-friendly story of the adventures of various arctic species. The ‘stars’ are

given names - Nanu the polar bear and Seela the Walrus, personalised the story arcs and the film echoes Walt Disney's *The White Wilderness* (1958).



**Figure 3.3:** Poster advertising the American cinematic release of *March of the Penguins*, with the logline “In the harshest place on earth love finds a way” (Poster from [www.movieposter.com](http://www.movieposter.com))

Despite its popularity *March of the Penguins* has been constantly criticised for its humanised portrayal of penguin biology (Miller 2005), raising arguments regarding anthropomorphisms' influence on wildlife filmmaking and responsibility of wildlife filmmakers. Criticism stemmed from the interpretation of the film by some religious groups as evidence of Intelligent Design (Mayell 2005 and Wexler 2008). It was suggested that the humanistic endurance of the penguins as they made their way towards their breeding grounds paralleled the hardships faced by those engaging in a Christian pilgrimage (Wexler 2008). The filmmakers, however, maintained this was not

the case and underlined the scientific integrity of the film, indicating that it was created in association with organisations with excellent scientific credentials like the French Polar Institute and National Geographic. Ironically, however, this stance was used to lend scientific credibility to the claims of Christian and Intelligent Design organisations (Wexler 2008). In her investigation into the presence of scientific authority in *March of the Penguins*, Wexler (2008) states that: ‘...the film became an arena for disagreement about social agendas: conflict over the cultural authority to interpret animal images.’ The debate over *March of the Penguins* has implications for anthropomorphised story arcs that are presented as having scientific authority. Similar to criticisms of Disney’s anthropomorphic ‘ranking’ of the animal world, a filmmaker’s construction of nature may be used as scientific ‘evidence’ or proof for a particular ideology of an audience. Indeed, wildlife filmmakers and producers need to walk a fine line when constructing a story arc and personifying wildlife as their choices may have ramifications for the viewer far beyond the filmmaker’s intention.

However, criticisms of anthropomorphism as giving human ideology ‘naturalisation’ return eventually to the formerly discussed pay-off between the entertainment value and the informative value of a film. Gerald Kooyman, a marine biologist studying penguins with the United States Antarctic Program (and arguably a scientific authority), claims that the anthropomorphism in *March* is a necessary tool in making the penguins’ biology more accessible to the general public (Mayell 2005). The filmmaker Luc Jacquet concurred, saying he told the story in the simplest possible way and deliberately left it open to any interpretation. He places this in a wider theoretical context, suggesting that audiences don’t like being lectured to and other modes of communication, especially regarding environmental issues, needed to be investigated (Miller 2005).

Furthermore, filmmakers are arguably not responsible for how an audience construes the motivation and meaning behind their film. They have a responsibility only to produce a piece of work that fits the film format and provides entertainment in some way. Filmmakers cannot prevent their film being incorrectly interpreted by an audience with a particular vested interest or ideology. Anthropomorphic techniques cannot therefore be criticised for encouraging ‘proof’ of a particular human ideology if they were not intended for that purpose.

## CHAPTER 4) ANTHROPOMORPHISM REACHES THE MASSES

*'We're not looking to be a natural history channel. We're looking to be an entertainment destination.'*

- Majorie Kaplan (President of Discovery Communications, 2008)

### 4.1) Animal Reality Television and the Docu-soap

Popular factual program networks like Discovery Communications, whose channels include Animal Planet and Discovery Channel, broadcast to some 370 million households worldwide (Discovery 2010). The use of anthropomorphism within the competitive television broadcasting networks is therefore an important consideration in this thesis, with entertainment-driven representations of animals becoming commonplace and globally distributed (Pierson 2005, Dingwall and Aldridge 2006).

In the current ratings-driven era of cable television programming, wildlife documentaries have been subject to format diversification (Bouse 1998, Pierson 2005, Horak 2006, Kilborn 2006). The competitive market has seen the standard 'blue-chip' formats of the 1970's and 80's largely disappear, to be replaced by the action and drama that human Reality Television can provide. In response, wildlife broadcasters like Animal Planet have developed a range of survival strategies; marrying wildlife documentary with other television genres like Reality TV and developing innovative filmmaking techniques to maintain ratings and keep costs down. These format diversification strategies have been criticised by film theorists (Kilborn 2006, Eisenberg 2003). Further discussion of their use, in particular the use of anthropomorphism, is necessary to determine if their popularity with viewers can provoke a behavioural change in the audience.

Wildlife docu-soaps or docu-dramas are an example of recent cross-genre programming and are arguably the best example of anthropomorphism in televised nature programming to date. Deliberately creating and naming characters, docu-soaps follow the day-to-day activities of a group of animals, dramatising their lives in just the way a human soap opera or Reality TV series does. In September 2005, Discovery Communication's Animal Planet channel launched its telenovela-style nature series, *Meerkat Manor*. The series, Animal Planet's most successful to date, follows the lives

of a tribe of meerkats dubbed ‘The Whiskers’, in the Kalahari Desert. The meerkats are given names and personality traits. We follow them, much as a family-drama television series like *The Sopranos* would (Figure 4.1), through the drama of first love, domestic fights, turf wars, sex, babies, motherhood and death, also supported by an emotive and subjective soundtrack and narration.

The experimental combination of wildlife documentary with the Reality TV genre proved popular with audiences around the world. *Meerkat Manor* developed a cult-like following during its four series on Animal Planet, was broadcast in over 160 countries and had an audience of approximately four million during its first three seasons in the United States alone. When ‘Flower’, the matriarch of the Whiskers family, was bitten by a snake and died at the end of the third season, viewers expressed their grief by composing songs in her honour, holding vigils and funerals and making tribute videos that were posted online (Figure 4.2). An excerpt from the narration script from Episode 8, Season 3 (Discovery Communications 2007), indicates why viewers had such a strong attachment to Flower:

**Narrator:** For four years, Flower was the Whiskers’ faithful dominant. From humble beginnings, she created one of the largest, close-knit families on the manor. Flower was a formidable leader and a noble mother. The desert has lost its favorite rose.

Flower was the ‘furry star’ of *Meerkat Manor* and was given the personality of an Amazonian-like formidable leader and noble mother. She was so popular with viewers that the producers of the show were criticised for not giving her anti-venom at the time of her death. As McFarland (2007) suggests, it is the Reality TV style that made *Meerkat Manor* both addictively popular and yet also very difficult to watch. The dramas of the Kalahari are real - unlike human Reality TV stars, meerkats do get killed, eaten, starve, or fight to the death.

‘Most other documentaries take viewers as close, of course, but they do so while keeping the viewers and the filmmakers at an emotionally safe distance. We watch the circle of life play out with little judgment or emotion... But then on those shows predator and prey do not have names or behavioral ticks usually ascribed to humans...’

(McFarland 2007)



**Figure 4.1)** Poster advertising the season return of *Meerkat Manor* to the syndicated cable television channel, Animal Planet (from Entertainment Weekly Magazine, August 10<sup>th</sup> 2007)

Anthropomorphic techniques are often criticised for ‘sanitising’ nature and perpetuating ‘safe’ cultural expectations, a trend particularly evident in the criticism of Disney’s True-Life Adventures. *Meerkat Manor*, however, did not follow the ‘sanitised’, ‘happy-ending’ formula. Humanised meerkat ‘characters’ suffered the full effect of ‘un-sanitised’ nature, causing intense pain and grief for *Meerkat*’s audience. The outcome, however, was essentially the same, with both forms of representation encouraging viewer emotional investment.

The production and camera crew of *Meerkat Manor* were forbidden to interfere with the activities of the meerkats during filming, and the series did not sanitise their natural behaviour – cannibalism, predation and bloody turf wars are all shown. However, the ascribed personalities in *Meerkat Manor* allowed for the projection of the viewer’s own life onto those of the meerkats, creating a stronger emotional connection than is usual in traditional wildlife documentary. As Bellafante (2007) suggests, the struggles assigned to Flower as the leader of her tribe are identifiable to that of a modern woman ‘bringing home the bacon’. Interestingly, the series’ popularity waned after Flower’s death; ratings lowered to just 500,000 during season four *Meerkat Manor: The Next Generation*.

## R.I.P Flower Queen Of The Meerkats



**Figure 4.2)** Screen grab from a eulogy tribute video for Flower the Meerkat, as posted on Youtube website ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UD\\_Y-GAIa1I&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UD_Y-GAIa1I&feature=related))

Gallagher (2007), in the New York Times Magazine, criticises *Meerkat Manor*, saying:

... the main problem with docu-soaps, unlike more traditional nature programs, is that they ascribe human emotions and ethical matrices to animals. Meerkats cannot be “courageous” or “conscientious,” “humiliated” or “somber,” and they certainly cannot be “heroes.” ...Is our craving for narrative structure so intense—and our sense of drama so impoverished—that we have to resort to anthropomorphizing what are basically South African rat-dogs? The protagonists are represented as heroes, and the beasts that happen not to be television stars are vilified, when really they’re all just meerkats, doing what meerkats do. No wrong. No right. Just meerkat.’

Criticisms of *Meerkat Manor* echo those leveled at *March of the Penguins*; is anthropomorphism being used to justify particular human behaviour or cultural identities as chosen by the filmmaker? This thesis argues that wildlife filmmakers have to work within the rating imperatives central to the existence of broadcasters or syndicated cable channels. Some sort of cultural overlay is unavoidable when representing animals on film or video (Chapter 2.1 and 2.1). Heffernan (2006), in an earlier edition of the New York Times magazine, acknowledges the extremity of the

anthropomorphism in the series, but later concludes, ‘the comparisons to humans don’t matter any more. The alert little meerkats become engaging in themselves’. It is interesting to note that on Animal Planet’s memorial website for Flower the matriarch meerkat, they ask that donations in her honour be given to the Fellow Earthlings' Wildlife Center, an independent organisation dedicated to lifelong care of sick or injured meerkats (Discovery Communications, 2007). Due to its anthropomorphic style, *Meerkat Manor* received unprecedented ratings and popularity, which has resulted in an increased awareness of or, at least interest in, the meerkat species and biology and stimulated donations to a wildlife centre.

## CHAPTER 5: ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ITS POSSIBLE INFLUENCES ON CONSERVATION AWARENESS

*TV Wildlife has become – with very few exceptions – a conservation-free zone*

-Richard Kilborn

### 5.1) Anthropomorphism and its audience

In one form or another anthropomorphism has been a part of wildlife film and documentary since its inception. Anthropomorphism has been determined to consistently draw large audiences and encourage emotional investment in animal ‘characters’, with examples given from Disney’s True-Life Adventures, *March of the Penguins* and *Meerkat Manor*. This anthropomorphic ‘draw-card’ has often been criticised as allowing cultural constructs to be used as overlay. However, it must be noted that filmmakers cannot control and are not responsible for the ideological, political or religious agenda of a particular audience. Furthermore, an audience’s emotional investment in a film, obtained through careful use of anthropomorphism has the potential to bring about positive environmental change. The advent of the Internet has given an audience the opportunity to respond to programming immediately and productively.

Given the current global eco-zeitgeist alongside the dire state of wildlife conservation, it is important to question the role and influence that popular wildlife filmmaker and programmers have on environmental consciousness and determine whether this popularity can have any real effect. Apple and Apple (1993) declare that the popularity of a scientific film indicates its success in encouraging science knowledge despite its content or method of presentation. The longevity of independent factual television programmers like National Geographic and Discovery Channel is evidence in itself of sustained public interest in science and wildlife. Indeed, television in particular could be considered a powerful medium for change because of its unprecedented viewer access (Dingwall and Aldridge 2006). 2010 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of cable television’s Discovery Channel. Parent company Discovery Communications has, to date, more than 100 networks around the world, including Animal Planet and the Science Channel. One cannot doubt the potential influence that such access may have (Eiseberg 2003, Dingwall and Aldridge 2006). It is to this end that I will further focus

specifically on the conservation influence of wildlife factual television rather than wildlife cinema.

## 5.2) Using anthropomorphic empathy to inspire change

Animal Planet had a ratings hit with the 2007-2008 docu-soap series *Orangutan Island*. The series copied the winning formula of *Meerkat Manor*, with named characters, melodramatic situations and emotive narration and soundtrack. The two seasons follow several orphaned baby orangutans learning to survive as a group or society in a protected area of Borneo rainforest known as Orangutan Island. They attend rehabilitation classes in preparation for release back into the wild. Individual orangutan personality traits are emphasised and social groups are given gang names (Figure 5.2).



**Figure 5.1)** Image taken from the Animal Planet’s Orangutan Island website showing the named members of the ‘Bandit Boys’, a group of orphaned orangutans (<http://animal.discovery.com/tv/orangutan-island/meet/bandit-boys.html>)

Ascribing human-like characteristics onto orangutans is arguably more ‘acceptable’ than doing so with meerkats, given their closer relation to us on the evolutionary tree. Nonetheless, Orangutans are not human. Yet the series’ producers impose upon them our human social and emotional constructs. They are portrayed as good-tempered, grumpy, popular and unpopular. Biological behavioral choices are given deliberate meaning and association. For example, one young male orangutan, named Saturnus, is depicted as a hopeful ladies man, and when filmed lying on the ground scratching his

head is described as wistfully thinking about his dream girl (Transcript, Appendix 3).

The series was criticised by Gallagher in his New York Times article, as taking the Reality TV formula too far, claiming:

‘The promos for *Orangutan Island* even ape the now-iconic opening sequence of *The Real World*: ‘This is the true story of a group of orangutans...’ And just like the stock characters on that program—the angry black guy, the gay guy, the girl who gets drunk and kisses other girls—the orangutans have been labeled: Jasmine the Femme Fatale, Saturnus the Clown, Cha Cha the Social Butterfly.’

But the backlash against the article was prompt and direct, with the Director of the non-government conservation organisation, Orangutan Outreach, replying:

‘It is an easy intellectual exercise to criticize the concept of Orangutan Island on anthropomorphic grounds or suggest that the producers are only interested in market share, but the fact is that Orangutan Island is being watched by millions of people in North America-- and if even the smallest percentage of them are inspired to visit the Orangutan Outreach website and adopt a baby orangutan or make a donation, then the program can be deemed a success. As the Director of Orangutan Outreach, I can say that the show is getting people's attention. We are getting letters from children and adults who are fascinated by the orangutans. They care about the orangutans on the show and are concerned for their survival as a species.’

Indeed, Animal Planet’s website for *Orangutan Island* provides easily accessible links to Orangutan Outreach’s website to ‘Adopt an Orphaned Orangutan’. The series executive producer, Judith Curran, indicates that one of the broadcasters’ aims for the series was to increase awareness of Orangutan habitat destruction due to palm oil production (Curran, 2009, pers. comm.). Perhaps *Orangutan Island* provides the first evidence that the anthropomorphic techniques inherent in wildlife film can have powerful positive consequences. The use of interactive websites also means that an audience interested or emotionally invested in the animal ‘stars’ will become more involved in the series through the website; it is perhaps quicker and easier to obtain a conservation ‘action’ than for a television series made pre-internet. Quelling criticism

of anthropomorphism as bowing to the social norms of an audience, *Orangutan Island* provides evidence that the ends may justify the means. The anthropomorphic model may have the potential to reshape an audience's behaviour and elicit positive conservation action.

Providing a counter-argument in his seminal work *Wildlife Film*, Bousè (2000) suggests that the actual influence of wildlife film on audiences' values and beliefs, despite ratings or box-office figures, remains immeasurable. He further suggests that:

\_Arguments that wildlife films directly help save nature nearly all rest on anecdotal evidence as well as a failure to consider sampling procedures, viewers dispositions and the difficulty of actually measuring effectiveness'.

There is a dearth of real evidence in the literature determining direct links between influential filmmaking techniques, such as anthropomorphism, and any definite causative effects. Bousè's claims, however, are perhaps unsubstantiated given the very lack of evidence he mentions. Further research is needed to accurately determine the influences of anthropomorphism beyond the anecdotal evidence. Certainly anthropomorphic techniques play a part in providing entertaining, viewer-friendly wildlife television and filmmaking. King (1996) argues that linking the audience with the stories on screen allows them to feel that they are intrinsically connected to the wildlife and nature represented, that they are involved in their lives or have been there before. Once connected to these animals or landscapes, audiences are more likely to have a personal investment in their interests or conservation. As Dioum (1968) said \_We will conserve only what we love...'\_ By simply reaching larger audiences through their entertaining anthropomorphic narrative structures, and increasing audience's empathy and understanding with appealingly anthropomorphised characters, series like *Orangutan Island* and films like *March of the Penguins* may have huge potential impact on audiences' conservation values and inspire positive environmental change.

## DISCUSSION

Animals have been intrinsically linked with the moving image since its inception. From the early ‘man against nature’ ethnographies to Disney’s True-Life Adventures, filmed nature has been seen through a ‘human lens’; a construct of what our particular culture and society needed it to be (Apple and Apple 1993, Bousè 2000). Anthropomorphism is a natural byproduct of this subjectivity. Film, as a medium for entertainment, has ensured that representations of animals reflect those that are popular and will provide entertaining viewing for a particular audience.

Walt Disney, the pioneer of narrative wildlife films, has been criticised for patronising and sentimentalising the natural world. His ‘Disney formula’ arguably used animals to naturalise 1950’s family values. However, it is this formula of personification and narrative structure that encouraged viewers to see themselves in Disney’s animal ‘stars’; animals became fellow individuals with identifiable plights and struggles. This empathy influenced the development of the eco-political movement of the 1960’s and 70’s.

Evidence from the critical reception of *March of the Penguins* suggests anthropomorphism may be interpreted for political or religious gain. Fundamentalist Christians used the anthropomorphism in *March of the Penguins* as a parable for the Christian Pilgrimage and validated their cause through the film’s scientific foundation. The filmmakers argued that they did not intend this interpretation, and indeed they have little control over how their film may be understood. Given the film’s large audience, multiple interpretations of the film are possible. As the filmmakers indicate, the characterisation and narrative of *March* were deliberately used to engage a large audience, no matter what their political or religious persuasion, thereby increasing awareness of the Antarctic environment and the life and plight of the Emperor Penguin species.

It is clear that animal programming for syndicated cable television employs anthropomorphic techniques to ‘sell’ broadcast time. Series like *Meerkat Manor* and *Orangutan Island* use traditional methods of personification and characterisation to attract audiences and ensure long-running viewer commitment to the series. This formula is in alignment with television as a primarily ratings-driven entertainment

medium. However a secondary outcome is also evident; *Meerkat Manor* and *Orangutan Island* have endeared audiences to previously little known species and encouraged positive conservation action.

Our experiences making *Love in Cold Blood* echo the long-running paradox faced by wildlife filmmakers. The motivation for the film originated from our academic backgrounds in Science and Zoology. We intended to make a wildlife conservation documentary rather than any entertainment-based film. However, we soon realised that this was impossible, especially because the tuatara species is not particularly ‘cute and cuddly’ or active. Throughout our storytelling process (Appendix 1) we continually employed necessary anthropomorphic techniques to help create an entertaining and empathetic narrative. At later stages in the post-production processes we used music and narration, further anthropomorphising our tuatara ‘characters’.

Carla and I were also heavily influenced by our own experiences of film and television. For example, because of our love of the Monty Python films, we endeavoured in *Love in Cold Blood* to emulate their light, humourous stories and amusing character constructs. However, whatever our creative intent for the film, we cannot control how a particular audience will interpret the story. Personal communication with various viewers and festival judges indicate the film has meant many different things to different people with many seeing a greater conservation message than we originally intended.

Anthropomorphism may be criticised in a film theory context, but its potential power to encourage greater science communication and empathy cannot be denied given the audience attracted to films and series that utilise this technique. Anthropomorphic techniques have consistently aided in increasing ratings and popularity of televised nature programming and cinematic wildlife films. This has great importance and potential influence when screening to an increasingly conservation-aware audience. As direct evidence for the potential of anthropomorphism to encourage conservation action remains scant, I suggest further research, including public surveys, is needed.

## **APPENDIX 1: TIMELINE OF THE FILMMAKING PROCESS**

*Love in Cold Blood* took just over 11 months of 2009 to complete. In early December 2008, having decided to work as a pair, Carla Braun-Elwert and I began searching for the story for our film. By February 2009 we had chosen tuatara conservation as our topic and began crafting our script and story.

The scripting process took us over 4 months to complete – including synopses, style treatments, shot-by-shot storyboards and narration scripts. We explored several story options, eliminating possibilities until the narrative arc followed a tight three act-structure. We soon realised it was impossible to tell the entire tuatara conservation story; we had to choose events that had potential for drama and visual interest. During the scripting time period we also began production in Invercargill at the Southland Museum and Gallery in order to film the hatching of Henry and Mildred's eggs.

We filmed over 20 hours of footage during the production period, which lasted from approximately March 2009 to August 2009. Filming was dependant upon the seasonal behaviour of the captive tuatara, both at Southland Museum and at Nga Manu Reserve in Waikanae, Wellington and the availability of interviewees.

Due to the unpredictability of animal behaviour what we had scripted and what we were able to film were not synonymous. As a result a second storytelling process began when we digitised our footage and began to craft our film's narrative structure in the edit suite.

To gain a greater understanding of our narrative choices the film was viewed by selected trial audiences at various stages of the production. The editing and other post-production processes including compiling graphics, sound mixing, composing music, recording narration and colour grading, took approximately 4 months to complete.

The film premiered on the 24<sup>th</sup> November 2009 at the Regent Theatre in Dunedin; the version screened at that time is included in this thesis.

## **APPENDIX 2: REEL EARTH ENVIRONMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL AWARDS**

The Reel Earth Film Festival was held in May 2010 in Palmerston North, New Zealand. The Festival is the largest of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere attracting hundreds of entrants worldwide. *Love in Cold Blood* received the award for Best Emerging Filmmakers and Best New Zealand Film and garnered a special mention in the Best International Short Film Award:  
<http://www.reearth.org.nz/modules/content/content.php?content.164>

The Wildscreen Festival is the largest wildlife film festival in the world. Held every two years in Bristol, United Kingdom, it is patronised by the BBC Natural History Unit. The BBC Newcomers Award honours the potential of up-and-coming wildlife filmmakers. Nominees for the 2010 festival are listed at:  
<http://www.wildscreenfestival.org/index.php?pageid=341&parentid=312#BBC>

### **APPENDIX 3: ORANGUTAN ISLAND NARRATION TRANSCRIPT**

Web Exclusive: Orangutan Island Saturnus: Ladies Man?

<http://animal.discovery.com/tv/orangutan-island/video/video.html>

Narrator: It's been over a year since Saturnus arrived with his classmates to live on Orangutan Island. And it looks as if the class clown is growing up. He's not as mischievous these days, but what could Saturnus be dreaming about? Most likely his favourite fixation – girls! When he arrived at his new island home, 5 year-old Saturnus was the youngest male on the island. He's far from sexually mature, and the girls picked up on this pretty quickly – they wanted nothing to do with him. But that didn't stop Saturnus – especially when he laid eyes on the girl of his dreams – the beautiful brunette, Jasmine.

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