

# PERCEIVED NATURE

## How Nature Is Presented On Film

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Bachelor's Thesis  
May 2013

Degree Programme in Media Design  
Global Business Management, School of Business Services





Author(s) KONSTI, Laura	Type of publication Bachelor's Thesis	Date 06.05.2013
	Pages 40	Language English
	Confidential ( ) Until	Permission for web publication ( X )
Title PERCEIVED NATURE – How Nature is Presented on Film		
Degree Programme Media Design		
Tutor(s) HYVÄRINEN, Aimo		
Assigned by		
Abstract <p>How is nature presented on film? Many people only know about nature and wildlife from the documentaries they watch on television. As the urban city-dwelling audience disconnects from their own lived experience of nature and the outdoors, their awareness becomes limited to the framed image presented on film. The producers seek to capture a larger audience and increase sales, and often even the filmmakers choose to manipulate the content of their work in ways the audience is typically unable to detect. Deceiving the audience gives them an inaccurate and misconceived perception of reality.</p> <p>The thesis looks at the history of nature on film and the early deceptions some of these early films contained, discusses the techniques of audio and video manipulation, and compares modern examples of natural history films from Britain and the United States. In the qualitative-comparative analysis, two fairly recent series are compared for their representation of nature and effect on the audience; Planet Earth (2006) produced by the BBC, and Untamed Americas (2012) produced by the National Geographic Channel.</p> <p>The productions compared differed greatly in their portrayal of both animals and nature in general. The American production seemed to focus more on entertaining the viewer with scenes of action and descriptions of hardship, while the British production delivered more educational content, with narration based on well-researched facts rather than assumptions.</p>		
Keywords Wildlife films, natural history films, nature documentaries, representations of nature		
Miscellaneous		



Tekijä(t) KONSTI, Laura	Julkaisun laji Opinnäytetyö	Päivämäärä 06.05.2013
	Sivumäärä 40	Julkaisun kieli Englanti
	Luottamuksellisuus ( ) saakka	Verkojulkaisulupa myönnetty ( X )
Työn nimi KÄSITYS LUONNOSTA - Kuinka luonto esitetään filmillä		
Koulutusohjelma Viestinnän koulutusohjelma		
Työn ohjaaja(t) HYVÄRINEN, Aimo		
Toimeksiantaja(t)		
<p>Kuinka luonto esitetään filmillä? Monet perustavat tietämyksensä ja näkemyksensä luonnosta televisiosta katsomiinsa luontodokumentteihin, mutta minkälaisena nämä ohjelmat oikeastaan näyttävät luonnon? Samalla kun kaupungistuneet ihmiset erkanevat "oikeasta" luonnosta yhä enemmän, heidän käsityksensä perustuvat lähes yksinomaan näihin videomuodossa näytettyihin tuotantoihin. Kuten muissakin elokuvissa ja televisiotuotannoissa tänä päivänä, päätavoite myös luontodokumenteissa on loppujen lopuksi voittojen tuottaminen, eivätkä kaikki elokuvantekijät ole aina täysin vilpittömiä tuottaessaan materiaalia näihin ohjelmiin. Filmimateriaalin manipulointi ja lavastaminen ovat arkipäivää myös luontoa käsittelevissä sarjoissa, eivätkä katsojat voi olla asiasta mitenkään tietoisia. Muun muassa ylidramatisoidut kohtaukset antavat yleisölle vääristyneen kuvan luonnosta, jolla taas on omat seurauksensa esimerkiksi väestön suhtautumisessa villieläimiin.</p> <p>Opinnäytetyö selventää luonto-ohjelmien historiaa sekä näissä esiintyneitä lavastuksia ja muita manipulaatioita, kertoo tavoista joilla yleisöä "huijataan" myös nykypäivänä, sekä vertailee kahta viime vuosina tuotettua sarjaa Britanniasta ja Yhdysvalloista. Vertailukohteina olivat BBC-tuotanto Planet Earth (2006) sekä National Geographic Channelin tuottama Untamed Americas (2012).</p> <p>Vertaillut sarjat poikkesivat suuresti toisistaan tavassa, jolla luonto ja villieläimet tuotiin esille; Amerikkalainen esimerkki luotti nopeisiin toimintakohtauksiin ja keskittyi lähinnä yleisön viihdyttämiseen, syventymättä sen enempää "tylsiin" asioihin tai ympäristöön; kun taas brittiesimerkissä oli enemmän tutkittua tietoa eläimistä ja näiden elinympäristöstä, esitettynä tavalla joka ei juurikaan demonisoinut esimerkiksi petoeläimiä.</p>		
Avainsanat (asiasanat) Luontodokumentti, luontoelokuva, luonnon esittäminen, representaatio		
Muut tiedot		

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## 1 Introduction

I have been interested in nature and wildlife films since childhood. I remember watching them with my father on television, something that was more of an event than simply “watching TV”, since those were not shown every day. Through this experience nature became my friend, I would spend hours outside just “researching” insects, collecting them to keep as pets, and furnishing their containers to look as natural as possible. Eventually I moved from insects to small animals; frogs, lizards, mice, even trying to keep fish on occasion. As my elementary school had a focus on natural sciences, I got all the nature knowledge a child’s brain could possibly process. At a later age I started reading books about evolution, natural organisms and flora and fauna ecology, just because it was fascinating – eventually I realized the effect of plants on the environment, as well as on the animals. Having grown up with television and nature around me, I could say natural history films became my passion, showing me things I could possibly never see otherwise, and teaching me things nobody else had taught me before.

At age 19, I started my film studies. We were told fairly early how the sounds of animals in nature films are actually made in the studio, by a foley artist. This new knowledge just crushed me. The sounds are not real? My experience of watching nature documentaries changed completely, and was completely ruined for a while after learning the secret. I had been fooled for so long with my idealist belief that documentaries actually document reality, and their makers really want to educate others. While the use of foley sounds does not bother me as much anymore, I have started to notice filmmakers circulating the same clips, using bits from other documentaries in their own productions. The more so-called “documentaries” I watched, the more I watched them through a critical lens. It became obvious that producers use multiple tricks for capturing the audience, such as portraying wild animals as “human”, using music and narration to evoke certain feelings, even the framing and editing can be used to represent wildlife in a way that is suitable for the production in question. While all of these can be used to create a truthful documentary, sadly it seems they are mostly used for entertainment purposes, often only to attract audience.

Natural history and wildlife films are probably a bigger business now than they have ever been. Productions such as the 2006 BBC series *Planet Earth* have multi-million dollar

budgets, are released as DVD compilations and Blu-ray discs in high definition, and possibly even remade into full-length movies like *Earth*, released by DisneyNature in 2007. With the prevalence of reality shows and “made-up” content on television and the internet these days, I feel it is becoming more important for the audience to maintain a grasp on the real world. There is an increasing demand for entertaining content, and documentaries are no exception. Filmmakers have to find ways to create films that are both entertaining and realistic while still within budgetary limits, and sometimes this has unwanted effects. The way wildlife is represented in nature films can easily lead to false beliefs and fears, while making the things outside our front door “the other”, a thing different from us and something to be feared or avoided.

In this thesis I will try to figure out how nature is usually represented in these natural history films, by comparing productions from two different continents; by BBC in the United Kingdom, and the National Geographic Channel in the United States. I will also describe the ways used to create these representations, especially focusing on altered footage, and the image they give to the viewer.

## **2 How Wildlife Film Came to Be – a Brief History**

As images of wildlife can be traced as far as human civilization, photographs can be considered the predecessor of wildlife films, like all films, which eventually evolved into moving picture. The most likely oldest successful photograph of a live wild animal in its natural setting is of a stork on its nest, taken in 1870. Eadweard Muybridge created the first moving images of any kind showing an animal; these images were of a running racehorse in 1872 or 1873. Supposedly, they were no more than silhouettes – the images themselves have never been found. In 1878, a Frenchman by the name of Etienne-Jules Marey learned of Muybridge’s work, and in 1882 he developed the prototype of a “photographic gun”, which was able to take photos in rapid sequence with a single lens. The development of the apparatus, later called “Marey’s wheel”, was motivated by his desire of creating images of animals under natural conditions, rather than in controlled environments like Muybridge. (Bousé 2000, 40-41)

By 1882, Muybridge had improved his own primitive motion-photo process, and took this to the Philadelphia Zoological Gardens to “film” a buffalo being killed by a tiger. (Bousé

2000, 196) As this event was staged for the camera, it can be considered as the first of many scenes specifically created for the wildlife film.

Quite possibly the first actual “wildlife film” with real film was made by Thomas Edison in 1897, showing wild sea lions entering and then exiting the water. As with other films of the era, most depictions of animals were mainly short sequences of fairly static events shown to audiences, filmed in zoos and consisting mainly of the animals being fed. The earliest examples of violent confrontations, though staged, were seen in films such as *Fighting Roosters* in 1898 and *Fight Between Tarantula and Scorpion* in 1900, as well as an especially cruel piece made for the amusement of audiences and ultimately for profit in 1906, called *Terrier vs. Wildcat*. However, the most famous disposable animal subject from this period was the elephant called Topsy from Coney Island, electrocuted in front of a paying audience for killing one of her keepers, and filmed by Edison for *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903). (Bousé 2000, 45)

## **2.1 The Age of Film**

When it comes to pioneers of nature film, Chris Palmer (2010, 34-35) mentions Martin and Osa Johnson as the earliest ones to really bring the wildlife to the to the big audiences in the 1920s. Their films were quests to faraway lands, with dramatic footage of hunting and exotic animals, something the American public had never seen before. As their main goal was to astonish and entertain, their hunts were often staged, with the animals being provoked to attack so the Johnsons could then shoot them as “self-defence”. According to Bousé, the Johnsons “*brought more popular acceptance to wildlife films than anyone prior to Disney*”. (2000, 85) In the 1930s and 1940s, just after the Johnsons had set the stage for animal adventures on film, a man by the name of Frank Buck realized he could make a living catching and selling exotic animals. He brought back thousands of animals for circuses and zoos from his travels, and then staged and filmed fights between them for profit. What was significant in these early examples of *Fang TV*, was the impression of “natural occurrences” they gave to the audience, as if the animals had just *happened* to come across each other in the jungle. “*Buck’s success with films*”, says Palmer (2010, 36), “*did much to whet the public’s appetite for images of the natural world – but mostly its bloody, violent side*”.

After these productions had done their best to shock the audience, Walt Disney's wildlife films, starting with *True-Life Adventures* in 1948, did their best to bring back the "good old traditional values" in a time where the glamour-laden Hollywood movies were seen as "encouraging immoral behaviour". Essentially, good animal behaviour was praised, and bad behaviour was punished, both of which were obviously measured in human terms. (Palmer 2010, 37) Disney used new technology such as Technicolor in his films, created a nice story around the well-edited, well-shot footage, added music and really showed the "nicer" side of nature and wildlife to the people. According to Joanna Henley, "*Disney challenged the tradition that animals were for collection and exhibition, presenting them as personalities or characters in their natural habitats living out their own stories*". (2013, 58) While Disney's films were "morally appropriate" and pleasant to watch, the animals were heavily anthropomorphized and some scenes were fabricated to enhance the "lessons" these films taught, even claiming the makers had nothing to do with the behaviour shown. For example, the famous scene of lemmings committing mass suicide in the Academy Award-winning *White Wilderness* (1958), claimed to have been shot at the Arctic Ocean but actually shot near downtown Calgary, was created by the filmmakers by forcing the lemmings into the water on a rotating platform. (Cruel Camera, CBC, 1982) Not only did it misrepresent animal behaviour by blatantly lying to the audience, the animals themselves were also mistreated. Other notable fabrications in the film included scenes shot at a zoo, using captive animals and carefully crafted studio sets to make it all look like it was shot in the wild. Chris Palmer refers to once asking Walt Disney's nephew, Roy Disney, if the company was embarrassed by their treatment of animals in the 1940s and 1950s. The answer he got was,

*Apologies are needed, but the awareness raised by the films far outweighed anything bad that was done during production. We were decades ahead of the ecology movement. I can't tell you how many times I've run into park rangers who told me they found their careers after growing up on "True-Life Adventures". (Palmer 2010, 39)*

## **2.2 Wildlife Comes to Television**

"Television created a larger audience for natural history subjects by making the moving image more accessible, more part of daily stimulus", says Henley (2013, 56). Indeed, as television sets started to become a common part of the daily life in the mid-1940s, a new director at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago named *Marlin Perkins* got an opportunity to



become the host of a Sunday afternoon television show, *Zoo Parade*. Knowing how important the publicity was for the zoo, he did his bit of promotion by showing animals to the audience, while discussing their behaviour and biology. The program first aired only locally in 1945 and reached the viewers nationally in 1949, staying on air until 1955. After years of broadcasting live from the basement of the zoo's reptile house, the safari film was reborn when the show took a trip to the national parks of East Africa. In 1963 Perkins became the host of a popular nature show by the name of *Wild Kingdom*, which had over thirty million people watching it each week during its peak. The series won four Emmy during its first ten years, among several different honours for children's programming as well as for its contributions to wildlife conservation. The first few shows were studio sets with zoo animals, but the show quickly moved outdoors, evolving more toward film, with each show becoming "a short dramatic movie filmed on location". (Bousé 2000, 72) The series, also known as "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom" after the sponsor, remained in production until 1988, and was later revived in 2002 on *Animal Planet*. Chris Palmer (2010, 41) notes the show using extensive staging during the original run, as many of the animals were actually filmed in enclosures, and the "adventures" shown were set up by the film crew. He refers to a 1966 review in *San Francisco Chronicle*, which – quite gullibly – noted, "One of *Wild Kingdom's* admirable features is its honesty about its subject. This is nature as it is." The article also praised the hosts for being "there", instead of "merely being narrators of wildlife films".

With the 1960s introducing fresh faces to the wildlife television-viewing public, the man with the red wool cap, a French naval officer, conservationist and explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau became a household name. Having previously co-invented *Aqua-Lung*, the first open-circuit scuba set, extended underwater exploration was now made possible. After the fictitious undersea adventure show *Flipper*, shown on television from 1964 to 1967, the time was ripe for Cousteau's first television special, *The World of Jacques-Yves Cousteau* in 1966. The show rose to huge international success, obtaining a contract with *The American Broadcasting Company* (ABC). The show was renamed *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, remaining on the air for eight years.

*As a passionate advocate, Cousteau did something that other leading wildlife filmmakers often neglected to do: he provided context. Viewers not only saw amazing footage of sea creatures but also learned about the sea itself and the threats to its inhabitants. In this way, his films were more real, and more rooted in a bigger picture of what was happening to the ecosystems on which we depend. (Palmer 2010, 44)*

In addition to television shows, Cousteau produced films and wrote numerous books, teaching the public about the oceans and their inhabitants. “Often referred to as “the conscience of the sea”, writes Joanna Henley, “Cousteau produced around 120 television documentaries, wrote more than 50 books and even championed an environmental protection foundation with over 300,000 members”. (2013, 59)

### **2.3 The Big Players of Natural History**

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) established its Natural History Unit in 1957, giving the whole wildlife film industry a fresh start. During their existence they have produced numerous innovative and popular natural history shows, with the 1990 series *The Trials of Life* defining “the highest-quality wildlife films”. (Palmer 2010, 45) The filmmakers often spent months of even years tracking and filming animals for the BBC productions, and a charming and enthusiastic zoologist by the name of David Attenborough quickly rose to fame as the on-camera host.

*It is widely accepted that, in the United Kingdom and beyond, Attenborough has done more than anyone to transfer knowledge of ecological and environmental issues to the general public. Fronting many major BBC series, starting with the epic Life on Earth in 1979, he remains the ultimate authority on not only natural- history subjects, but the broader, philosophical perspective on our relationship with the natural world. (Henley 2013, 59)*

The high standards of production, the integrity of its attitudes and the adventurous spirit of its projects, along with Attenborough’s hosting skill, “have won BBC wildlife documentaries every possible award”, including many prestigious Pandas awarded by the Wildscreen wildlife film festival. (Palmer 2010, 45-46) With traditions of producing highly regarded and widely watched landmark wildlife television, the BBC has continued to produce successful and critically acclaimed shows for over 50 years.

In the United States, 1963 saw the National Geographic Society launching its first television production unit, which is still renowned today for its emphasis on education combined with riveting storytelling, as well as contributing to the “positive filmmaking trend” started by the BBC’s Natural History Unit. “By the end of the 1960s”, says Palmer, “the fabricated fights and other transgressions that were so prevalent in earlier decades of wildlife filmmaking seemed to be a thing of the past”. (2010, 47) Filmmakers began to put

their focus on the beauty and diversity of nature, some even clearly supporting conservation – the environmental movement was thriving, and films were now being achieved without deliberately abusing or exploiting wildlife, as the producers and networks had realized their audience would no longer tolerate staged or abusive films. “*The subsequent environmental movement of the 1960s and early 1970s saw natural-history shows such as National Geographic television specials and The undersea world of Jacques Cousteau meeting an escalating demand for knowledge and observations of wildlife and the natural world*”. (Henley 2013, 64)

All this seemed to change with a series created by Marty Stouffer in 1982, a show of “shocking reality of the life in the wild” called *Wild America*. The show became a hit in its native country, offering the audience taboo-breaking scenes including mating, birth, predation and death using slow-motion, time-lapse and close-up shots, all spiced up with Stouffer’s storytelling. However, appeared to be mostly the American audience that had the taste for this type of entertainment, as a showing of one of his episodes – with a scene of a boar ripping a hunting dog apart – at a British wildlife film symposium resulted in booing and fist-shaking. Palmer quotes Stouffer, saying the audience “*said it was too bloody, too confrontational. I’m sorry, but that’s the story of wild hogs down in Georgia. Their lives are violent, they are bloody*”. (Palmer 2010, 50) In 1996, Stouffer was accused of misleading audiences by filming in enclosed spaces and using captive animals, as well as abusing them. He admitted the “re-creating” of some scenes with tame animals, claiming he used only “limited staging”, but denied ever harming any of the creatures he worked with. (Palmer 2010, 119) Whether it was audience deception or not, his show still set the stage for the “in your face” type scenes and productions seen today.

In 1985, Discovery Channel was launched to showcase popular science, technology and history, and Animal Planet, a channel distributed by Discovery Channel, came along in 1996. “*Never before had so much prime-time TV been devoted to wildlife*”, says Chris Palmer. (2010, 50) With multi-episode programming, filmmakers could now “*delve more deeply into a subject that would be possible in a single program or even a feature film*”. However, the recent years have seen Discovery Channel in the United States focus more on reality television, while Animal Planet “reinvented” itself in 2007, changing its content from educational to more entertainment oriented programming. A 2008 article published in *Broadcasting & Cable* talks about the rebranding, saying

*The goal is to move from being perceived by viewers as paternalistic, preachy, and observation-based to being seen as active, entertaining and edgy. That means targeting adults 25-49, rather than full families, with less voice-of-God narration and more visceral imagery and sounds. Think of it as swapping a drab narrator saying that a lion is about to kill its prey for the blood-curdling scream of the doomed creature as it meets its demise. (Becker 2008)*

### **3 The Great Outdoors: Defining Nature and Wilderness**

When the word “nature” is mentioned, everyone has a definition for it. What counts as wilderness, anyway? Can nature be found indoors, or is it only “available” outside? Charles Siebert (1993, 48), a writer and a journalist, puts it like this: *“To be in “nature”- by which we’ve come to mean the world without us--is to meet firsthand that thriving indifference and nearly insufferable gradualness that moves us to decamp from nature.”*

The world without us, outside our comfort zone, beyond our control. Throughout the ages, humans have tried to control and restrict the wilderness in different ways. We have built houses for protection as well as leaving the outside out, literally. We’ve been chopping down trees and blowing up rocks to make room for buildings, draining out lakes and marshlands for fields, flooding valleys for water reservoirs, and cleaning out the excess wildlife in various ways. In many occasions nature is seen as a nuisance, a force trying to ruin our comfortable lifestyles just by being “in the way”. A good example of this is my father; though he seems to enjoy being outside, watching birds and boating, nature is mostly just “in the way” for him. If he decides the trees near our cottage block too much of the sun, the trees are taken down immediately. If the hill is too close to the cottage for an expansion he is planning, he digs a hole in the hill to make room. He even bought a “mosquito cannon” to lure and trap female mosquitos, in order to keep them from breeding and biting. To him, human is the dominant species with the right to control nature as much as he pleases, to really “show that nature who the boss is around here”.

This was also the main idea in the 1950s, when television sets became a common household item. The first nature shows were mostly about controlling wildlife; viewers were glued to their seats with shows about animals in human-controlled habitats such as the zoo, or humans in “the wild”, hunting or wrangling wild animals. (Orner 1996, 217) Indeed, one of the popular formats was the “outdoor sportsman” type. The presenters were shown in the wild, provoking animals into aggressive behaviour, just so they can “put them

in order” again, asserting their authority both as humans and men. This could be hunting, wrangling or even fishing, as long as the “offender” looked dangerous. *“The mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity”*. (Cronon 1995, 8)

The style obviously reinforced the image of wildlife being dangerous and requiring control (by men), as well as creating a difference between “exotic” animals in the wild, and common domestic animals. The *civilized* life was thought as having “feminizing tendencies”, which could all too easily emasculate men; all things *domestic* were also the main responsibility of women. This can be partly understood as being the way wildlife was seen back then, with more and more people moving to cities from the countryside, away from the natural landscapes and into the industrialized, manmade environments. (Porter 2006, 400)

We can assume “nature” was associated with undeveloped rural areas, something that was not fashionable enough for the city-dwellers of the time. This influence can occasionally be seen in the present-day world as well; spending time in the wild can stain clothes and make you dirty, which is considered disgusting, unhygienic and overall “uncivilized, lower class” behaviour. However, linking the thought of nature with the uncivilized world is not a new one.

*As late as the eighteenth century, the most common usage of the word “wilderness” in the English language referred to landscapes that generally carried adjectives far different from the ones they attract today. To be a wilderness then was to be “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” “barren”—in short, a “waste,” the word’s nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was “bewilderment” or terror.* (Cronon 1995, 2)

According to Cronon, the wilderness had nothing to do with civilized people, and whatever value it held were based only on the possibility of reclaiming it to suit human needs; as a planted garden for example. But somehow the attitudes changed, and these undesired landscapes became the privilege of the wealthy. (1995, 2) The trigger may well have been the development of North America; the New World with a pristine untouched wilderness, nothing like the old and thoroughly populated Europe. And so, the *frontier myth* was born.

*For two centuries the frontier West was the setting for America's most enduring form of popular entertainment. Daniel Boone—master hunter, pathfinder, Indian fighter, and a frontier leader of the American Revolution—was the progenitor of a long line of national frontier heroes. The subject of a short biography published in 1784, Boone was the archetypal Western hero: a man who loves and understands the wilderness, an intimacy he uses to defeat the Indians and tame the country. (Faragher 2006)*

The myth of the frontier ties with the history of the United States, where an often-romanticized concept of the “Wild West” is common. This comes from the colonial era, when America was only a small number of colonies on the Atlantic coast. As large numbers of settlers ventured out of eastern colonies into the vast open land to the west, folk stories of a wide variety would make their way back to cities in the east, describing the unfamiliar ways of life on “the frontier”. The idea of free open land provided great opportunity for early Americans, and their folk stories provided a highly romanticized view of what life was like. Tales that glorified jobs like logging, gold mining and cattle ranching often left out the negative details of these jobs or just how difficult they were.

However, the American West was not a picturesque land of milk and honey, but rather a rough and dangerous place, far from the reaches of government and their laws. There was prosperity to be found, but hard work and sacrifice were required to get it. Despite these negative realities, the ideal “western” character concept of hard work and success was engrained in these stories, which were printed wildly by press in the colonies. As a result, the “frontier myth” emerged, with themes of cowboys and indians, and revolver duels in dusty town squares amongst the wilderness.

A *frontiersman* type adventure theme can be considered as one of the staples in wildlife film. The frontier is present in the early shows with Marlin Perkins, the crocodile wrangling scenes by *Steve Irwin* as well as the recent survival adventures of *Bear Grylls*. In an article published by Time Magazine, Andrew Marshall writes about Steve Irwin:

*...The pet-and-pester approach he pioneered has become the standard way for nature programs to produce cheap dramatic footage — reality TV with claws. Turn on any channel and you'll see Irwin lookalikes hassling animals. They declaim their love of nature, while unwittingly recording our dysfunctional relationship with it, teaching our children to both fear and subjugate creatures already pushed to the brink of extinction. (Marshall, 2011)*

Thus, nature is presented as *the frontier* and can still be seen as the idealized wilderness, where nobody has been before, anything is possible and only the best survive.

Unfortunately, this often means that anything is there for the taking, and ultimately, the humans always come first.

## 4 Showing Nature Off

*We've become, in a sense, a race of armchair naturalists even as more and more of us are now visiting the places and creatures whose stories we've watched on the TV. We go as nature tourists, fully equipped and expectant of seeing those characters, as though visiting the various sets of a Universal Studios theme park. (Siebert 1993, 50)*

With the help of modern technology, such as television and the internet, nature is easily reachable by most people, even the city-dwellers who would otherwise distance themselves from it. It invades our homes, just like wars fought on foreign shores, yet it stays “somewhere else” and does not necessarily concern us in a tangible way. You turn on the television, watch the nature you are shown, turn the television off and return to your everyday life. You know there are things like that “somewhere”, but they’re somewhere else, not anywhere near you nor they concern you in any way. You are already distanced from the nature as it is, so why should you care?

The main attraction in nature films probably lies somewhere between the picturesque scenery and either cute or dangerous animals; it’s either for the eye candy, or for the entertainment value. Obviously amidst all this there are the educational properties of these films, but that is not where the money really comes from. People view nature films just like they view movies, with characters, the good and the bad, and possibly a plot of some kind. In many cases the animals shown on screen are anthropomorphized somehow, they have stories and are followed in their “everyday life”. But what is their everyday life like, really? Because we may have little or no experience of the worlds wildlife films depict, we may have nothing to weigh the images against. Not knowing any better, we may simply end up accepting whatever we are shown as reality.

While the filmmaker’s attitudes and ideals affect the outcome and eventually transfer to the audience, in the end it’s always the viewer who makes the decisions after seeing a nature film. To get a certain message through the audience, they have to be interested enough to sit through the film, and hopefully pick up some ideas as well. In her Bachelor’s Thesis

about the use of anthropomorphism in wildlife films, Jane Adcroft refers to Gregg Mitman, who says that it's the drama and excitement that audiences crave in nature films, even over authenticity. (Adcroft 2010, 6) Discussing this subject, Chris Palmer recalls an event from the 2008 Wildscreen Festival in Bristol, England, where a commissioning editor for the British commercial Channel Five, Bethan Corney, said she would "*rather have shows about "exploding snakes" than about conservation. Programs that are "extreme, strange, and shocking" are what audiences want*" Palmer quotes her saying. "*We are tabloidy and we're not ashamed of it*". (Palmer 2010, 30)

#### **4.1 Wildlife Reality Television**

While many natural history filmmakers approach the subject with a scientific and educational point of view, adding anthropomorphism or presenting animals purely for the viewer's pleasure is still frequent. The latter two bring about the thought of wildlife films as a type of reality television, something that did not actually even cross my mind before I read a completely irrelevant film review on the HybridMagazine.com website. The following is a direct quote from the review of a reality genre film called *The Real Cancun*.

*This is by no means a documentary. Everything that happens is real, but you are only seeing what the producers want you to see, in the order they want you to see it, with the music they want you to hear. And they go even further here by splicing in non-reality cuts from time to time to accentuate the plot a little further. They need to turn these normal people into characters in order to achieve an entertaining experience and they are very crafty in the ways they do this.* (Corey Herrick 2003)

Even though the film in question has nothing to do with natural history films, the quote could be about any of the current nature shows on television. A good, award-winning example of this is the film *March of the Penguins* (2005), in its original French language version. The audio track for the French version features a first-person narrative, making it seem like the penguins are telling the story themselves. The English version however is in the form of a third-person narrative, having someone else tell their story for them. Either way, the penguins are presented as "humans", with their human-like behaviour, even if it actually is unintentional.

The likely reason this specific film appealed to so many people lies in the multiple different interpretations of the behaviour shown on screen, varying from promoting



conservative family values to “unethical” adoptions, ill treatment of weak chicks, prostitution, and ostracism of rare albino penguins. (Walker 2005, 17) People try to identify with the penguins, and assuming conservative values are important to the majority of people watching this film, it’s no wonder people saw it as “heart-warming” and praised it widely. To them, instead of a scientific film, this was another depiction of intelligent design, in addition to being a suitable film for the children and adults alike. No blood or gore, no “too natural”, inappropriate behaviour, just a cute, “real” story told by penguins.

## **4.2 The Snuff of Nature**

The opposite end to these cute animal stories also exists, and commonly goes by the name “*Fang TV*”. It consists mostly of violent events and action-filled sequences found in the wild, edited together to create the illusion of these occurrences being common. As an example Bousé (2000) mentions the North American trailer for the BBC produced *The Trials of Life: A Natural History of Behaviour* (1990). Even though the show itself was made by BBC, the trailer shown on American television to market the videotapes was created by *Time-Life*, then owned by *Time-Warner*. The trailer itself caused great commotion and complaints in the wildlife and natural history circles, even to the point of presenter/writer David Attenborough reportedly considering taking legal action.

*As if designed to illustrate the degree of disparity between the natural world and its media representation, the ad was an extended, rapidly cut montage of action long-shots and intense close-ups (of snarling predators), set to exceedingly percussive music to heighten the sense of drama, danger and unease. As an image of nature it was exotic, artificial, and tendentious. As a piece of film it was exciting, even Eisensteinian. As television, it seemed perfectly designed to capture viewer attention and prevent channel-changing. As an advertisement to promote sales, it was an unqualified success. (Bousé 2000, 1)*

These dramatic and intense scenes of “dangerous wild beasts” were originally seen as in demand by mostly American viewers, as fast tempo and action are stereotypically thought to attract audiences in North America. Fast-forwarding to the present, this type of action is readily available anywhere, as films and television shows are fighting for ratings. In a 2006 interview by *RealScreen Magazine*, Canadian academic, broadcaster and environmental activist David Suzuki says,

*“The problem is not only fragmentation of the viewing audience, but [also the] tremendous increase in sensationalism, which means we are competing against shows where people are eating scorpions and that kind of garbage... But there is still an audience out there that is watching serious documentaries”.* (Christie, 2006)

Chris Palmer mentions Discovery Channel’s *Man vs. Wild* and Animal Planet’s *River Monsters* and *Untamed and Uncut* as examples of “*an unfortunate recent trend toward nature porn and fang television*”. (2010, 146) In *Man vs. Wild*, Bear Grylls is left stranded in a region – usually consisting of wild terrain, such as a jungle or a forest – with his film crew, where he must then survive and find his way back to civilization. The show, which ended in November 2011, often had scenes of Grylls killing a wild animal for “food”, or as pre-emptive safety measure. On the *Psychology Today* website, animal behaviour expert Jonathan Balcombe mentions seeing the show, and describes what he saw as “*depicting brutal violence against animals and reinforcing old myths about perilous nature*”. (Balcombe 2010) In Animal Planet’s *River Monsters*, biologist and extreme angler Jeremy Wade is shown travelling around the world in search of these “river monsters”, freshwater animals often involved in local folklore and myths, and portrayed as “deadly”. Even though the fish and other animals are released after filming, the show still involves “hunting” for them, harming them by trapping, and most likely works wonders in creating fear and hate for certain types of animals. “*These producers often deliberately cause violence to get footage*”, says Palmer. The most extreme example of the shows mentioned above is Animal Planet’s *Untamed and Uncut*, consisting mostly of animals attacking humans, with the show’s website describing it as “*gritty, shocking, compelling, and always raw*”. In Palmer’s book, film producer Katie Carpenter says, “*If you are a human supremacist, animal abuser, or general despiser of wildlife, this show just feeds the flame*”. (Palmer 2010, 146) In the end, it’s shows like these, with the promise of action right in the title, that seem to make the most money for their makers, especially on television. As stated before, it’s the action and entertainment that sells, not the educational value. When it comes to cruelty on television and its effects, Balcombe says: “*I believe a major reason why we tout cruel nature is that it absolves us of guilt for being cruel ourselves; If nature is cruel and we are just another part of nature, then surely it is natural and defensible to be cruel, so the thinking goes*”. (Balcombe 2010)

### 4.3 The Flawless World of Blue Chip Films

The term “Blue Chip film” refers to the big-budget wildlife productions with breathtaking landscapes without people, carefully crafted stories and well-framed shots of interesting animals, but very rarely with a clear message for conservation. In his essay on conservation filmmaking on the *Filmmakers for Conservation* website, Chris Palmer describes blue chip films as “*those films that steer clear of environmental issues for fear of the controversy, focus on charismatic species like bears and sharks, rarely involve people, typically avoid politics or policy debates which could date the film, often contain a compelling story focused on a specific animal, have budgets in the area of US\$1 million per hour or more, and feature magnificent, pristine landscapes with power lines and fences carefully hidden.*” While blue chip films do present the audience with inspiring landscapes and at least raise awareness for the natural world, they may also give their viewers “*a false sense of security, a false sense of endless bounty*”. Derek Bousé lists the chief tendencies for blue chip films in *Wildlife Films* (2000):

- 1) *the depiction of mega-fauna – big cats, bears, sharks, crocodiles, whales, elephants, and the like;*
- 2) *visual splendor – magnificent scenery as a background to the animals, suggesting a still-unspoiled, primeval wilderness;*
- 3) *dramatic storyline – a compelling narrative, perhaps centering on a single animal, with some sort of dramatic arc intended to capture and hold viewer attention (i.e., not a science lecture);*
- 4) *absence of science – while perhaps the weakest and most often broken of these “rules”, the discourse of science can entail its own narrative of research, with all its attendant technical jargon and seemingly arcane methodologies, which can shift the focus onto scientists and spoil the “period-piece fantasy” of pristine nature;*
- 5) *absence of politics – little or no reference to controversial issues, which are often seen as “doom and gloom” themes, and no overt Griersonian-style propaganda on behalf of wildlife conservation issues, their causes, or possible solutions, although a brief statement may be included at the film’s conclusion;*
- 6) *absence of historical reference points – “There has to be a sense of timelessness,” producer Dione Gilmour has said, suggesting that not only nature itself appear timeless, but there should also be no clear references that would date the the film or ground it in a specific time, and thus prevent future rerun sales;*
- 7) *absence of people – the presence of humans may also spoil the image of a timeless realm, untouched and uncorrupted by civilization, where predator and prey still interact just as they have for aeons. (Bousé 2000, 14-15)*

An excellent example of a big-budget blue-chip film is the 2006 BBC series *Planet Earth*. It was the first BBC production ever to be filmed in high definition, as well as the most expensive natural history film ever made with a budget of £16 million. (Slenske, 2007;

Sherwin, 2005) Even though the series does contain all the classic signs of a blue-chip film, it still does not completely lack a conservation message. “*Unlike the films I used to criticize*” says Chris Palmer in *Shooting in the Wild* (2010, 161), “*Planet Earth didn’t ignore conservation. It didn’t present animal life in a bubble or give people the feeling that everything was fine. Conservation was mentioned – and in a serious, responsible way – in many of the episodes*”. The series was also supported by a plethora of books, study guides and websites, some containing strong conservation messages such as the three-part companion series *Planet Earth – The Future* (2006), originally broadcast immediately after the last three episodes of *Planet Earth*. However, *Planet Earth* may be the exception that proves the rule.

## 5 Manufacturing the Representation

With nature films, the focus is commonly on a particular animal or plant species, organism, ecosystem or a scientific idea such as evolution, or observing and documenting a scientific experiment or a study. A common denominator is usually a human presenter in various roles, which can be anything from narrating scenes before or as they happen with explanatory voiceovers (David Attenborough, Cousteau), actually interacting with wildlife in order to “present” them to the viewer (Marlin Perkins), to even direct, usually initiated confrontation with animals (the Johnsons, Steve Irwin, Bear Grylls and others).

The often educational and scientific aspect of nature films makes it easy for the audience to view the content as factual. The most common description given to nature films is documentary, though the definitions of documentary do not actually apply to wildlife film in full. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines documentary as “*a movie or a television or radio program that provides a factual record or report*”, which is consistent with the idea of a film representing reality and actual events. When it comes to the natural world, the reality may be quite boring to most people. The experience of stillness and quiet of the real nature has rarely a place in wildlife film, as it’s all about movement on the screen.

As Derek Bousé suggests,

*For whether in two minutes or two hours, in a promotional trailer or a detailed natural history study, in nonnarrative montages or in elaborately plotted dramatic stories, wildlife film and television depict nature close-up,*

*speeded-up, and set to music, with reality's most exciting moments highlighted, and its "boring" bits cut out.* (Bousé 2000, 3)

Unfortunately for the filmmaker, nature cannot really be controlled or told what to do. The problem with these naturally occurring things is that they are unpredictable, random and at times even fickle; how is it possible to be in the right place at the right time to even see certain things happen in nature? How can the filmmaker get the animals to “tell” their story like he wants it to be told? Citing Jeffery Boswall’s 1988 paper “*The Moral Pivots of Wildlife Filmmaking*”, Chris Palmer describes the ways of deceiving the viewer. According to Boswall, Palmer says, “*anything that made an animal behave unnaturally – for example, baiting it or giving it food it does not normally eat – constitutes audience deception*”. Other deceptions listed include exaggerating, overdramatizing, sentimentalizing and the “common sin” of anthropomorphism, attributing human characteristics to animals. Boswall describes it as “*a kind of lying, because it teaches audiences to misunderstand the real nature of animals*” Palmer writes. (2010, 104) In addition, the viewers may mistake the editing speed to be event speed, easily leading them to false assumptions. (Bousé 2000, 5)

*Nanook of the North* (1922), a famous film considered to be the first feature-length documentary by Robert J. Flaherty, was also possibly the first heavily fabricated film to document “reality”. Though it was not a wildlife film per se, it did feature a seal hunt, though the seal on the other end of the rope was actually already dead. The family shown in the film was not a family at all, the Inuit had already replaced spears with guns when hunting, and even the igloo shown was constructed specifically for this production, as there were no additional lights and the camera was too big to fit inside an actual igloo. Though he was later somewhat open of his methods, he received criticism for deceptively portraying these staged events as reality. Defending his film, Flaherty stated that “*one often must distort a thing to catch its true spirit*”. (Rony 1996, 116) On the other hand his fabrication can be understood, since at the time the only cameras available were large and immobile, therefore it was impossible to film most interior shots or unstructured exterior scenes without significant modification of the environment, as well as the subject action. Adding drama to his film, Flaherty also exaggerated the tough life of the Inuit, often repeating how *Nanook* – though his real name was *Allakariallak* – had died of starvation two years finishing the film, while in reality he died at home, presumably of tuberculosis. (Ebert 2005; Duncan 1999)

## 5.1 Staging Reality

Before a film can even be shot, it needs a script, which means the filmmaker has to know in advance exactly what he wants to capture on film. If the desired shot cannot be achieved the way it was originally planned, there are still options to get it done, perhaps making it look even better on film than expected. One way is to just buy a suitable clip of stock material, but with limited budgets, this may end up being quite costly. An often-used trick is to simply fabricate the scene; either by re-creating it completely, or the less ethically problematic method of “helping” nature create the scene. Numerous choices exist for staging events in wildlife films, and it is not unusual for filmmakers to add shots of captive animals to extend their original footage. In his book “Shooting in the Wild” Chris Palmer gives an example. After spending six weeks in Yukon to shoot footage for the film “Wolves”, the two-person team sent there came back empty-handed. To complete the film, he used captive wolves obtained from a game farm - essentially a sort of a zoo, but the animals there are usually trained for appearing on films. Palmer says he was often asked how they got the shots of a mother wolf in its den, and felt awkward and embarrassed: “*I didn’t want to admit that many of the scenes involved captive wolves, nor was I eager to reveal that the “den” where the mother wolf suckled her newborn pups was a manufactured set*”. Despite this he told the truth, explaining why they had decided to use captive wolves in controlled settings – the fact about using captive animals had even been disclosed in the film credits, but most people had never noticed it. (Palmer 2010, 108; De Vise 2010)

Using captive animals is not just a matter of deception, but also of ethics. “*Often game farms are merely storage facilities for the wildlife media industry*”, writes Palmer. (2010, 110) Recalling one he inspected in 2000, he says: “*While I brooded about the immorality of the animals’ living conditions, the owners boasted about the number of high-profile wildlife filmmakers they served*”. A quick internet search reveals the ways these animals were obtained in the past, at least for the *Olympic Game Farm*, a game farm used to make Disney films such as the infamous “White Wilderness”. The history of the game farm is presented proudly on their website, telling how Disney wanted shots of cougars when there were none on the farm, so the owner “*took his dogs out and captured a couple of juveniles, which were trained for the desired footages.*” However, in an e-mail message sent to Palmer, wildlife filmmaker Beth Davidow says the farms vary in quality, and mentions a game farm in Montana called *Triple D*, where “*baby animals, which are purchased from*

*captive breeders and never taken from the wild, are hand raised, often inside the house. When an animal reaches the end of its modeling career, the owners of Triple D game farm take care of it until the end*". (Palmer 2010, 110)

Another common occurrence of staging in modern natural history films are underwater scenes shot in an aquarium, while the viewer is lead to believe the event is taking place in the wild. CBC's *Cruel Camera* website gives the 2001 BBC film "Blue Planet" as an example; apparently, the film "included a lobster spawning scene that was filmed in a British aquarium. Viewers were led to believe the scene was taking place off the coast of Nova Scotia". (CBC, *Fakery in Wildlife Documentaries*) Palmer describes a scene exactly like this in his book, and tells how "following a noncaptive lobster around underwater, waiting for the right moment and right light, wouldn't be practical", so he would choose to film this particular scene in a tank. The use of captive animals is problematic though, and he goes on to question right and wrong in situations like these. "If it's okay to film a lobster in a tank", he says, "is it okay to build a set so viewers can witness the birth of an extremely secretive animal such as the wolverine?" And while this might be still considered acceptable, "is there an ethical distinction between building a set to rear young animals for filming and building a set to help a predator", he asks. Referring to Boswall's experiments in lectures during the 1970s, Palmer concludes that humans appear to be "programmed by evolution and culture to bond emotionally to our mammal relatives more than to invertebrates and cold-blooded creatures". (Palmer 2010, 118)

## **5.2 The Tricks of Post-Production – From Composites to CGI**

Even if the footage is completely real and authentic, there is still a way to create deceptive footage during post-production. For example, creating composite scenes is easier than ever, and telling the story of an animal character is usually done by editing scenes of different animals together. Sometimes this is done mainly because following a certain animal would be fairly impossible, other times it is just to save time and money. While many filmmakers would not consider this deceptive in any way – after all, the science can still be accurate, and filming the same animals completing a journey would be impossible – Palmer does still see this as deceiving the audience. He mentions filming two whales migrating from Hawaii to Alaska, and notes that the whales arriving at their destination are in fact not the same filmed when the journey started. (2010, 108) Another recent example of this is the film 2007 "Arctic Tale" produced by National Geographic, telling the story of a polar bear

and a walrus. The use of composites is mentioned at the end of the film, however this does not seem to be stated anywhere on the official website.

When referring to computer-generated imagery, *CGI*, it is easy to assume it means mostly animated scenes that would be impossible to create otherwise, such as extinct animals or possibly travelling to the center of the Earth. It would be fair to imagine most people do not see the difference between computer-generated footage and material shot on film, as they expect a certain degree of “plastic” in the appearance of something created on a computer. In *Wildlife Films*, a book published in 2000, Derek Bousé imagines the future of natural history films and digital technology. “*Perhaps the empty space between a lion and its prey*” he says, “*could be digitally removed, making them appear closer on the screen, and making the chase itself appear more dramatic*”. He notes the colours of wildlife films have already been digitally corrected during post-production for some time, but with the new technology the images could be heavily manipulated, if not even created artificially from start to finish. “*At the very least, skies could be made more blue, telephone lines and tourist vans deleted, and a few hundred wildebeests or flamingos added to panoramic shots where needed*”.

Would the audience be able to tell which part of the scene is authentic footage, and which was artificially created on a computer? Especially if the animal you see on the screen was actually filmed with a camera somewhere, but the environment around it is possibly a composite of multiple locations, none of which in reality would be nowhere near the natural habitat for the particular species. Something like this is achievable with far less effort than what filming in the wild would require, and the end result looks just as real. A scene shot on an ordinary backyard can be turned into a lush jungle with exotic animals, and the filmmaker does not even have to ever leave his house.

### **5.3 Using Foleys – the Made-Up Animal Sounds**

Chris Palmer recalls an event from the early 1980s, when he had just started working for television and brought home a film he and his colleagues had just completed:

*She especially liked a close-up scene of a grizzly bear splashing through a stream and asked me how we were able to record the sound of water dripping off the grizzly’s paws. I had to admit that my talented sound guy had filled a*



*basin full of water and recorded the thrashings he made with his hands and elbows.* (Palmer 2010, 107)

As for his wife's reaction after telling her this, he says his wife was shocked and called him "a big fake", adding that since it was a documentary, it led her to expect authenticity and truth. (Palmer 2010, 107)

Even now, when the use of foley sounds may be thought to be common knowledge, not everyone is aware of it. While the close-up shots are easily achieved with a long telephoto lens, the sound would still need to be captured right next to the source, which is challenging outdoors and especially in windy conditions. Even when the weather is just right, getting the recording equipment close enough to the animal can be extremely risky, so the sound used in most wildlife films is not actually recorded live at all. "*Sounds are usually added in post-production from noises created in the studio, sound libraries, or recordings made in the field*", says Palmer. (2010, 107) He goes on to mention some of the ways these sounds can be made, including footsteps in the snow created by squeezing a rubber glove full of talcum powder, or the sounds of a bird's wings done by flapping an umbrella.

While reading the reviews for National Geographic Channel's Untamed America, a show discussed later in the comparative analysis, I found yet another example of a viewer possibly not being aware of foley sounds. A review by *Jeffrey Kauffman* (2012) describes a scene of one episode as "*incredibly artful with its sound design*", and adds "*how the wizards at National Geographic were able to capture the sound of this wolf actually panting as it chases the caribou is just one thing astute listeners may be wondering about as they watch*". Hoping this was just a hint for the reader to actually question the origin of these sounds, I kept reading and surely enough, there was more praise for the sound when discussing the screams sea lion pups make: "*the sound recording here is amazing*". While these sounds could be recorded on location, it is highly unlikely, especially when the scene was shot right next to the sea. And finally, when the writer concludes his review with this sentence: "*When an animal's heartbeat becomes an integral part of an episode (and seems to be an actual recording, not some interpolated effect), you know you're getting something pretty special in terms of nature documentaries*", I just could not help but to feel a little bad for him. Even when he appears to know about these "interpolated effects", he considers this particular sound so well made that it "has to be real".

## **6 How We See Nature – Analyzing the Content**

In this chapter I will analyze the representations of nature and wildlife in the nature films I have watched, and compare different films based on their educational value versus their entertainment value. The initial argument is that the films aimed for North American audience tend to be more entertaining, most likely with the cost of authenticity; whereas the films produced for European viewers emphasize the factual and scientific content, which then possibly reduces the entertainment value of the production. Because of the entertainment factor, I also have a reason to believe in the “less-scientific” films designed to entertain having a higher extent of staged and/or faked content.

The two major television channel brands focused on natural history content available worldwide are the National Geographic channels owned by Fox Entertainment Group, a subsidiary of the News Corporation, and the Discovery Networks channels owned by Discovery Communications, Inc. Although both of these are American companies, the content and style of their programming as well as possibly the connection with Fox has given National Geographic Channel a more “American” connotation, while the high-profile BBC documentaries shown on Discovery Channel give it a slightly British undertone. By this I mean the stereotypical “seriousness” of British television, especially when compared to American counterpart; a certain “style” that can be seen in the films produced by the BBC’s Natural History Unit. BBC does not have a specialized channel for natural history programming, however these films make up a significant part of “BBC Knowledge”, a subscription-based cable channel offered in various countries outside the United Kingdom.

### ***6.1 Research Question and Methods***

For the comparative analysis I have picked two episodes of two different natural history series shown on television, both representing the blue-chip film style. The first one is a four-part series called “Untamed Americas”, produced by and shown on National Geographic Channel in 2012. The episodes selected for this show are episodes 1, “Coasts” and episode 3, “Forests”, both 45 minutes long.

The episodes for the second show, the BBC-produced “Planet Earth”, shown first in 2006 on BBC channels in the United Kingdom and later around the world, were picked to

resemble the content of the first show. The two 50-minute-long episodes selected for the analysis are episode 9, "Shallow Seas" and episode 10, "Seasonal Forests". Even though *Planet Earth* has footage from around the world, while *Untamed Americas* focuses only on North and South America, I believe the content is fairly comparable, and will hopefully show the differences in style and representation between a British production and an American production. My argument here is that the American style will be less educational and focused more on entertainment, with possibly greater amount of staged or fabricated content. Having seen mostly BBC productions, I already know they have a "sensible" style, usually with calm narration and well-researched scientific facts. However, I have also had access to the National Geographic Channel, both the North American and the Nordic version, therefore having a general idea of the type of programming shown on these channels.

## **6.2 National Geographic: *Untamed Americas* (2012)**

Not having heard from or seen this series before, I had no prior expectations before I started watching. I knew the show was narrated by the actor Josh Brolin, therefore I had a feeling it might be mostly "light entertainment", not meant to present anything "too complex". An article on a TV guide website *Zap2it* has some facts on the production:

*"The series, two years in the making, has impressive behind-the-scenes numbers: 27 cameramen logged 600,000 miles of travel to 43 locations in 20 countries. More than 170 days were spent in portable camouflage blinds, and crews braved temperatures from subzero to 120 degrees". (Cutler, 2012)*

I was able to find a few reviews for *Untamed Americas*, most of them praising the quality of the footage and even the "spectacular" sound recording. A review found on a film blog website called "Lord of the Films" describes the situation this film has to face, despite the all the efforts: *"In a post Planet Earth television landscape it seems like any attempt to do a nature documentary miniseries will only result in an inferior product to David Attenborough's (and his crew's) work". (Fernand, 2012)* The filmmakers certainly seemed to have all the little details thought out, but when comparing to giant spectacles like *Planet Earth*, it may not be enough.

The Internet Movie Database gives the series a rating of 7.5/10, though this is composed of only 31 user ratings. What I find interesting are the statistics of these ratings, showing that males aged 18-29 (12 users) have given the show an average rating of 7.8, while males aged 30-44 (9 users) rated it at 7.2. – all the ratings were given by males, no data for users under 18 is available. These statistics can only be seen as a guideline, since the users may deliberately give incorrect info on themselves. Something in Untamed America obviously attracts men under thirty.

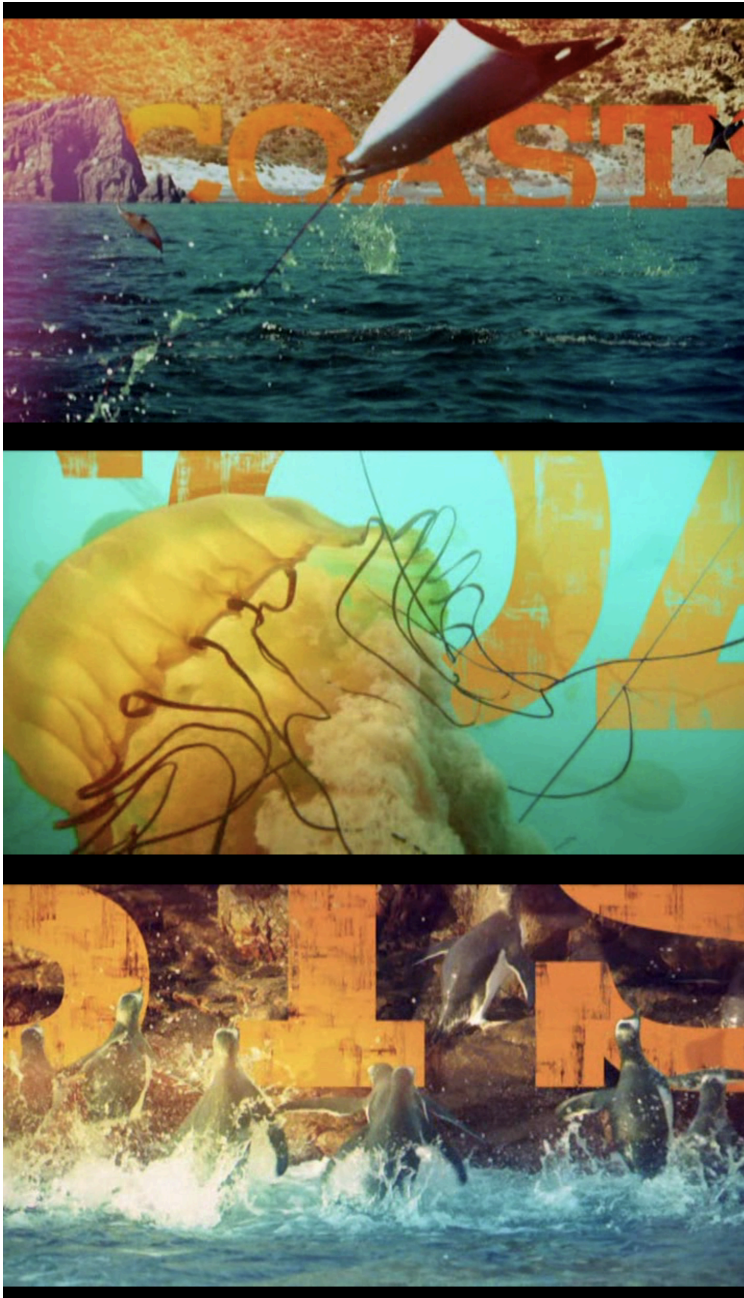


Figure 1. Opening title for "Untamed Americas".

(Screenshot taken 29 April 2013)

### 6.2.1 Opening Titles

Both of the two episodes watched for the analysis had the same intro, which already had an “American” look and feel to it, as demonstrated in Figure 1. The viewer is flown across the sky above a residential area, while the narrator announces how “most of us live here – the concrete jungle”. Immediately after the suburbs, the camera flies above water and forests, with the narrator informing the viewer about the nature outside: “*It’s wilder than you think*”. At this point the narrator seems to assume the audience knows nothing about the world outside their own home, which may even feel offending to some – especially if the viewer has previously seen wildlife films.



*Figure 2. Opening title for episode 1, "Coasts".*

(Screenshots taken 29 April 2013)

The opening credits show the title sequences for all four episodes, with computer-generated episode names carefully placed on the background in giant letters, while different animals run, hop and fly across the screen. (Figures 2 and 3) The sheer amount of action in the opening credits alone is more than most of the BBC productions have in the first fifteen minutes. The music used for the opening credits, as well as the episodes themselves, support the action shown on screen. A review of the series by Desiree

Washington (2012) describes the music score as “*equally well suited for a scene in Blade Runner*”, which feels fairly accurate.



Figure 3. Opening title for episode 3, "Forests".

(Screenshots taken 29 April 2013)

### 6.2.2 The Narration

Throughout the two episodes the narrator uses an excessive amount of superlatives to describe scenes and situations shown on the screen. Expressions such as “*life here faces intense struggle*”, “*the stage for many of the greatest spectacles on Earth*”, “*the most extreme transformation of all*” seem to be used extensively. The writers seem to be

especially fond of phrases emphasizing the “difficulty” of life or “extreme conditions” in some habitats. Such descriptions seem to rely on personification or anthropomorphism, where animals are given human-like feelings, or their behaviour is measured in human terms like “life on this beach is no holiday”.

Most of the time the narrator sounds like he is just reading his lines from a paper, without even really knowing what is actually happening on the screen – the narration was probably recorded without him seeing the footage at all. Brodin does not sound very interested or acquainted with the subject he is talking about, and it is easy to imagine how certain sentences or words in his script may as well be written in capital letters for the dramatic effect. For example, he calls the wood bison “*giant steamrollers*”, a swarm of mosquitoes and blackflies “*an army of trillions*” in addition to describing them as “*bloodthirsty*”, and the reason for the Kermode bear’s white fur is a “*genetic quirk*”.

### 6.2.3 Dramatic content and use of Sounds

Both of these episodes appear to focus on two types of animal behaviour: hunting or eating, and anything related to mating. The hunting and eating scenes are always gory to at least some extent, even if the animals shown are eating a carcass. The filmmakers even obtained footage from inside a carcass, showing a red fox entering it and ripping flesh from the bones while inside. In the “Coasts” episode, a group of bears was shown dining on a whale carcass. The narrator did mention how the bears are usually solitary animals and many bears eating the same carcass like this is not common, but they did not bother to note that bears are actually omnivores, and mostly feed on fish and berries, with vegetation being the main staple in their diet. Only showing them eating a dead animal like this easily gives the audience an impression of a dangerous predator, which leads to unnecessary fear and very often, even hate.

In an article published on the USA Today website, Chuck Raasch (2012) talks about the series producer Karen Bass, and mentions how “*her films can have heroes and villains, but your attitude determines which is which*” – even though the two episodes clearly separated the “good” animals from the “bad” ones: this was easily determined by the music used in some scenes, which usually featured violence. A common occurrence was showing the males of some species either fight with each other, or the male attacking a female’s cubs.

Not only does this misrepresent the species shown, it also reinforces gender stereotypes in a really bad way. The narrator was clearly stating it was a male attacking or fighting, so it is easy to see how the audience would view violence by males a “normal” thing. All the females did in these episodes were related to reproducing, either by being the object of the male’s attention and advances, or by taking care of her offspring. This again gives the audience the impression of “traditional values” being found in the nature.

What I found interesting and odd was a scene about dolphins, near the end of the “Coasts” episode. It clearly represented the animals as “the good” ones, with cheery music playing while they were jumping in the sea. *“Each splash is thought to mean something different”*, the narrator says. *“Anything from let’s move, to danger, to let’s get it on”*. Right after this the narrator emphasizes how *“this communication is key to their social life, as is sex”* and a composite scene of dolphins mating is displayed on the screen. The narrator goes on to tell facts about the sex life of these dolphins, from the size of their genitals to *“lucky for female spinners, it’s not about size, but frequency”*, and all the way to *“mothers keep a strong bond with their calves, but don’t know who the father is”*. This leads to showing the males protecting all the calves *“because they don’t know which calves are theirs”*, and finally stating how *“it’s an unconventional family, but it works for them”* as human values and morals would somehow apply to dolphins and their behaviour. This particular scene – even though portraying the dolphins as “good” with no hunting scenes and the usual happy music – somehow gave the impression of them being “unconventional” and even perverse, with the females mating with multiple males and stating how they don’t really even care who fathers which calf. As commonly these kind of nature shows have scenes of dolphins being social and smart, possibly even interacting with humans, the way this episode represented them just seems tasteless and even a little bit judgemental.

In the “Coasts” episode, scenes of crashing waves separated different parts of the show, the “Forests” episode had either aerial images of forests when changing location, or time-lapse footage of sunlight and shadows moving on the tree trunks. The time-lapses are fairly common in nature films, especially the ones marketed as documentaries. However, the waves seemed to be placed mainly to underline the dramatic scenes, in addition to convincing the viewer how these events are taking place in the sea instead of an aquarium. Many of the underwater scenes had no other animals or organisms shown aside from the currently discussed species, so these could have been shot in an aquarium. Very often the backdrop is only blue water.



#### 6.2.4 Transparency of Production, Conservation Messages

The end credits of the show reveal the use of stock footage, as well as using captive animals: “*Some scenes were filmed under controlled conditions. All scenes represent accurate animal behaviour.*” The credits roll by extremely fast, so the viewer is not likely able to read any of the credits, especially the note at the end, which is saved for the very last frame and vanishes just as fast as it appeared. Being able to read this particular text meant a lot of pausing and rewinding, and then learning to pause pre-emptively – it really was the last frame, and only that *one frame* which had the disclaimer.

Overall, despite the high production value, the series appears as a generic wildlife show, with a focus on the entertaining content. There are no conservation messages and little education in this, with animals being portrayed as “bizarre”, the natural cycle of life seems to be demonized, and even normal forest fires are somehow presented as “devastating” and “unnatural”, while comparing them to nuclear weapons: “*The inferno can pack more energy than an atomic bomb*” is not a thing one would expect to hear in a wildlife film, let alone when it is used with something that is a part of the forest ecology like fires are. For uneducated audience, a show like this works just as well as any other show with enough action to keep them watching, but for the viewers with prior knowledge about nature and wildlife, this feels cheaply made and inaccurate.

#### 6.3 BBC: Planet Earth (2006)

After watching the two episodes of Planet Earth, both of which had similar content as National Geographic’s Untamed Americas, the differences in presentation were easy to see. As the series has won four Primetime Emmy awards, was the most expensive natural history film ever produced by the BBC, and with a rating of 9.5/10 on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the expectations were quite high; especially since the series was rated by 50 345 users on the website. The statistics on the website show males rating the series slightly lower than females, with the exception of males aged 45+ rating it at 9.4, while females aged 45+ rate the show at 9.3. Generally all other age groups (18-29, 40-44) have given the show a rating of at least 9.5, though users under 18 have rated it below 9.0 – this I attribute to their young age, and possibly just wanting to rate the show without ever seeing it. It should be noted, though, that the majority of users still give Planet Earth the

outstanding rating of 10.



*Figure 4. Opening title for "Planet Earth".*  
(Screenshot taken 29 April 2013)

### **6.3.1 Opening Titles**

Despite having previously watched some episodes of this series, I had not seen the two chosen for this analysis. The first major difference is presented immediately as the show starts, as opposed to *Untamed Americas*, no narration or other footage was shown before the opening title. The opening title itself is composed of satellite imagery of the Earth, and the name of the show appearing on the screen, as shown in figure 4. The overall atmosphere is calm, the background music is made for the series and performed by the BBC Concert Orchestra, and the narrator is David Attenborough, probably the most famous narrator in the history of wildlife films.



*Figure 5. Opening title for episode 9, "Shallow Seas".*  
 (Screenshot taken 29 April 2013.)

The opening title sequence is followed by a short introduction involving the contents of the episode, transitioning to a scene with aerial footage relevant to the episode in question. The episode title appears as an overlay, and fades soon after. (Figures 5 and 6) The footage used as the background becomes the start of the episode, followed by narration.



*Figure 6. Opening title for episode 10, "Seasonal Forests".*  
 (Screenshot taken 29 April 2013.)

### **6.3.2 The Narration**

The narration itself is completely different than what *Untamed America* had, as it is not just text written by someone being read from a paper – the lines were written with Attenborough's input, and his knowledge in the things he talks about can also be heard. Compared to him, Brodin's narration sounded monotonic and uninteresting; he also did not

seem to be actually interested in what he was narrating. Planet Earth has a lot more scientific facts given about what is shown on screen, and BBC delivers it with this empathetic touch, which brings the viewer closer to the animals in a way no other show does. In an article published in *Archives of natural history*, Joanna Henley (2013, 61) mentions a possible reason for BBC productions' success: "*Many have said that it is the creation and depiction of empathetic relationships with animals that is the most pioneering educational aspect of films emanating from the BBC Natural History Unit*".

All the facts given seem well researched, and even the word choices reflect that – for example, there is no “assumed” facts, and even if something is suspected, it is told in a way that doesn't confuse the viewer. For example, when a scene with two whales is shown, a mother with its calf, the viewer is told how “*his mother must starve*”, after not being able to eat for so long while taking care of the calf. Obviously there is no way of actually telling if the whale is feeling hungry or not, but saying it like this puts sympathy on the whale without anthropomorphizing it. Another example of the difference made with just choosing the words right is when a certain “difficult” environment is shown: compare Planet Earth's “*survival is not easy*” to “*life here faces intense struggle*” as it is told in Untamed Americas. Essentially they are saying the same thing, but the other one just puts it in a more dramatic way. In addition, the difference in language is also noticeable; Attenborough frequently uses “old” or “traditional” British words, such as “*vast*”. While death is not really discussed, it is still mentioned in both of these shows. Again, the style in narration is different – Untamed Americas underlines how short the life of a jellyfish or a vole is, while Planet Earth calmly states, “*cicadas, having completed their tasks, die*”.

The scenes and animals chosen reflect the purpose of education instead of only creating “easy” entertainment for profits; the number of species shown and discussed greatly exceeds that of Untamed Americas, in addition to the facts being actually useful and interesting instead of just “cool” or “weird”. Nothing is portrayed as either good or evil, every animal gets treated equally, and no behaviour is presented as “inappropriate” or judged. A good example of this is an algae forest in the sea, which Untamed Americas describes as “*an alien world*”, while Planet Earth is showing it as a spectacular place full of life. It almost seems that Untamed Americas is trying to widen the gap between humans and nature, further alienating the viewer who might already feel disconnected from nature.

### **6.3.3 Dramatic Content and use of Sounds**

The lack of violence and dramatic content is apparent in the music, as there is only a little increase in the tempo at times, but nothing to make the viewer feel nervous. The two episodes I watched had no actual violence in them, in fact the only “fighting” scene was of two seahorses butting their heads together. Even then, the music didn’t change to dramatic, but stayed as calm as before. Scenes were shown as more of a curiosity than a crime scene; the viewer isn’t lured in with the promise of blood and gore, but with beautiful images and a soundtrack to go with it. Compared to other natural history films, there seems to be either fairly little foley sounds used, or then they are so well made it’s impossible to notice them. Very often the music would pause, and the only background sound was the sound made by animals, such as cicadas chirping. What I personally find fascinating especially with this series is the overall feeling of peace it gives to the viewer. It is a delicately crafted combination of the orchestral soundtrack, non-hectic images and the reassuring narration that just makes every episode feel “complete” somehow. However, the calm style makes each episode seem far longer than it actually is, thus possibly boring viewers with no specific interest in the subject. Planet Earth is not a show for the channel surfer, rather the viewer must really sit down to be able to fully appreciate it.

### **6.3.4 Transparency of Production, Conservation Messages**

What really separates Planet Earth from the others is the “making of” part, “Planet Earth Diaries”. This sequence is about five minutes long, shown right after the actual episode ends. This really adds to the transparency of the production, showing the audience how certain shots were achieved, without fabrication of any kind. For example, the episode “Seasonal Forests” used the five minutes to show how the aerial scenes presenting baobab tree were created, by using a special hot air balloon called the “Cinébulle”. Fitted with a simple seat for two and a camera, the operator and the cameraman were able to fly around the baobab trees while not bothering any wildlife, resulting in steady footage of these trees unlike anything seen before.

After reading Palmer’s book I was expecting to find more conservation messages in Planet Earth, but they seemed to be extremely subtle with just the occasional hint, such as mentioning how only 6% of the coral reefs are still in their pristine state. This could lead a concerned viewer to research the subject, but without specific interest in conservation or

coral reefs, it may not do anything. The real conservation messages are in the three-part companion series “Planet Earth – The Future”, which sadly was not part of the release I watched.

## 7 Conclusion

After researching, watching and comparing, I have to agree with Derek Bousé, noting how *“film and television have little tolerance for what is normal and usual in life, thriving instead on what is rare and unusual”*. Looking at Untamed Americas, I find this to be especially true. Just the words used in the narration alone emphasized how something was “bizarre”, “alien” or otherwise unusual or weird. Bousé continues, saying, *“spectacular chases and bloody kills are everyday events on film and television, occurring with remarkable regularity and predictability, yet are surprisingly rare occurrences in reality”*. (2000, 4)

It seems the desire to see action does apply to the American audience, which leads to filmmakers including more and more violence and blood in their productions, often even staging or baiting the animals to get the most gory shots – the shots that sell. While the BBC productions rarely have bloody scenes, a certain degree of staging is still possible, such as using captive polar bears to film the birth of a cub. While this can be seen as fabrication, there are still many details the filmmakers have to consider in order to show a certain thing on film, especially if they actually care for the animal’s well-being, not to mention the lives of their film crew.

Essentially the question of fakery and fabrication appears to be mostly ethical – how far the filmmaker is willing to go for the shot, and at what price. This in turn is a matter of the budget available for the production, as less money means less high-quality material and less travelling, therefore it is easy to resort to creating the scene by staging, or even by using computer-generated images to stitch the perfect sequence together.

According to my findings, the amount of fabrication can be higher in American wildlife film productions, assuming they contain more dramatization than British productions. This does not mean the British productions are free of deception either – they just seem to generally do it less, since at least the films made by the BBC appear to hold up to their traditions in creating educational content, while still entertaining the audience.

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## Appendix

The Time-Life trailer for BBC's "Trials of Life – A Natural History of Behaviour" (1990) is available on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddsl-IOx0Ag>.