Domination and Preservation: Reflections on Wildlife Cinematography

by Margot La Rocque

Contemporary wildlife documentaries, geared for the television market, exhibit a recurrent pattern: their narratives tend to emphasize the predatory pursuit of wild animals. In large part this problem is a consequence of the masculinist and scientific legacies which wildlife filmmakers have taken over from the natural sciences, in order to seek legitimacy for this genre. Other (even contradictory) forces also come into play in the production of wildlife documentaries, namely those arising from commercial demands. The differences between wildlife programming and entertainment specials are at times only ones of modality. Thus, while the contemporary writings of deep ecology and ecofeminism very clearly reflect alternate ideals of human interconnectedness with the nonhuman environment, wildlife documentaries seem compelled to answer to two rather "environmentally unsympathetic" task-masters: objective science and entertainment.

In general, environmentalists have failed to launch a critique of wildlife documentaries, choosing instead to overlook the embeddedness of most programs in the very assumptions to which radical environmentalism must necessarily be opposed. Of the few dissenting views about wildlife documentaries on record, not surprisingly one of the earliest I have found comes from Adolf Portmann—the European biologist noted for his radical revisioning of biological thought. Amidst the ecstatic accounts of the achievements of filmmakers such as Cousteau in the late 1950s, the following passage from a 1959 essay by Portmann stands out as a rare admonition of the perils of a disembodied eye:

Portmann’s message is plain: photographic reproduction will fatally weaken our appreciation of an original nature.

In this paper, I present a few tentative reflections on wildlife documentaries which seek to expand the above critique of this genre that Portmann initiated. In particular, I begin with a discussion of the figure of the wildlife filmmaker as a "personality" or exemplary witness. Indeed, few of these figures (who often appear on screen as well) are scientists, despite their appeals to scientific ideology. Their appeal lies, on the other hand, in their enthusiastic amateurism, their fierce independence, their mastery of technique, and the heroism of their sweeping vision. I argue that as mythic constructions, the careers of such filmmakers resolve antagonisms between domination and preservation (much in the same way that series such as Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom are an attempt to reconcile the conquest of the frontier with the effort of saving it).

To begin to understand how such a persona is constructed—a persona which in turn shapes many of our everyday relationships with wild nature—I will consider some of the various ways in which the single white male occupies nature in wildlife documentaries, and advertises himself as such. But rather than generalize, I begin with a brief look at one such document of self-promotion: Lights Action Africa! (1980). This film, co-produced by Alan Root and Aubrey Buxton, is about the celebrated careers of Root himself (and his wife Joan) — makers of such well-known wildlife documentaries as The Enchanted Isles (1967) and The Year of the Wildebeest (1976).

The One Who Looks at Wild Animals

Lights Action Africa! may well be the epitome of idealizing film biographies about the ones who look at wild animals. This 60-minute film follows the Roots through a variety of domestic and professional situations. Scenes of the Roots at work on various films, and relaxing and doing chores around camp, are intercut with extraordinary footage shot for their wildlife documentaries. The

*Margot La Rocque recently completed her Master in Environmental Studies. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Sociology at York.
resulting images of wildlife are marked, above all, by indications of their normal invisibility to the layperson’s naked eye.

The Root legend occupies a unique place in the history of wildlife filmmaking. Indeed, it is a legend identified almost solely with Alan. Alan’s public image is in fact a composite of images: of teacher, adventurer, husband, carpenter, superb pilot, risk-taker, naturalist, and conservationist. In the first few minutes of *Lights Action Africa!*, the viewer is treated to a dazzling array of exploits, as the Roots rise above the terrain in a hot-air balloon, take a coffee break in the middle of a remote river, jack up a four-wheel drive vehicle, buzz over treetops in a small plane, climb a rope ladder, share a drink with some "natives," and film underwater – to list just a few. The ensuing film primarily documents how the Roots manœuvre their way around the physical barriers that stand between the wild creatures of the continent of Africa and their camera lens. The Roots are clearly privy to knowledge and experiences not accessible to most.

Almost immediately, however, the commentary informs us that in this idyllic, exciting world, the Roots share the fate of all human creatures: to "try to keep fit," to "try to keep clean," and to "try to keep 'regular.'"* Taken literally, this is of course true. But the juxtaposition of commentary and images here wields an irony. Rather than show scenes which might seem synonymous with domesticity, the viewer is treated to glimpses of a life probably very different from their own: Alan jogging past a group of elephants, and bathing in a river with an audience of wild creatures; Joan tossing a roll of toilet paper from a make-shift outhouse towards a lion. These vignettes all serve to emphasize not in fact the similarity of their lives to our own, but the marked contrast. The Roots are, most definitely, a breed apart.

However, there is at least one sense in which this semblance that is drawn to the rest of our lives is correct. This husband-wife "team" is hitched to the familiar theme of the sexual division of labour, with Alan the professional, and Joan his help-mate. In the film’s initial shot, Alan peers through a long lens in a torrential rainstorm. He continues filming while his tea cup and saucer, perched precariously on a log, fills up with drops of rain. A female figure (Joan) comes into frame, picks up the cup and saucer, exits frame, and a moment later returns the tea cup to the log—this time with the saucer placed on top. Alan, meanwhile, has not removed his eye from the lens. Joan’s small civilizing gesture in this wilderness will likely go unnoticed in the shadow of Alan’s much more significant task.

This sexual division of labour informs almost every scene of the Roots at work and at home in the camp, and is underscored by the shots which introduce Alan and Joan individually: Alan is lathered with shaving cream; Joan bakes bread. These images place Alan and Joan on opposite sides of the sexual divide, although the commentary seems at first unwilling to acknowledge this:

> In the short time that they spend at their Lake Naivasha home, Joan does what she can, with a little help from her [animal] friends. But she’s happiest when living in a tent, and is not really into domesticity and the comforts of home.

Yet again, images soon belie words. There are several shots of Joan gardening, sewing, and cooking, always with “orphaned” animals at her side. Then in the first major sequence in the field, after several aborted attempts at filming hippos underwater from floating "coffins" and cages, male and female are finally explicitly distinguished as an arduous task approaches:

> Now they knew that there was only one way to get their pictures: they would have to take the plunge.

> Alan is a stimulus at it. He relishes this sort of situation—where danger and fear are finely balanced. A project is not interesting unless the odds are against him.

> Joan’s philosophy is simpler: if Alan is going to do these things, it’s less worrying and much more fun to do them with him. So, it was the two of them who swam toward the unknown in Mzima.

> Throughout *Lights Action Africa!*, Joan is variously set up as target for a snake’s poison; as parent to the smallest hornedbill chick (whom she “tops up”... so it doesn’t get left behind”); and as the one who can get closest to the nonhuman (by

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mimicking the rasping feeling of a fish that cleans algae from the hippo’s hide, Joan is “able to scratch a two-ton hippo’s bottom”). These scenes construct woman as closer to “nature” than man. Teamwork is perhaps a misnomer here, for in spite of the assistance Joan offers, the persona Alan projects seems to hinge on his singularity and self-sufficiency. The figure of Joan serves primarily to mark the gap between Alan’s masculine privilege and authority, and the closely interconnected domains of “the feminine” and “nature.”

In the closing moments of the film, the commentator asks rhetorically: “So, what is it the Roots have that makes them the ‘A team’?”

Well, for a start, they’re obviously just that—a team. They have a pioneering sort of courage... and patience. Tenacity... and patience. Special skills. Lots of energy... and patience. But above all, they have a deep understanding and love for the creatures they film. And for Africa.

But here is the crux of the problem. The film ends with a confused appeal to the simultaneous threat to wilderness and the inevitability of extinction. Accordingly, in one breath the narrator concentrates on the Roots’ aspiration to save what is fast disappearing, and with the next, the pastness of a great Africa is a given:

They will need all these qualities in the future, for their kind of Africa is fast disappearing. Their films, and others like them, have done much to show the world what a tragic loss that would be.

Alan and Joan will go on filming, and will continue to share their wonderment and understanding. And who better to record, for all time, what used to be... in Africa?

So much for saving animals then. The urge to save wildlife has been translated into the urge to record it: the preservation of a life by its representation. The Roots may well be an “A team,” as the commentator exahorts, but following the logic of the marketplace (where images of wildlife are a commodity like any other), the exchange value of their work reflects the increasing rarity of the phenomena that they photograph.

Survival of the Fittest

I recall that at the screening of Lights Action Africa! at a gathering of wildlife film professionals I attended in Bath, England in 1981, the auditorium was abuzz with excitement at Alan Root’s presence. Confessed Eamon de Buitleir (a colleague of Root’s) on coming face-to-face with this legendary figure:

I was quite confident at coming to talk and show my bit of film. Now panic has set in! I’d never seen Alan Root before, and here he is himself—and on film! This fantastic film-maker, tearing around the jungle, fully equipped with small plane, a generator, a whole boxful of every lens ever made for the Arriflex, a battery of lights, not to mention a wife thrown in as snake baiter and hippo fodder!

What is striking about this statement (aside from the fact that it vastly depreciates the accomplishments of de Buitleir who, labouring on a tiny, intensively cultivated island, has himself produced some of the most resplendent wildlife film sequences I can recall ever seeing) is the extent to which it focuses on the sundry trappings of the trade. Indeed, this paraphernalia is of no possible use to a filmmaker whose task it is to document not the flora and fauna of the vast continent of Africa, but of Ireland. Clearly both the human and nonhuman accouterments—wife, vehicles, camera apparatus—augment the power of Root in de Buitleir’s eyes, for in this profession expertise is virtually synonymous with the command of technique. But it would be a mistake to put such comments down simply to de Buitleir’s envy or false modesty; the embracing issue is surely the advancement, both on- and off-screen, of masculine prowess and technologically intensive activity as the very essence of conservation practice.

Such an accord between domination and preservation is abundantly documented in literary and filmic chronicles of the careers of wildlife filmmakers, and in numerous publicity images featuring filmmakers with their gear. The ideological force of such accounts and displays of wildlife filmmakers with their gear may be seen to lie in their apparent reconciliation of the human drive to master Nature with a technologically guided process of saving it. This suggests that, despite whatever desires are peaked by the lure of danger and the promise of omnipotence, this seemingly primordial contest is now offered in service of a greater and contemporary ideal: wildlife preservation. The wildlife filmmaker appropriates nature, but allegedly solely for ameliorative purposes.

The immense burden of this critical assignment is iconically represented in numerous publicity shots in which the filmmaker stands as a metonymic representation of “one who looks at wild animals.” Typically, he deftly shoulders his weighty apparatus while surveying an expansive or formidable terrain, or, in another favored pose, pauses for a moment from his intense investigations through the camera lens to look toward yet another lens, thereby evoking the phantom witness who will eventually share in an imagined exchange.

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with a true champion of the wild. The expression is always stoic; pleasures accrued in the pursuit of one's quarry are necessarily consumed by the gravity of this urgent task: to make an exact representation of a species so as to insure against its disappearance. This endeavour would seem to have both spiritual and scientific import.

Yet it seems to me each filmmaker is ultimately poised to suggest a triumph of human ingenuity over nonhuman nature. The lure of wildlife photography and cinematography—its appeal to modern, humane sensibilities—is that it allows a connoisseur's relation to nature while simultaneously claiming not to exploit it. If the photographic fray is a disturbance—a penetration of the animal's habitat not unlike that of hunting—it is nevertheless ostensibly bloodless: a way of having our cake and eating it too, of possessing the animal and permitting its life to be spared.

Wildlife photographers and filmmakers seem innocent; by contrast, hunters, and most particularly trophy hunters, do not. Accordingly, while the hunting of animals has provoked much outrage throughout this century, wild animals may be held captive, given sulphuric ether, refrigerated, chased by motorized vehicles, treed by dogs, etc., all by photographers and cinematographers without a qualm; nesting locations may be revealed without a thought. Yet, hunting and photography share much of the same terminology. We are reminded of this whenever we speak of "loading" and "aiming" a camera, or "shooting" or "taking a snap-shot."

Obviously, it is not by chance that the photographic act has often been compared with shooting, and the camera with the gun. In her collection of essays on still photography, Susan Sontag suggests that people have switched from bullets to film as the fear of nature has been replaced with nostalgia:

The desire to photograph the rarer, the more magnificent the species (and the rarer, I might add), the truer the match is said to be with the human. It may also be the result of wanting to enter into communion with the environment, to return to a time when man was a hunter, a provider; to return to our "animal roots." This pleasure must be pursued in further and further away places, as more and more exotic animals are sought.

And what prompts one to photograph wildlife? What is this urge? The desire to photograph a wild animal may also be said to grow out of respect and affection for the species. Animals are beautiful and colourful; they are fitting subjects for the lens, out of the ordinary, naturally photogenic. The act may be prompted by the desire to be out of doors, to make a contribution to science, or as Richard Kearton put it, "to pit one's skill and ingenuity against the shyness and cunning of a wild beast." In both instances the animal is taken from its world and made over into an image; it is opened up for future scrutiny, in another place, by another group of people, or perhaps by all of humankind when the species or phenomenon has ceased to exist.

Significantly, the history of wildlife cinematography and its progenitor, wildlife photography, is entwined with that of hunting. We can find evidence of this in the titles of many of the early natural history photography texts—Photography for the Sportsman Naturalist (1904), How to Hunt with the Camera (1926), Stalking Birds with Color Camera (1951), etc.—and in the careers of many of the great museum collectors and wildlife filmmakers. To appreciate just how intimate the relationship between hunting with a rifle and hunting with a camera is, we do well to read the numerous personal accounts that have been recorded by men who have performed both.

"In past few years I have tried hunting and collecting," noted Herbert K. Job in his 1905 account of his adventures as a "camera hunter," but this new hunting [with the camera] entirely outclasses them. It requires more skill than shooting, and hence is a finer sport. The results are of more interest and value, and, withal, the lives of the wild creatures are spared for our further pleasure. This hunting is in season the year round, every living thing is proper "game," and the sport may be enjoyed by men and women alike. One may use both gun and camera, if desired. In my own case, at first both were used, but, finding camera-hunting the more interesting and exciting, I gradually lost the inclination to shoot."

Carl Akeley declared in 1923, "Camera hunting takes twice the man that gun hunting takes"—on the grounds that it required greater skill, daring, and
endurance.  

Today, the sheer volume of published tales of near-fatal encounters between wildlife filmmakers and their "quarry" in the field provides ample evidence of the legacy of this predatory tradition in contemporary film practice. An article celebrating the 21st anniversary of Anglia's wildlife series Survival catalogs the exploits of several filmmakers associated with this series:

Alan Root had a hole torn in a leg by a hippopotamus and was also bitten by a leopard. John Buxton was nearly trampled by buffalo in northern Canada. Des and Jen Bartlett came close to drowning in the Amazon when their rubber boat was damaged and they were washed half a mile down river. Dieter Plage, a mercurial West German, was attacked by a crocodile which bit through his camera mounting, and has twice had close encounters with charging elephants.  

Wildlife filmmaker Wolfgang Bayer has conceded: "I am basically masochistic... It's the challenge I enjoy--it's toughness, overcoming circumstances."  

In the conventional split between "consumptive" and "non-consumptive" uses of wildlife, wildlife photography of course falls in the latter category (the animal's life is spared, after all). But we must surely ask, what do we mean by non-consumptive use? Is this not a contradiction in terms? Are we to assume that only the results are important? That the largely predatory pursuit of the animal is always understandable, justifiable--even desirable--if the animal is not killed, if indeed we have a bloodless fray?

New Wilderness?

A close look at the long-standing success stories of wildlife television would indicate that wildlife photography and filmmaking has to be constantly renewed with new frontiers--whether of species, behaviour, or technique--so as to engage the interest of the television audience in the nonhuman. From the microscopic daguerreotypes of the mid-nineteenth century, through the "flashlight" night images of the 1920s and the underwater scenes of the 1950s, photography and its evolutionary progeny, cinematography, have certainly lived up to (and surpassed) the promise made by American painter Samuel Morse upon seeing the first daguerreotypes in Paris in 1839: that the medium would offer the naturalist "a new kingdom to explore."  

Though many nature writers have not ceased to celebrate their relationship with the natural world first of all within the everyday and close to home, or to pin the great questions of humankind in nature on something as simple as the dilemma of a domestic cat and a junco, wildlife photographers and, in particular, filmmakers, have known no such freedom from commercial demands. Driven to travel further and further away from home in order to pursue an ever receding horizon of "amazing creatures," or, alternately, to get closer and closer to those species and natural processes near at hand, filmmakers in particular find themselves under pressure from two conflicting sets of expectations: those arising from the desire of the audience to participate in the vicarious conquest of new realms of the nonhuman world (whether this be scenes never recorded on film before or scenes normally beyond the naked eye) and those created by the need of these discourses for an idea or condition of wildness whose mythic proportions have not been diminished by this proliferation of images.

Consider the sensation once created by motion picture recordings of even the most commonplace scenes in nature, as reported in the London Times of August 17, 1907:

Entirely new possibilities in photography in nature study--one may say in field lore--were revealed by Mr. Kearton yesterday before a small gathering at the hall of the Institute of Journalists. It has been known for sometime that [Richard Kearton] and his brother, whose photographs of birds are known all over the world, had been experimenting with the bioscope. The results are astounding. . . . The photographers have chiefly been busy with young broods. . . . You could follow every movement of the bird; watch the bullfinchess bring out the pouched food in surprising quantity: the larks run along their little pathway and carefully select each bird in turn. The waving of the grass, the ruffling of the feathers were quite distinct. The audience could not forbear a cheer when the sedge warbler, passing his mate on the nest, passed on the food, which she in turn passed on to the young. . . .

The more our collection of such photographic evidence grows, the more difficult it becomes to elicit such a response. We compensate for this by searching even further abroad, substituting information or sensation for experience. The single human being today--be it wildlife painter, photographer or filmmaker--now stands most often not in relation to a local woodlot or other cherished spot, but to an entire continent, or even planet. Yet the dialectic of man and continent--rarely woman and continent--even man and planet, does not dwarf the individual, as one might expect, but rather aggrandizes him. Listen to some of these titles of television series: The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau; Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom; Lorne Greene's New Wilderness. These are regions not of the world's body--her
rivers, landscapes, ecosystems, or even nation-states—but rather territories of human mastery and subjugation: evidence of our sweeping vision.

A final note: If I have been pessimistic here, it is because the genre of the wildlife documentary as we know it now has absorbed elements of escapism and scientism common to other practices, and is fraught with contradictions. For example, it may well be that even the flattened "whole earth" image, often featured in the title sequences of wildlife television documentaries confirms Portmann's dire vision, Yaakov Jerome Garb writes that behind this image which may commonly express the "beauty, finiteness, fragility, and interconnected unity of the Earth," he finds instead "a banner of alienation and subjugation: evidence of our alienation and escape from the Earth." He calls it "a rearward view of a distant and abandoned Earth." Indeed, in a recent television interview, wildlife filmmaker Wolfgang Bayer confessed his "ultimate view of a distant and abandoned Earth.

1. Portmann is often cited by Neil Evernden in The Natural Allen: Humankind and Environment (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985). For a fuller discussion of the work and thought of Adolf Portmann, see Marjorie Greene's The Understanding of Nature, Vol. XXIII of Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1974). Greene explains that Portmann's work hinges on the distinction between what he calls authentic and inauthentic phenomena. Authentic phenomena are those patterns in space and time which appear to our senses, and inauthentic phenomena are those phenomena which would ordinarily be imperceptible to us, but which are increasingly mistaken for reality itself.


6. Lights Action Africa! All excerpts from this commentary have been transcribed by this author.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. This is not, one surmises, accidental, for behind such statements lie some of the most complex theoretical questions about the nature of photography and filmic representation.


13. Although I was in attendance, I have taken this quote from a short piece entitled "Quotes from Bath...", The BKSTS Journal, 64:1 (January 1982), p. 7.

14. I am thinking in particular of his series on the indigenous wildlife of Ireland. An excerpt from The Living Forest produced by R.T.E. was screened at the symposium at Bath.

15. See Susan Sontag's On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), pp.14-15, for a discussion of some of these metaphors, which Sontag claims are variants of the "inescapable metaphor" of the camera as phallic.


22. Morse described the daguerreotype in a letter from Paris to the editor of the New York Observer, published on April 20, 1839. He wrote: "I have the impressions of interior views are Rembrandt perfected. One of Mr. D.'s plates is an impression of a spider. The spider was not bigger than the head of a large pin, but the image, magnified by the solar microscope to the size of the palm of the hand, having been impressed on the plate, and examined through a lens, was further magnified, and showed a minuteness of organization hitherto not seen to exist. You perceive how this discovery is, therefore, about to open a new field of research in the depths of microscopic Nature. We are soon to see if the minute has discoverable limits. The naturalist is to have a new kingdom to explore, as much beyond the microscope as the microscope is beyond the naked eye."

