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Abstract:

Seeing Culture in Watching Nature on the Screen

by Henrik Juel (2006)

Nature presented on a screen is something quite familiar to us. From the earliest days of cinema nature films have formed a popular, vital and innovative genre. Today most TV-stations successfully offer a variety of wildlife and nature related programs. Nature programs are considered good family viewing. We even install images of nature on our computers as comforting screen savers, and perhaps it is an emblem of modern culture that we know about wild nature mainly from the screen, and that we appreciate nature the most when it is something appearing on a screen?

However, not much has been written about the history of nature films, their reception and their cultural context, nor about the narratives and aesthetics involved in presenting nature on TV. Compared to the rather intense academic interest in other genres, e.g. sit-coms and the latest in reality-TV, critics and scholars pay surprisingly little attention to this rich, and intriguing, material.

But the (re-)presentations of nature have many a story to tell about our culture. The screen versions of nature offer mainstream discourses - and occasional daring views - on sex and violence, on individualism and survival, on family values, and on how to defend your territory. A close, critical analysis may reveal new insights - not just about nature, but about us as cultural and social animals steeped in history.

Join a safari through this amazing and virtually unexplored genre!

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Nature on my Screen

From the earliest days of cinema and throughout the television era to the present nature films and wildlife programs have formed an innovative, vital and quite popular genre. Most TV-channels offer quite a variety of nature related programs every week - at least in the Nordic area and probably around the world. In general, programs of this category attract significant audience numbers, and the production of nature programs for television form a well-established industry; perhaps not a booming one, but at least a well known line with its own enthusiastic and highly skilled, creative professionals.

However, very little has been written about the genre or the history of nature films, or about the often quite astonishing technical achievements of the pioneers of the genre and its avant-garde; we rarely witness anyone receiving an award for a nature film, nor do we hear about the lives and personalities of the directors in this field; and hardly any scholars seem to be interested in the development of the genre. Searching library catalogues for books or articles dealing with subjects like "wildlife", "nature film" or even "nature and TV" leaves one with very few hits. Understandably the few studies available also mention this "loneliness" of the long distance nature film researcher:

Although cinematic and televisual images of animals have been commonplace, wildlife films and television programs constitute a relatively little studied genre.¹

Det har undret mig, at naturfilmens historiske forløb er blevet overset af de fleste værker om dokumentarfilm og andre nonfiktive film.²

Exactly why historical reconstruction, myth analysis, or for that matter, mass communication research of most any type has not been conducted on this genre to any significant extent is largely a matter of speculation.³

Today there is a small and loose network of scholars interested in wildlife and natural history films, who, despite barriers of language and geography, have begun to exchange papers, observations, and ideas. It is woefully late in the history of motion pictures for this work to have begun, but at least it has.⁴

Hopefully this lack of interest is not due to any assumption that nature films would simply be "natural" recordings of the things out there in nature, something like documentary illustrations of basic facts from the realm of the natural sciences. This of course would be as naive as regarding news programs as nothing but a straight forward recording of "new" events in the human world appearing all by themselves and in good order in front of the camera. When it comes to the news it is widely accepted that this sort of material involves processes of selection, gate-keeping, framing, agenda setting, evaluation of news worthiness, storytelling etc. In short: the so-called news does not just appear, it is also constructed and produced. And the same must be said of the nature of nature film: it is not just there, in front of the camera ready to be reproduced for your screen. Nature is also something to be selected, framed, narrated, dramatized, contextualized, produced. Nature films are not - and never were - straightforward re-presentations of a given nature - they are presentations of cultural interpretations of nature (and just in passing it should be noted that these days a variety of themes relating to nature and the environment are actually appearing in the news as well).

In this short article I hope to point out that the contemporary as well as historical stock of nature films, wildlife and nature related TV-programs presents us with a fascinating jungle of possible academic roads to be taken - even when limiting the interest in the nature presentations to content analysis and not venturing too far into proper reception studies or other types of media research⁵. I agree with Cynthia Chris, who writes about contemporary wildlife documentary that it "circulates discourses of

race, gender, sexuality and power"⁶. And I may add that it should not prove too difficult to detect discourses of religion, politics and good old (and perhaps new?) ideology either.

Of course it can be objected that it is not quite clear how one should delimit the genre of nature films. But so what? This uncertainty belongs to almost any other genre as just one more challenge for the scholar and would probably be a very productive one to work with in this area. Because when it comes to inventing new techniques, new types of narrative, and new mixtures of the well-known schemes: the films on nature do not lag behind. A close study of nature films might be a nice way to get a good fresh view of what it is that the media of moving images is able to do in the borderland between depicting reality, creating stories and reviving myths.

Thus I find it reasonable to believe, that analyzing and interpreting to some depth the specific art and functions of nature films – as manmade presentations of nature – might have something interesting to tell us not only about specific natural phenomena, but more generally about our cultural and historical relationships to nature, our attitudes and ethics, the values and discourses of our society and - perhaps - about our own changing identity and "nature".

Nature and Early Film History

The study of nature through filmmaking goes back to the very first moving images. The experiments conducted by Muybrydge in photographing the motions of a galloping horse are often mentioned as forerunners of the real, live film, and indeed scientific interest, as well as technical innovation and purposes of entertainment , seem to go hand in hand in the history of nature film. The pioneers of nature film were pioneers also in developing equipment, and their skills in film making were not second to any other genre when it comes to recording, editing, shaping a narrative and side-glancing at the commercial aspect.

Nature films have been made for both scientific and educational purposes as well as for entertainment or out of commercial interest or personal ambition. No sharp distinction between fiction and documentary existed in the early days (and that distinction will probably always remain blurred). The very first cinema show produced by the Lumière brothers in 1895 with ten small rolls of film - all filmed outdoor - was both documentary in a traditional sense, and a comedy show in another. *L'Arroseur Arrosée* (with the gardener being tricked to splash water in his own face by a boy, who first steps on the hose and then lets go) may even be called the first garden film. Even though it is clearly a sort of instructed slapstick comedy this does not exclude it from the genre. Nature films are generally carefully instructed and edited, and in modern garden programs for television the hosts are often closely followed and adored by the camera and the microphone, not so much for their expertise in botanical phenomena as for their looks and showmanship. Nature programs often tend to lionize the good storyteller, the funny person, a member of a royal family, or some other popular guide.

Among the very earliest films to follow were recordings showing some breaking waves - and simply that (e.g. *Rough Sea at Dover*, Birt Acres, 1896). This might be interpreted as a scientific study of nature, but it was also a very popular view and many such "wave films" were to follow⁷. Other popular shows were panoramic views

of mountains or the seaside, filmed from a train or a boat, and soon a wide range of travelogue films followed. Spectacular entertainment often seemed more important than authenticity of the recordings, but indeed all sorts of interests could be seen at play in the early film business - not just the photographers' love of nature. The power of film to depict a beautiful landscape and thus to promote tourism seems to have been noted as early as 1901⁸.

Natural wonders like *The Eruption of Mount Vesuvius* (1905) was made using trick recordings, and the Danish *Løvejagten på Elleore* (1907/8) was completely staged⁹. Two old lions from the zoo in Hamburg were hunted and killed on a small island in Roskilde Fjord. Other shots were taken in a wood north of Copenhagen, others in a zoo, but the scenery was supposed to look like an African safari. The film was banned for some time. Neither the inclusion of a negro dressed in very colourful clothes in this black-and-white film, nor the proud pose, nor the smoking of cigarettes by the hunters seemed to worry anyone: only the fate of the animals. Some public scandal followed (animal welfare debate), not unlike the fate of similar issues today. The film sold well, some prints even in Africa.¹⁰

Another very successful film at the box office was *Hunting Big Game in Africa*, 1909, produced by Selig in a studio in Chicago and using an actor to imitate Roosevelt. It was a complete fake, but much more convincing and dramatic than the "original": Roosevelt had actually been on a safari together with the photographer Kearton in Africa, but the footage seemed to lack drama or even good shots of animals and scenery (even though Kearton also tried to splice in a still picture of a lion¹¹).

To fake or "cheat" in the recording or editing of material presenting nature is neither new nor outdated; nor is it uncontroversial. During the live broadcasting of the Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer in 1994 a stock shot of a fox crossing the skiing tracks was inserted. This "false fox" caused some debate about its questionable authenticity. It would be to sadly neglect the history lessons of the nature film tradition to see this sort of problem as just a consequence of *modern* electronic media or network competition.

The Myth of Lemming Suicide

Most of us have heard the story about how a lemming population may from time to time become so numerous that the little animals start to migrate, rush along and stop to nothing, even if it means killing themselves by falling off rocks into the sea. I have asked a number of my friends and colleagues and they all knew about this phenomenon - but they had no clear knowledge of how they knew it. It seems to be a myth well known in the western world. I myself was told the story in school in the 1960's and the imagery was somehow so powerful, that I actually expected to see such a mass migration when I later went backpacking in the mountains of Northern Scandinavia. I saw plenty of traces of the little mice-like animals - but began to wonder about the amazing story. It seemed to me that there was plenty of room in Sarek National Park and that it was very far to the sea. I then did a bit of research and learned that lemmings might be very numerous in some years and that it was difficult to explain exactly what regulated the population. But no sources affirmed that they should go crazy in some sort of mass-hysteria and commit suicide. It was rather

disappointing to read so much about ecology and nothing about spectacular and tragic events.

Today on the net it is possible to get closer to the original source of this persistent story. It appears to stem from one of the *True Life Adventures* of Disney, but unfortunately the film is not available "right now", as it says on the Disney video site; but the advertisement is promising:



True-Life Adventures: White Wilderness VHS

*Discover what wildlife enthusiasts have clamored for! The pioneering wildlife achievements of Walt Disney's team of filmmakers, brought to video by popular demand. The award-winning TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURES series will amaze and thrill you with dramatic stories and striking imagery, unforgettable moments captured on film and now offered on video! White. The color of bleakness. And nothing in the world seems as bleak as the icy cold wilderness of the Arctic region. Yet, nine daring photographers spent three years in this "white wilderness" to prove that it's anything but bleak. Now, on video, Disney brings you wondrous scenes of spectacular landscapes and true-life adventures of native wildlife including walruses, polar bears, lemmings, and vicious predators in this Academy Award®-winning film!*¹²

White Wilderness is a nature documentary produced by Disney in 1958. The film was directed by James Algar and narrated by Winston Hibler. It was filmed on location in Alberta, Canada in the course of three years. As in the animation classics of Disney it is not difficult to recognize certain values of individuality and purity in the nature documentaries. Mitman explains how many different interests and attitudes towards nature could go into a production, but also how in the end it was all smoothed into a Disney unity of populist values. Mitman tells us that "....Disney believed animal behavior revealed the "instinctive beginning of the deepest, most basic human emotions""¹³. The personality of the individual had to be emphasized:

*While shooting Disney's feature film White Wilderness (1958), Herb and Lois Chrisler spent eighteen months in the remote regions of Alaska. Many Disney photographers like the Chrislers idealized wilderness as a place of frontier values. Only in the complete freedom of the wild, Lois Chrisler suggested, could one escape the conformist trends of mass society and know the true individual nature of oneself and others....*¹⁴

The fear of mass movements and the adoration of individuality seem to have flourished in the US at this time. The 50'ies were also the decade of McCarthyism and cold war worries about communism. Is it possible that some of this had an influence on the construction of the myth of lemming suicide? Is it sociological or perhaps existentialist anxiety? Anyway, it is hard to understand why the film crew went to such trouble as is described below. They were not recording what they saw in nature so why this constructed scene? Did they want to add excitement? Perhaps, but then they hit on something that was readily accepted by the public at the time and that has remained alive in western culture:

White Wilderness famously contains a sequence supposedly depicting a mass lemming migration ending with the lemmings leaping to their death into the Arctic Ocean -- in fact, the entire sequence was staged. The lemmings were not even local (there are no lemmings in Alberta); the film makers arranged to buy wild-trapped lemmings from Inuit school children in Manitoba and transported them to the set. A few dozen lemmings, placed on a large, snow covered turntable and filmed from a variety of angles, became a mass migration. As a grand finale, the captive lemmings were herded over a cliff into a river (in the film, this was the "sea", and the herded lemmings were on a "suicide drive"). Generations of TV watching schoolchildren grew up on the Disney nature films, and the myth of lemming suicide persists to this day.
http://encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/White_Wilderness

The Lion - a New Sexual Role Model?

In order to support my claim that even what seems like very traditional straightforward documentary nature films might contain rich clues for a wider cultural interpretation I will mention a few points from a recent film about lions. This film, produced for the BBC by John Downer, was shown on Danish broadcast TV, DR1, January 28th 2001 at 7.15 p.m. - thus a prime time show for family viewing. Danish title was "Løven - Dyrenes Konge" (The Lion - King of Animals). The announcer promised us some spectacular views of the life of real wild lions due to a new camera technique. Here the new technique was the use of a robot camera disguised like a huge stone with some green twigs sticking out. Using a remote control the film crew was able to make the camera roll in on its four little wheels amidst a group of lions thus getting very clear and amazing close up pictures.



This is of course in line with the tradition of applying or even inventing new techniques for nature filming: high speed, slow motion, under water, under cover, infra red, etc.

Also in line with a specific nature film tradition is the rather sudden appearance of David Attenborough out of the savannah explaining about the camera. But this famous host disappears again after about half a minute (maybe he is doing the voice-over in the English version; in the Danish version this is performed by a female voice). Anyway, for the careful content analyst (starting out by taking note of the form of the communication) this short appearance of the host draws attention to the fact that so many nature programs seem to tell their stories in this way, i.e. through some well known person, as if it is assumed that we, the audience, want to see nature not by ourselves (actually being out there), but through the media; and here again, through the experience of some host person. It is like a second order mediating - and not uncommon in other programs, genres or parts of our culture. Maybe we want to see for ourselves - but it is also very nice to be told just what and how to see things.



This leads to another point I want to make about the narration in this and other programs: we seem to want a good story, a narrative with a plot in the sense of some action and development, a hero, a problem to be solved, and so on: beginning, middle and end. In this film the voice-over soon tells us that the old male lion has to defend his position as leader of the group as two younger strangers, also male ones, are approaching. The old lion chooses to attack the intruders, we are told. And that, then, is also what we see, there is a fight, the old leader wins and chases the others off. But maybe this is what we see only because of the interpretative voice-over and the careful editing. By watching the same sequence again a couple of times I have come to realize that this is a montage of material from different sources; it is a constructed story. Maybe a reconstruction of something the recording crew really experienced or had heard about, but not a recording of one actual event: the position of cameras - even though in part a moving robot camera - the change of light, and the interjection of suspense shots strongly indicate this. My point here is not that this is a lie or a shame - but that we have a curious willingness as an audience to interpret pictures as telling us a dramatic story. Perhaps we are eager to accept such stories because they provide us with models or myths through which we are able to understand our own lives better? And is it perhaps nice to be reassured in this changing multi-cultural world that defending your own territory (and access to "your" females) is a very "natural" thing to do?

I have tried substituting my own, very different, commentaries for the original voice-over in other wildlife film scenes, and they have been easily accepted by the students to whom I showed it. They were later rather surprised to hear the originals. I told them e.g. that a sequence would show the happy carefree life of some animals on the savannah. The original commentary was saying that the animals in this situation were suffering and almost on the verge of dying because of the lack of rain. Both versions of the story worked fine with the same pictures. We seem able to project all sorts of

human emotions, relations and behavior into the animal world - and vice versa - without knowing exactly what is allegorical or wishful thinking, observational science or selfdeluding anthropomorphism.

Towards the end of this lion movie we have perhaps become so accustomed to the splendid close up pictures of the otherwise private life of the lions that we overlook another trick of the filmmakers. The very young lions are chasing - more or less for fun an exercise, we are told - a huge hippopotamus, and some of them jump along behind it with their front paws placed up on the back of the fleeing animal. Nice pictures with a lot of motion.



But in between are inserted little shots taken from a different angle, actually from what seem to be on top of the back of the hippopotamus. However, in the other pictures - the establishing shots - no camera was mounted there on top of the animal. The robot camera cannot suddenly jump up there, so some sort of trick is involved.

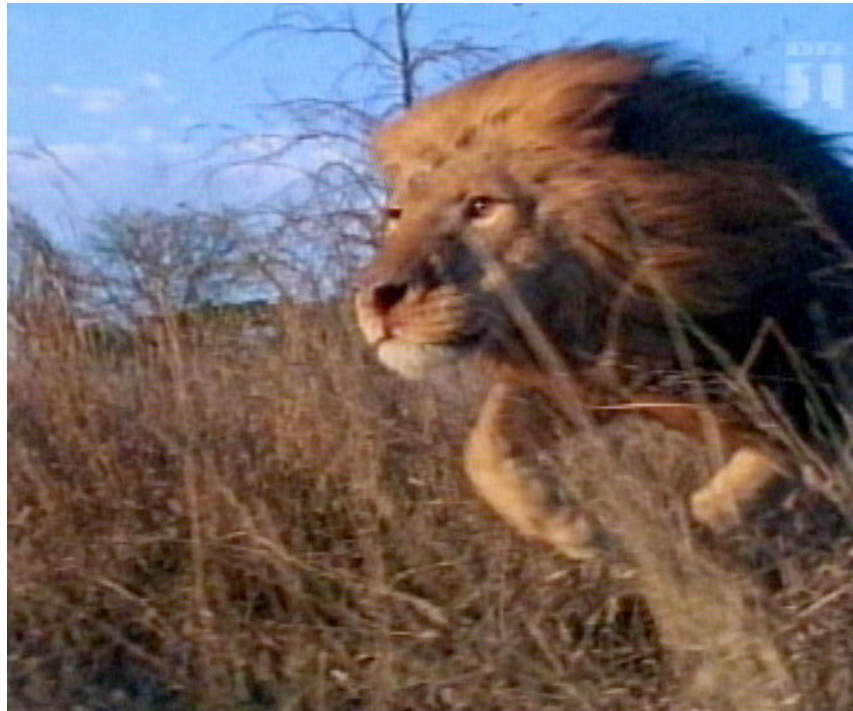


Stopping the tape on the few inserted frames and comparing to material earlier in the film revealed to me that these shots were from a different situation: the young lions were trying to climb onto a grey rock where the camera is located, and the rock looks a bit like the back the hippopotamus if you just see it very briefly - and as spectators we are accustomed to this kind of reverse shots, e.g. in a dialogue scene, so we readily accept this as the true story.

Of course there is not necessarily anything wrong about constructing stories or about leading an audience into constructing their own plots, myths, ideas, discourses or interpretations. But this is where an analysis can find such an abundant amount of material in nature films. Lions are widely used as symbols in our culture, and a new story about the family life of lions is likely to enter the imagination and revitalize the symbols. In the animated film *King of the Lions* from 1994 Disney puts out one type of story about a very affectionate family life and a sentimental father-son relationship (Simba the young lion is very devoted to the memory of his dead father who really tried hard to look out for him). But in this television production with the robot camera the lions are not portrayed as having a very cosy family life - on the contrary we learn that a new male leader might very well kill off all the young ones - in order to secure the survival of his own genes later. This may be true or not (and the lion may know about genetics - or probably not), but what I find significant is how much a film is emphasizing this "fact of life", how it talks around it, explains, or even excuses it.

Naturally when it comes to the sex-life of lions it is easy to see how the human connotations, the discourses of the day and perhaps also the worries of the contemporary culture are at play. A male lion has often been seen as a great sexual symbol, a clear role model in our culture, perhaps. The female speaker of the program even tells us (in Danish) that "it is the size that counts" and only a bit later is she adding like a pun that she is referring to what the female lion feels about the size of the males mane! I wonder: how does the speaker know this? Did she conduct

carefully planned qualitative interviews? Is it something established through scientific investigation - then why this peculiar wording?



Anyway, we are told that a pair of lions mates as often as 150 times in 3 days. This, of course, sounds very much like good solid information from the natural sciences (and at first seems to reassure us, that a lion is really a very potent Don Juan). Now the information is probably correct, but the airing of this information in prime time about the sex-life of lions is likely to have some emotional impact on the male as well as female human spectators - especially perhaps in a culture now experiencing increasing problem with young men losing their fertility and/or interest in sexual engagements. It must be of some significance to hear that a real lion is doing his thing every 25 minutes - that is if he gets enough encouragement from the lioness. Now, we do see the female lion in some shots doing something that might be interpreted as "being interested". But then we also hear about how aggressive the female lion behaves towards the male right after each session. He is likely to be both torn and bitten. One of the robot cameras just barely survived, we are told, and we see some dramatic dusty shots of this (or whatever it is?) accompanied by lots of roars and noise on the sound track.

This means that many interpretations are possible, taking point of departure in the audio-visual "discourses" of this sex-sequence. Many associations, sentiments, and imaginings can be triggered by this apparently very "natural" documentary - but of course their reception also depends on the climate of the culture and the individual preferences. So perhaps nowadays to be "a real lion" means to be pushed into too much sex and to expect some dangerous aggression - especially from the female part? I for my part no longer see in the next wildlife films a lazy male lion lying in the shade of a tree leaving it to his females to do the hunting because he is such a macho patriarch. No, I see the poor fellow resting there, because he is exhausted and scared of the lionesses.

Epilogue on Film and Nature.

This was just a very brief indication of some of the curious, amusing, moving and spectacular incidents available in this vast material. A careful treatment of the different cinematic presentations of nature over the last hundred years should be able to reveal how different concepts of nature change and reappear in an interplay with historic and social conditions. These manmade images of nature do in fact tell a story, not only about the wild and exotic spectacles of nature, but also about the ongoing search for identity and meaning in contemporary human life. Nature transformed into moving pictures with sound, speech and narrative structure is more than just nature: it belongs to the big cities, the schools and private homes of modern society – and today the quest continues with virtual reality and into cyber space. Moving images of nature are often a mixture of art, science and entertainment. And the popularity – not least today - of these (re-) presentations of nature calls for a cautious and sensitive interpretation.

Recently I overheard a group of Danish rangers ("naturvejledere") complaining how difficult it sometimes was to satisfy today's schoolchildren. It was hard to arouse enthusiasm for a field trip to the local forest, the beach, or to an abandoned gravel pit in order to look at the birds, the animals, plants and insects in such common habitats. The kids did not think there was much to see or to experience. Nothing really happens, they say, even if you wait for hours. Nothing spectacular like the rapid unfolding of a flower, the hatching of eggs of ants larger than life, or something dramatic like lions hunting a gnu, killing it and tearing it apart - all in close up pictures.

Fortunately the rangers did not lack ideas for finding new ways of introducing local nature, or new themes about the environment, to schoolchildren. But just in passing they blamed nature programs on television for making their jobs harder. And indeed nature films and wildlife programs have made us accustomed to grand stories and a perfect view of strange and distant phenomena. On film you can condense time and space, and you can create stories and construct sequences that perhaps were not there to be observed in the material to begin with. That is part of the magic of filmmaking and film viewing, and I do not lament that. I just feel encouraged to try harder to analyze what it is we see - and do not see.

Once it was the creed that we should study the book of nature in order to understand more about divine principles and the wonders of creation. Today we should perhaps study the films of nature in order to understand more about the human principles and the wonders of civilization.

¹ Cynthia Chris: *Watching Wildlife: On the Nature Genre in Film and Television. Its History and Meanings*, 2002, p. x (of the Abstract).

² Palle Bøgelund Petterson: *Naturfilmens Tidlige Historie: Baggrund for at naturfilmen opstår og dens udvikling i perioden 1895 - 1928*, p. 1

³ Mark R. Orner: *Nature Documentary Explorations: A Survey History and Myth Typology of the Nature Documentary Film and Television Genre from the 1880s through the 1990s*, 1996, p. 4.

⁴ Preface of: Derek Bousé: Wildlife Films, 2000. Pennsylvania Press.

⁵ I have touched upon some of these research aspects in previous articles: Fjernsynets natur - den TV-formidlede naturoplevelse, Arbejdspapir nr 106, Humanistisk Forskningscenter, Menneske og Natur, Odense Universitet, 1997: 58 sider.

"Natur i firkanter" i Naturen Værdi - Vinkler på danskernes forhold til naturen. red. Agger, Reenberg, Læssøe og Hansen, Gads Forlag 2003.

⁶ Chris, p. x.

⁷ Petterson, p. 37.

⁸ Petterson, p. 43.

⁹ Løvejagten på Elleore: <http://www.danskefilm.dk/index2.html>

¹⁰ The movie - usually associated with the producer Ole Olsen - was directed by director and actor Viggo Larsen, who also played the role of the hunter, and with cinematographer Axel Graatkjær according to:

<http://www.dfffilmfotograferne.dk/general.asp?pageID=19>

¹¹ Gregg Mitman: Reel Nature - America's Romance with Wildlife on Film, 1999, p. 7.

¹² <http://disneyvideos.disney.go.com/moviefinder/products/0033103.html>

¹³ Mitman, p. 119.

¹⁴ Mitman, p. caption fig. 17.