What I Learned from the Making of *Closer to Home*: A Research and Reflection Paper

The process of creating my final project short film *Closer to Home* naturally divided itself into three parts: filming, editing, and forming a message. I learned something from each step of the process and gained a greater understanding of Cronon's words and my own beliefs through the act of making the film. This process also inspired me to research wildlife filmmaking further by diving deeper into the readings we completed in class as well as finding additional resources about filmmaking, narration, and landscaping at Pomona College.

Beginning with filming, I gathered the clips of "wilderness" around me for *Closer to Home* as I went throughout my regular daily routine. Anytime I saw an animal, an interesting plant, or a nice natural scene, I would take out my phone and film a short clip. This practice made me so much more aware of my natural surroundings than I normally am while walking through campus. Knowing that I needed so many clips of nature, I began keeping my eye out for any sign of flora or fauna as I went to class or to the dining hall, and this has helped me appreciate just how much of the natural world exists on our campuses. There were also so many natural examples that I didn't include in the video, often because my hands were full, or I was in a rush while walking and didn't have time to take a video. This meant that even when it wasn't for the purpose of my project, I was noticing nature all around me. I hope this is an awareness I will keep with me even when the project is over.

This heightened awareness and subsequent appreciation of animals that I gained from making my film connects to some of the points John Berger makes in his piece *Why Look at Animals?* Berger analyzes why it is appealing for humans to watch animals–whether in life or media–and what this means for our relationship with them. Berger writes, "The animals scrutinizes him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise

the animal. Yet the animal–even if domesticated–can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is *being seen* by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him" (Berger, 5). As I made my short film and began to look at and see animals, I felt myself *being seen* by animals just as Berger describes. Filming the animals was interesting to me because of the "abyss of non-comprehension" that Berger mentions–animals are starkly different from humans. We are curious about them, afraid of them, and unsure of what they will do. For this reason, we want to look at them. And, as Berger writes, this non-comprehension goes both ways. Animals are also curious and afraid of us. Interacting with animals around campus more for this project pointed out to me just how much I am seen by animals and how my presence affects them.

I tried the best I could to not disturb any of the animals or insects that I filmed, and I often used zoom to prevent getting too close. Even so, many times the lizards would scamper away from me when they saw me noticing them. I also tried to film multiple clips of birds but could never get a good one as they would fly away whenever I got remotely close to them. Although I don't think I did much harm to any of the animals, as it's common for them to encounter humans and scurry away, this experience did cause me to reflect on how I was affecting them by making the film. In order to make a film about nature on campus, I had to disturb some of the animals involved (even if just in a small way). These interactions highlight Berger's concept of the mutual "abyss of non-comprehension," and his words helped me contextualize how it felt to *be seen* by animals as I made an effort to look at them.

This made me think about how wildlife films in general can serve to both help and harm animals, as their messages might be for conservation, but their methods could be invasive. Bousé

discusses this phenomenon in his chapter *The Problem of Images*, writing, "Even those who intervene most invasively (in nests and dens) rely nevertheless on their subjects' habituation to the camera to mask the fact from viewers" (Bousé, 26). Filmmakers assume that the animals they document will be disturbed in some way by their presence, and therefore turn to "habituation" in hopes that the animals will become used to them enough to not show their reactions to the human presence.

When editing my film, I encountered many choices that related to the critiques of wildlife filmmaking that Bousé discusses in his piece as well as those we have talked about in class. The first step in my process was to record the voiceover, which consisted of quotations from William Cronon's *The Trouble with Wilderness.* The piece is long, so it was impossible to record the whole chapter for the project. Therefore, I was tasked with the job of picking quotations from the piece that made sense together, successfully communicated Cronon's main points, worked with the theme and message of my film, and were easy to understand without reading the rest of the paper. The quotations I picked ended up coming from multiple different parts of the piece, and one of them I even edited a sentence out of for clarity. This is the first instance in my film where I found myself changing and manipulating reality to work more smoothly for my project.

Bousé writes specifically about voiceover narration in *The Problem of Images*, noting how easy it can be to manipulate voiceover as opposed to natural, real-time speech. He writes, "The use of available sync-sound and diegetic speech in place of voice-over narration are especially significant. These can, of course, directly affect editing style. As Barnouw points out, editing silent footage (which would include wildlife film) typically results in the creation of artificial 'film time,' whereas editing for speech tends to allow 'real time' to reassert itself, making it more difficult for filmmakers to cut at will, and also for audiences to accept some

manipulations of events" (Bousé, 27). Bousé notes here that diegetic speech, or that which is occurring in real-time, encourages more "realistic" editing as it can be harder to manipulate or cut around the natural speech. Voiceover, however, is more easily controlled and manipulated by editors. This was certainly true in my project–I was able to cut up the source material, re-record the voiceover many times, edit the clips after recording, and time them exactly how I wanted with the wildlife imagery.

In a research dissertation titled *Voiceover Narration and Audio-Visual Imagery in Non-Fiction Film*, Jeremy Lines studied the relationship between video imagery and narration from a cognitive science perspective. Lines found that voiceover, when used with video in non-fiction film, has a tremendous effect on the perception of images because of the unique way that our minds process language and imagery differently. Lines describes language as a "top-down" process, meaning our minds process beginning generally and moving to more specific details. However, images are processed "bottom-up" meaning that our minds process the initial, basic sensory data first and then move to generalizations. Lines writes that "language exhibits the ability shown by other top-down processes, of pre-empting and attenuating bottom-up cognition" (Lines, 64-65). Essentially, top-down processes can have the ability to "override" bottom-up processes, according to Lines' research.

Therefore, Lines found that "Film theorists have observed the influence of language on our perception of AV imagery in non-fiction films, particularly where a film conforms to the structure identified by Bill Nichols as the expository mode. To the extent that we are told what we are looking at, the less we may see" (Lines, 65). When filmmakers use narration in the "expository" mode, meaning they use narration to explain to the viewer what is happening, the narration has the potential to greatly impact how the viewer interprets the images they are seeing.

This is supported by the different ways in which our minds process language and image. Bousé's work illustrates how voiceover can be used to manipulate timing and continuity, and Lines displays how there is a cognitive reality to how influential voiceover is to our actual perception of images.

The next step in my process after working on the voiceover was to edit together the clips of wildlife that I had collected. Selecting the order of the clips, deciding on their length, and splicing them together actually did not require much manipulation of reality—the clips are not in the order in which they were filmed, but I do not believe the film implies that in the first place. I didn't need to manipulate the speed, zoom, color balance, light, or any other aspects of the videos in order to make them work in the video. I think they reliably represent the natural elements as I saw them. Since my film does not involve a continuous narrative, there was no need for me to represent my shots in a particular order or chronology—instead, I loosely timed them with the voiceover. On the subject of editing to fit a narrative or chronology, Bousé writes, "Experiences of nature, like life itself, may be linear, but they are rarely narrative, with coherent beginnings, middles, and ends, as well as dramatic climaxes and satisfying resolutions" (Bousé, 16). Though nature does not organize itself this way, filmmakers often edit wilderness media to fit these narrative standards. Though my editing does loosely correspond to the voiceover, I had no need to create a narrative or chronological story for the purpose of my film, and therefore didn't need to manipulate the reality of what was in front of my camera in that particular way.

One thing that I did manipulate in the videos was the audio. I took out all of the original audio from the video clips and added in relaxing royalty-free piano music in the background along with the voiceover. The reason for this was two-fold: first, the audio from the actual videos was very inconsistent and unpleasant. There was talking, wind, sounds of cars, and other

background noise that would sound jarring when switching between clips. The second reason was that I wanted music to create a better flow in the video and set the tone as calming and relaxed.

On editing and music, Bousé writes, "even where continuity among shots is difficult to achieve, the use of sound helps mask this by remaining continuous, keeping the emphasis, and viewers' attention, on the action and the narrative" (Bousé, 32). This was the exact reason behind my manipulation of the sound in my film–continuity. If I kept in the original sound, the transition between clips would seem extremely choppy and it would be difficult to maintain the attention of viewers. By removing the sound and adding music, I was able to make the switch between each shot less harsh and fabricate a sense of continuity which was not there in reality.

The last part of my process in making this film was deciding on a message. This took place throughout the entire process, from the very beginning to the end. As I continued to learn from the various steps in the process, the message and purpose of my film developed. The main purpose of the film is to serve as a reflection and meditation on the nature that surrounds us. As I previously wrote, I gained a new perspective on the wildlife on campus through the process of making the video, and I want to impart that same experience on the viewer. I want the viewer to see the nature on campus through my eyes, and hopefully gain a new appreciation for it in the process. Maybe they will even begin to notice the wilderness around them in their life more. The film aimed to emphasize Cronon's words: "What I celebrate about such places is not just their wildness, though that certainly is among their most important qualities; what I celebrate even more is that they remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it" (Cronon, 16). I hope that *Closer to Home* can remind viewers of the wilderness in their backyards, and encourage them to see it.

The second purpose behind the film is to put Cronon's ideas into practice and help the viewer visualize his arguments through my video clips. I purposefully chose the quotations from *The Trouble with Wilderness* that affected me most, and I want to impart these same ideas onto others. The goal was to take Cronon's arguments about how wilderness can help us gain an appreciation for more everyday natural environments and apply them to the Claremont campuses.

The majority of the clips in my film are from Pomona's campus, as it is my home campus. Pomona College's landscape was meticulously designed and planned from its conception–in 1908, Architect Myron Hunt drafted a detailed plan for the campus titled the "Hunt Plans" (Pomona College Office of Facilities and Campus Services, 7). The Hunt plans described Pomona as the "Campus in a Garden," as Hunt intended the campus to be surrounded by natural spaces on all sides. The design was specifically intended to curate a wilderness experience for students. The current campus guidelines state that Blanchard Park or The Wash, "was designated for recreation, a rural experience, and as the site of a Greek Theatre" (Pomona College Office of Facilities and Campus Services, 7). This design note shows just how intentional Pomona's landscape plans are–they are laid out to give students a "rural experience."

Though the campuses are filled with constructed, intentionally curated landscapes and domesticated animals, I wanted to appreciate these types of wilderness and not privilege any one type over another. Cronon writes, "Without our quite realizing it, wilderness tends to privilege some parts of nature at the expense of others. Most of us, I suspect, still follow the conventions of the romantic sublime in finding the mountaintop more glorious than the plains, the ancient forest nobler than the grasslands, the mighty canyon more inspiring than the humble marsh" (Cronon, 16). To take this point even further, people often privilege wild landscapes over

man-made natural spaces–we may appreciate a remote forest more than a park intentionally designed to give us a "rural experience." *Closer to Home* aims to find the beauty in the curated landscapes of the Claremont Colleges, without denying that they are man-made and occupied by humans.

Throughout the process of making this short film, I placed myself in the position of the filmmaker and learned more about the decisions involved in representing "reality" in a nature video. My eyes were further opened to the delicate balance between faithfully representing what is in front of the camera and creating an engaging film with a clear message, and I know I can continue to improve these techniques through more experience and research in the future. In *The Problem of Images,* Bousé writes, "The use of formal artifice such as varying camera angles, continuity editing, montage editing, slow-motion, 'impossible' close-ups, voice-over narration, dramatic or ethnic music, and the like should by no means be off limits to wildlife filmmakers, but by the same token we should not avoid critical reflection on the overall image of nature and wildlife that emerges, cumulatively, from the long-term and systematic use of such devices" (Bousé, 8). The creation of *Closer to Home* aided in my critical reflection of a filmmaker's use of these devices, as I was faced with the decisions of how to use them myself.

Works Cited

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