Jacob Alspaw

USSY 227 Ehrlich

Travel Writing on Screen

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***Prompt***

Documentary:If you were to film a documentary about animal migration, how would you do it? Consider aspects of: preparation, funding, cameras, editing, narration, etc. Draw from the readings for the 2nd week of class.

A Documentation of Animal Migration:

Lobbying for the Return of the American Bison

Over the past year, I travelled with an amateur digital camcorder and documented my excursions to Birmingham, Panama City, Niagara Falls, Chicago, St. Louis, and beyond. Not much unlike Macon from the novel, *The Accidental Tourist*, I attempted to capture the essence of popular destinations as a way to visually inform a younger audience about affordable vacations. My documentary is a simple digital travel guide which aims to entertain an audience vicariously through my adventures and to educate them about travel budgeting. Other documentaries bring to light a certain cause or injustice with the hope that the film’s message will bring about change. Nature documentaries in particular often attempt to evoke emotion by juxtaposing human activity and environmental changes. Example, the American bison’s nineteenth century to modern-day decline illuminates the crippling effects of human urbanization on the American bison’s population and migratory pattern. Lobbying for the American bison through film documentation will limit further negative anthropogenic impact on the environment while conveying the importance of conservation.

The American bison is a species of bison that once roamed the grasslands of North America in massive herds. Their known historical range spanned from Canada’s northwest Great Bar Lake to the southern Mexican states of Durango and Nuevo León. In the nineteenth century, the American bison became nearly extinct from a combination of commercial hunting and the introduction of bovine diseases from domestic cattle (Weiser). Prior to their rapid decline, seasonal changes encouraged an estimated sixty million buffalo to migrate characteristically north and south along water sheds in search of food and favorable weather conditions. The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife estimated that by the turn of the twentieth century only three-hundred bison were alive in North America and that their range was substantially restricted to national parks and nature reserves. The United States was encouraging quick industrialization which was subsequently followed by rapid urbanization of the grasslands. The increased rates of urbanization quickly separated ancient bison migration routes and made natural resources and space a scarce commodity for the dwindling American bison population.

Nature documentary filmmakers must engage in a conservationist approach to the preservation, protection, and restoration of the natural wildlife. Daphne Sheldrick’s “The Elephant Debate,” provides wonderful insight into the effects that conservation and lobbying can have on an animal’s population and migratory well-being. Sheldrick mentions that, in 1989, an international committee imposed a worldwide ban on the sale of ivory. As a result, “the price of ivory fell sharply and with it the incentive to poach [elephants].” Because public outcry from the near extinction of elephants was able to sway international laws, it is entirely plausible that public outcry in favor of the American bison could spur change domestically in the United States as well. To inspire change is one of the foremost purposes of a nature documentary.

To evoke public lobbying for the American bison, the documentary would need to appeal to the ethos and pathos of the average viewer. “The Elephant Debate” appeals to the ethos by evoking a moral argument that condemns the slaughter of elephants. Likewise, the article appeals to the audience’s pathos by revealing that sentient animals with human emotions are culled for capitalistic gains. It is essential that the same tone is recreated in the American bison documentary. To evoke the pathos, a scene in the middle of fall will be included in a first person perspective. Dawn breaks and cicadas chirp from the brush. The sparse patches of yellowing weeds indicate to the audience that food sources are scarce. A bison calf walks into the shot as it hovers close under its protector’s chest. The pair quietly search for a grazing area to no avail. The perspective morphs to third person and an aerial shot begins. The camera quickly rises, so the audience realizes the underwhelming size of the nature reserve’s bison enclosure. The aerial view appeals to the audience’s ethos and invokes a moral argument; do humans have the right to confine the American bison and to stop their natural migratory instincts?

Portraying the bison in a certain manor is quintessential to the documentary’s success. The bison is an often docile creature, yet its towering physique and pointed horns lead many to believe it is a terrifying aggressor. To gain sympathy from the audience for the bison, the camera angle and light source will need to be adjusted. The bison will appear thinner with a smaller camera lens while a crane shot will shrink the bison’s height (O'Rourke). Decreasing the size of the bison will make it look less fearsome and more vulnerable which will gain the audience’s sympathy.

It would also be ideal for the documentary to compare and contrast the American bison’s mental health between three different time periods and environmental backgrounds. This comparison would qualitatively determine the extent to which a bison’s mind is impacted by decreased migration. The documented bison subjects would be a pre-nineteenth century bison, modern free range bison, and a modern bison in captivity. Each animal could offer a resoundingly distinct mental evaluation that could provoke internal or external debate of nature versus nurture and how human action has negatively impacted a species.

My experience with film over the last year has exposed cinematography’s intricacies. Documentaries have many audio and video cues that are there to evoke a desired emotion. Preparation, funding, cameras, editing, and narration are critical design aspects that impact the effectiveness of the final product and how well it conveys its intended message. Hopefully my decisions will help my documentaries stand the test of time.

**References**

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