"This series will take you to the last wildernesses"—*Planet Earth* and the Question of the Animal

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Abstract

Although generally marketed as disinterested and scientific sources of information, blue chip nature documentaries actively participate in both the maintenance and subversion of the nature-culture dichotomy. Using the award-winning BBC mega series *Planet Earth* (2006) as its example, the following article illustrates how non-human animals are presented as *other* to humans, but also argues that the degree and mechanisms used vary depending on the familiarity of both the species and habitat in question. In keeping with current ecofeminist theories, particular attention is also paid to scenes where the hierarchy reveals traces of its own production, which are revealed by a close reading of some sequences from three different episodes of the series. These traces allow a perceptive audience to question the othering of the non-human. One particularly potent problematisation of these narratives occurs whenever the series appeals to the audience's emotional engagement, since such an emotional appeal also weakens the documentary's overt claim to disinterested objectivity. Thus, on a metalevel, the article also furthers research into how documentaries can function as emotional machines.

Keywords: Planet Earth (2006), non-human Othering, emotional involvement, maintenance and deconstruction of nature-culture divide.

Resumen

Aunque los documentales punteros sobre la naturaleza generalmente se anuncian como fuentes de información científica imparcial, también participan activamente en el mantenimiento y la subversión de la dicotomía entre la naturaleza y la cultura. Usando como ejemplo la premiada mega serie de la BBC *Planet Earth* (2006), este artículo ilustra como los animales no-humanos se presentan como el *otro*, pero también sostiene que el grado y los mecanismos que se usan varían dependiendo de la familiaridad de ambas especies y el hábitat correspondiente. Con arreglo a las teorías ecofeministas actuales, se presta especial atención a las escenas en que la jerarquía revela los signos de su propia producción, que se revelan con un análisis escrupuloso de algunas secuencias de tres episodios diferentes de la serie. Estos signos permiten a una audiencia atenta cuestionar la otredad del no-humano. Una problematización especialmente potente de estas narrativas tiene lugar cuando la serie apela al compromiso emocional, ya que esto también debilita la pretensión de objetividad desinteresada. Por ello, en un metanivel, el artículo promueve la investigación sobre cómo los documentales pueden funcionar como máquinas emocionales.

Palabras clave: *Planet Earth* (2006), otredad de no-humanos, implicación emocional, mantenimiento y deconstrucción de la dicotomía naturaleza-cultura.

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Introduction

Initially aired on BBC One in 2006, the natural history programme *Planet Earth* is currently considered one of the most ambitious and technologically advanced blue-chip series to come out of the BBCs Natural History Unit in recent years. The British-American-Japanese co-production was nominated for four BAFTAs and awarded an Emmy in 2007, thus proving both a huge commercial and critical success ("Planet Earth TV series" n.p.).

As Barbara Crowther observes, and the widespread success of the series again proves, natural history programmes are "afford[ed] [...] a high cultural importance" (Crowther 289) in modern western cultures, since they serve as the primary (or even only) window into the lives of the non-human inhabitants of this planet for many people. Since its inception in the late 1960s and 1970s, animal studies and the problematisation of the Cartesian nature-culture dualism (what Cary Wolfe and others call 'the question of the animal') have become two central issues in the eco-critical sectors of cultural studies. This article concurs with Derek Bousé's claim on the urgent need to examine natural history programmes more closely (Bousé *passim*), especially since natural history programmes can also reify harmful existing power relations (both intra- and interspecies) by reiterating them in a discursive context that does not seem to want to raise a specific point in a debate, but rather seems to simply "convey information" (Boardwell and Thompson 342) and relate scientific (and hence non-interested) fact. This article ultimately seeks to promote and argue in favour of a closer look at factual media in green film studies, to complement its primary focus on the representations of nature in fictional media (Ivakhiev 2008).

The following analyses argue, that, for the most part, *Planet Earth* reproduces existing nature-culture dualisms and their concomitant "speciesist" (Wolfe 2; see also the original source for the term in Singer 6) placing of non-human animals in the position of the *other*, but that the degree of *othering* differs depending on the species and the familiarity of the habitat in question. In keeping with Bruno Latour's analysis of this dualism (which he calls "the Great Divide," Latour 97), they also attempt to illustrate those moments in the series' discourse where the mechanisms of "purification" (Latour 10) that stabilise and reify the dichotomy weaken enough for a critical audience to perceive the construction processes (what Donna Haraway calls "fictions" [4]), the "present act[s] of fashioning" (4) that make up the content of a given episode.

Contrary to what an everyday reading of the term *fictions* might suggest, the following analyses do not wish to simply denounce natural history films as "nature fakers" (Bousé 108). Rather, they seek to analyse how film sequences in *Planet Earth* are composed and how these composition strategies affect the audience's perception of animal *others.* Since what the audience sees of animals on screen thus oscillates between components that are primarily referential (the individual content of the images presented) and others that are primarily shaped by narrative conventions originating in the intrahuman context of western cultures (issues of editing, commentary, and musical

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score), these representations are subsequently referred to as 'symbol-indexes'. As appropriate, what follows also indicates connections between inter- and intraspecies power relations (such as ethnocentrism or sexism), in order to indicate the pervasiveness of "centrist" (Plumwood 100-106) discourses and to problematise the 'objectivity' of the narratives presented. Subsequent comments on potential viewer responses are based on a simplified version of Iserian reader response theory and treat the narratives as texts, the gaps of which the audience fills according to their individual reading of more overt textual signals.

For the most part, this paper consists of close readings of three episodes of *Planet Earth*: the first episode and one episode dealing with a comparatively familiar habitat, respectively a largely unknown one, namely caves and shallow seas. My analytical framework mostly draws on posthumanist and ecofeminist work in animal studies, supplemented by terminology taken from (feminist) science and technology studies, if required. Even so, the analyses offered below cannot claim to be comprehensive or to exhaust the subject fully. On the contrary, I hope that they engender a closer and more detailed analysis of the scientific narratives we tell about our fellow animals on this planet. In keeping with its broadly posthumanist premises, the following text shall refer to non-humans in the singular by using the gendered pronouns rather than "it". Unless the sex of the non-human in question can actually be seen on screen (or can reasonably be inferred from the images), the pronoun used alternates between "he" and "she".

Main Part: Analysis of Key Scenes

"This series will take you to the last wildernesses"—Establishing the nature - culture dualism as a governing divide

Planet Earth opens with a series of shots of Earth taken from space, which, due to their being taken from a slight angle, rather than straight on, emphasise the planet's size and vast expanse.[1] This visual impression is further supported by sombre scoring, likely to impress a sense of awe upon the audience (FP 00:17 - 00: 27). However, this emotion is itself already an indication of the potentially problematic effects of this initial shot. Following recent findings in the philosophy of emotion, their defining characteristic lies in their being aimed at something in the world (Döring, "Allgemeine" 14), which must thus by definition lie outside the self. Since awe is likely to engender a cautious and respectful distance between the emotion's subject and its object, presenting our planet as something worthy of respect may at first glance constitute a positive reversal of the more instrumentalist view of nature that has resulted in the present ecological crisis.

However, such a reading of the scene ignores that both the instrumentalist and the reverential discourse rest on the same epistemological hyper-separation of the

[1] *Planet Earth: From Pole To Pole.* Prod. Mark Linfield. BBC, 2006. DvD. 2entertain, 2007. Originally aired on 5th March, 2006, 00: 17 – 00:27. All subsequent references to the episode (given in brackets in the body of the text, following the abbreviation FP) refer to the DVD version.

 ISSN 2171-9594

human and the natural world, turning nature into an*other* that is fundamentally different from the cultural self. Opening the series with a number of planetary shots visually emphasises this further: it positions its audience in a place outside Earth, looking at, but not participating in, the non-human lives we are about to be presented with. It immediately casts the human audience as literal 'over viewers' of the natural spaces the episode (as well as *Planet Earth* as a whole) is going to present.

In the Renaissance such a position was typically thought of to be God's in relation to life on Earth, a belief famously visualised in the *theatrum mundi topos*. Since God thus marked the place of an absolute objectivity, which is not implicated in the materiality of the Earth, positivist science adopted such a position for itself after the Enlightenment, denying its participation and implication in the natural processes it studied, while simultaneously relegating materiality to all lesser beings aligned with the sphere of the *other*, including non-human animals. Thus, by positioning the audience outside Earth, the series visually erases human presences from the nature it is about to reveal, and simultaneously affirms its own scientific objectivity. Feminist scholars of science such as Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding call this discursive position "the god trick" (Haraway qtd. in Harding 57) and critique it for universalising the views of the dominant culture, in particular those of white middle-class men. Furthermore, this shot composition also evokes colonialist discourses. The audience is invited to lay claim to non-human natures in a fashion similar to the way colonialists lay claim to a place through cartography and topgraphical reports, which also do not account for the lived experience of an area's inhabitants.[2]

Subsequently, the audience encounters a polar bear and her two cubs as their focal elements for the first longer animal sequence in this episode. Discursively, the visual structure correlates the cycles of animal life and the return of the light by showing the emergence of the female polar bear right after an image of sunlight illuminating a shadowy mountain of snow (FP 03:41 – 04:00). This correlation is further emphasised by the narrative when it both personifies the sun's activities as "sweeping away" (FP 03:44) the darkness and informs the audience that the mammal "stirs" (FP 03:56 - 03:57) after spending the whole winter in her den, which, it can be presumed, is also a dark place. Indeed, the narrative explicitly correlates spring and the polar bear by seeing her emergence as "mark[ing] the beginning of spring" (FP 04:00 – 04:03) and further relates it not just to the beginning of a new year, but also to the beginning of life generally. For, although the narration is cautious when attributing emotional motivation to the grown female bear, even prefixing it with "perhaps" (FP 04:12) and thereby marking it as human conjecture, no such caution is evident when the narrative comments on a shot of the cubs emerging from the den with "[they] *gaze out at their bright new world* for the *first* time [my emphasis]" (FP 04:26 – 04:31). Since it can be assumed that most members of the audience would have been able to interpret the young polar bears' basic actions without an explicit voiceover, the line quoted above

[2] For a detailed discussion of the connections between cartography and colonialism compare for example Anderson (167–190).

 ISSN 2171-9594

clearly does not serve an epistemological purpose. Notably, it is full of metaphors and phrases that can be related to the behaviour of young human children.

As early childhood and early spring are commonly correlated in western symbolic systems (Naschert 2008 117), phrases such as the above implicitly encourage the audience to read the polar bear's actions as part of (or indeed as symbolic of) traditional western narratives of spring. On one level, the narrative thus creates an emotional link between the mammals and the audience by turning them into symbol-indexes of childhood. This emotional link is visually strengthened by close-ups that show the cubs struggling to reach their mother at the foot of the slope (FP 04:35 – 05:19), a series of actions accompanied by diegetic sounds which emphasise the calls emitted by the young bears. Just as the bear's young have become symbol-indexes of childhood, the adult bear is conversely cast in the role of an essentialised mother. For the narrative specifically remarks on her "converting the last of her fat reserves into milk" (FP 05:27 -05:31), thereby invoking (patriarchal) associations of ideal woman- and motherhood with self-sacrifice (Gilbert and Gubar 815-819). As the sequence progresses, the narrative refers to the area in which the bears currently live as "nursery slopes" (FP 06:48), and the subsequent footage of the cubs' climbing emphasises the imprecision of their movements while also showing the female watching over them (FP 06:55 – 06:59). In parallel to this narrative of childhood, the audience has been introduced to a complication, which limits the former's duration and introduces a moment of tension. For the narrative explains that the polar bears rely on the ice caps to find seals to feed themselves and their young, but that these melt in the spring sun (FP 05:50 – 06:02).

The focus on the melting ice also subtly reintroduces humans (or at least the effects of their actions) near the end of the segment, using both narrative and visual cues. The last image of the animals (showing the young bears running after their mother in a semi-long shot that is supplanted by a long shot) (FP 07: 55 – 08:11) is supplemented by the commentary that the polar bear "is leading her cubs out into a dangerous new world [since] [n]early half of the cubs die in their first year out on the ice." In the context of the narrative this segment has created, such information is likely to result in concern for the cubs and a concomitant desire to know the cause of this danger. One answer to this question is provided in the next shot, which captures a fracturing ice sheet and thus implies that unwary polar bears might drown in the water (FP 08.13 – 08:15). To a biologically-informed audience, it is clear, however, that melting ice is but one of a wide variety of dangers (others may include adult male polar bears, for instance) the animals may encounter, thus raising the question of why the episode chooses to visually focus on the melting ice caps. Such a choice may be explained by the prominent positioning footage of melting ice is given in news reports on the effects of global warming. Since most of the audience is likely to be aware of this placement, seeing it in this context could potentially trigger a chain of metonymic associations that connect the melting ice caps as symbols of global warming caused by emissions (themselves the product of human industrialisation) to the death of polar bears.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Through such a metonymic chain mechanism, the symbol-index of the polar bear becomes emotionally charged, and may prompt the audience to rethink their own involvement in climate change.

The frequent references to the emotional (as well as the cognitive) effects of the above scene also illustrate a secondary theoretical element of the present analyses. They argue that these representations appeal to various emotions on the part of the viewers, which condition their relationship with the (representations of) non-humans they encounter. Although the precise definition of emotions (particularly in relation to feelings) is still subject to intense debate among philosophers, this paper follows a minimal definition proposed by Sabine Döring.[3] According to her, "[emotions] are defined by their being aimed at an object in the world. They represent this object as possessing certain qualities and existing in a specific way" (Döring, "Allgemeine" 14; my translation). Following this definition, the subsequent analyses are primarily concerned with how *Planet Earth* constructs scenarios (De Sousa 294) that present non-humans as emotional objects (De Sousa) and whether these emotions can help us to perceive non-humans as our equal. When analysing their construction, the discussions give equal consideration to the linguistic, visual, and sound factors involved. As far as I have been able to determine in the course of my limited research, most studies have so far sidelined the issue of extra-diegetic scoring for the most part, but they form a central component of the present analyses. On a meta-level, this paper thus wishes to show that "categorical" (Bordwell and Thompson 343) and scientific documentaries are also "emotional machines" (Weik 3), even if less overtly so than other types of film might be.

In the specific case of the scene analysed above, the emotional scenario has a two-fold effect: on the one hand, it helps audience members to critically reflect on how processes solely motivated by their benefit to humans limit and endanger the non-human life on this planet. It represents the polar bears as worthy of human consideration. Even though this at first glance appears to be a positive effect of the emotional scenario, the fact that these emotions are only elicited because the non-humans are presented as conforming to specific cultural scripts strengthens, rather than destabilises, the nature-culture dichotomy.

"This is our planet's final frontier"—Human presence and the presentation of cave animals as 'utter others'

The previously analysed sequences also ensured that the nature-culture dichotomy would remain unquestioned by implicitly representing humans as outside nature. As Derek Bousé continually emphasises, the blue-chip sub-genre of wildlife films defines itself as presenting nature as a space free of all sorts of human intervention (Bousé 15-16). In order to achieve this impression, series from the 1970s onwards tend to edit out all signs of human presence in their footage (Bousé 15-16). Hence, the explicit

[3] "[Emotionen] zeichnen [...] sich dadurch aus, dass sie auf etwas in der Welt gerichtet sind und es als in einer bestimmten Weise seiend repräsentieren." (Döring, "Allgemeine" 14).

 ISSN 2171-9594

presence of humans in some episodes of the main series of *Planet Earth* constitutes a bending of the generic codes, which might at first glance potentially result in a novel focus on the complexities of non-human -human interactions.

In the case of *Caves* the presence of humans is announced in the fifth frame of the episode. Following the introduction of this habitat as "our planet's final frontier [-] an inner world where only the most adventurous dare to go," the audience is shown a dark hole in the mountain, which is positioned under the camera.[4] The size of the opening is additionally emphasised by the few overhanging leaves of a tree (C 00:50). Since such a shot construction closely recreates the visual stimuli members of the audience might receive if they were to stand at the edge of a cliff themselves, this shot is likely to engender awe and perhaps trepidation in them. Shortly afterwards, the camera captures a human male in street clothes jumping past the lens, down into the cave (C 00:51 - 00:54). At the moment of his jump, the audience can hear a single drumbeat and follow his trajectory into the apparently bottomless hole. Since the audience cannot see any kind of climbing gear or safety wire on the man, he thus embodies the qualities of those "most adventurous" (C 00:38 – 00:41) humans, even more so than the other explorers the camera shows jumping into the cave, all of whom carry parachutes (C 01:13 – 01:44).

Describing caves as the "final frontier" may at first seem a simple way of reminding the audience of the dangers the explorers face, but a closer look at the terminology reveals two additional aspects of the term, both of which are potentially problematic for the representation of non-human lives in this episode. Firstly, the phrase "final frontier" may remind some members of the audience, especially in America, of the terminology John F. Kennedy used to indicate his support for the widespread social changes America faced when he accepted his presidential nomination at the 1960 Democratic National Convention. Speaking of the "new frontier," he indicated that "beyond that frontier are unchartered territories of science and space" (Kennedy paragraph thirty-one). While this may at first glance seem but an accidental and idiosyncratic association on my part, the narrative indeed correlates the cave habitat and the space programme when the audience is told that "these depths [the Cave of Swallows in Mexico] were first explored only two years before men landed on the moon" (C 02:17 – 02:23). In correlating these two spaces, one extraterrestrial, the other literally *intraterrestrial,* the narrative invites the audience to see both as equally distant from their everyday lives. Additionally, the image of the 'frontier' again relates the popular science discourses employed in the series to colonialist imagery and thus hints at the problematic relationship between mainstream popular science discourses and various forms of oppression.

As the content of the voiceover soon makes clear, caves are not only to be seen as remote in terms of what Val Plumwood calls "spatial remoteness" (72), but also in terms

[4] *Planet Earth: Caves.* Prod. Huw Cordey. BBC, 2006. DvD. 2entertain, 2007. Originally aired on 26th March 2006, 00:30 – 00:41; 00:50). All subsequent references to the episode (given in brackets in the body of the text, following the abbreviation C) refer to the DVD version.

 ISSN 2171-9594

of "epistemic" (73), and consequently ethical (71), remoteness as it first introduces the habitat as consisting of "black, damp places" (C 02:35 – 02:37). Because western cultures symbolically associate the colour black with "the void, the absence of light [and thus the absence of the symbol of safety and knowledge] and evil" ("Color Symbolism"), and dampness also has connotations most audience members will most likely consider unpleasant, these adjectives mark caves as aesthetically unpleasant and not congenial to human habitation. Since most western nature discourses have however presented nature either as useful tools in the achievement of material goals (the traditional instrumentalist view) or as aesthetically pleasing (a discourse, which, though conceived of as decidedly anti-instrumentalist by its users, still sees nature as a spiritual resource) and caves are here described as being neither, there may exist those among the audience who consequently do not consider them part of nature 'proper' and thus not in need of preservation or consideration.

Thus, although on one level the voiceover *ex negativo* places the non-human species living in these caves in the positive position of being their first explorers and thus accords then an agency similar to that of humans, it also metonymically connects the animals to the spaces in which they live. Thus, since these places are presented as unpleasant, it is suggested that the non-human cave-dwellers must likewise be so. As this implicit association of inhabited geographic region and the (moral) character of its inhabitants is a common feature of colonialist discourses, its use in this particular context again indicates the close relationship between various axes of oppression in current western cultures. Visually, the footage shown shortly afterwards shows the shadow of an animal species with two very short legs and a long body, accompanied by a voiceover which describes the denizens of caves as "some of the strangest and least known animals on the planet" (C 02:41 -02:45). Presenting the *other* only as a shadow on a wall is a shot most likely familiar to most audiences from horror films, where it is commonly used to introduce the villain. Thus, the audience is subtly asked to view the animals it is about to see as exotic beings, whom they are inclined to perceive as weird, and as beyond the realms of approachable nature.

Considering that the troglobitical salamander we are shown once the camera cuts away from her shadow, is captured at a straight-on angle and shown moving towards the audience, it can be assumed that the audience is meant to see the animal as facing them (C 02:46 – 02:48). Arguably, however, this only distances her further from the human spectators, since they are clearly shown that she lacks eyes. In view of the importance of eyes and sight to the ascription of personhood in western cultures (Horlacher 6), the audience is likely to consider the troglobite as a freak creature and to distance themselves from her by means of either disgust or a variant of fascination that is explicitly founded on the animal's exotic difference rather than a form of difference perceived as a basis of dialogue. The narrative makes it clear that the audience is not meant to understand the troglobite's difference at this point, since we are not given the information necessary to understand that this physical lack is an evolutionary adaptation to the absence of light and thus actually an asset. This information would

 ISSN 2171-9594

furthermore enable the audience to see clear traces of a human presence in this scene, which constructs the troglobites as "strange" (C 02:46 – 02:48). After all, the shadow and the non-humans' luminous whiteness are the result of her being caught in a floodlight meant to enhance human sight, and not a 'natural feature' of her physiology as a later segment of the episode explains. But instead of being encouraged to understand their difference, the audience is clearly meant to mentally *other* the animal species that inhabit caves at this point. Even the extradiegetic soundtrack contains features commonly associated with thrillers or horror films, such as a low-pitched percussion section and what sounds like a wailing flute (C 02:38 – 02:50). Whereas the scenario created by the narrative in the polar bear scene analysed above encouraged some form of sympathy between the audience and the non-humans shown, the same techniques represent the troglobytes as 'utter *others*' in the present context.

Still, although this presentation seems to encourage a hyper-separated view of the animal species presented, it may also allow a perceptive audience to critically reflect on such mechanisms and their ideological uses. For the animals also escape easy classifications by being "strange" (C 02:41 – 02:45), since they cannot be relegated to either the safe realm of the "known" or the equally safe realm of the completely "unknown" which humans can treat as non-existent and as being of no concern whatsoever to their lives. Instead, these non-humans are a "bordering phenomenon" (Deleuze and Guattari 43) the presence of which both marks and threatens to destabilise the borders of human-made categories. This threat, however, also has the ability to permit the audience to not just become aware of their epistemological boundaries as being the flexible products of cultural processes, but offers them the possibility to change them if they so wish.

However, the episode also invites the audience to sympathise with some cave-dwelling species, of which bats are the most prominent. The audience's initial encounter with the mammals emphasises their numbers, explaining that these caves provide them with ideal protection from both "the outside elements [...] and predators" (C 11:30 – 11:36). Visually, this is accompanied by a cut from a mass scene of the bats, which enhances the narrative information that they "gather there in huge numbers" (C 11:05 – 11:21), to a more intimate close-up of a single bat, who is cleaning her fur (C 11:34). Notably, this scene also relies entirely on diegetic sound made by the bat colony (C 11:25 – 11:36). Thus, the audience is immediately afforded an individualistic perspective on these mammals, and the absence of extradiegetic music (which mostly caused a feeling of unease during the sections analysed above) further strengthens a perception of the bats as non-threatening or even as cute. Although such a presentation again limits the animals to having a single and uniform character throughout the narrative, it also counters a long-standing vilification of bats in western cultures where they are commonly associated with vampirism and witchcraft ("Stereotypes of Animals" n.p.).

Unfortunately, this positive recasting of a mammalian species re-enforces a speciesist hierarchy in the audience's mind by showing us the bats as the victims of

 ISSN 2171-9594

cockroaches in the following sequence. At first, the audience is told that the bats "produce something very important" (C 11:43 – 11:47) to the cave environment, and then we are shown a long tracking shot up a hill made of some black material (C 11:49 – 12:00). While the camera moves upward at a steady pace, the voiceover informs the audience "that this one-hundred metre high mound is made entirely of bat droppings" (C 11:51 – 11:57). Although Craig Condella argues that images such as these are likely to encourage greater eco-sensitivity on the part of the audience as a result of their aesthetic pleasure and awe (7-8), this is by no means the only response possible. The footage shown initially emphasises the expanse of the guano mound, something that is likely to be responded to with awe. In spite of awe's being an emotion that recognises difference, rather than denying it, this difference is again perceived as radical rather than a dialogical.

Furthermore, the subsequent presentation of the guano mound as the dwelling-place of cockroaches again codes it as a strange and even deadly place, something most audience members are likely to respond to with a mixture of awe and disgust, particularly once the camera shows the roaches feeding off a dying bat (C 12:08 – 13:38). This emotional reaction is enhanced by a close-up of the dying bat's paw as it twitches in death (C 13:26 – 13:29). By intercutting this sequence with images of the approaching cockroaches, the sequence implies that they killed the bat (C 13:18 – 13:23). Since bats were presented as worthy of emotional engagement earlier, the audience is likely to react to their being killed with sadness, maybe even with disgust, when the camera shows a close-up of a bat skeleton being picked clean by cockroaches (C 13:30 – 13:38), which might even be the remains of the mammal we saw fall into the guano earlier. While a biologically-versed audience realises that this behaviour ensures the needed energy supply for a wide variety of organisms, the narrative itself also permits an anthropomorphic *othering* of the roaches—in part because it uses shots like the back-lit twitching paw, the basic set-up of which can also be found in various thrillers as a symbolic indication of violent death (the most famous of these is perhaps the close-up of a hand during the shower scene in *Psycho* (02:01 – 02:05)). However, presenting the cockroach as the villain conversely turns the bat into a victim and limits the agency of the animals to a single role.[5]

[5] Traditionally, agency has been tied to the possession of some form of sentience and rational thought. Consequently, anthropocentric discourses imagined it to be primarily limited to humans and perhaps some highly-developed mammalian species. In recent decades, the term has been critically expanded to include not just animals, but also inanimate materials, such as objects and chemicals (see. for example the works of Bruno Latour, Michael Serres and Donna Haraway). Contemporary scholars in the new materialisms, such as Karen Barad and Stacey Alaimo, to name but two prominent thinkers in this burgeoining movement, have advocated that the term be replaced by the less –problematic "intra-action" (Barad 33). As I lack the space to properly contextualise and do justice to the important work done in the new materialisms here, I retain the usage of agency, but understand it as the ability to influence and shape life on our planet, an ability independent of both sentience and rationality. For a more detailed discussion of the reformulation of agency in the new materialism compare, for example Iovino (2012).

 ISSN 2171-9594

By presenting caves and most of the species dwelling in them as exotic locations and beings, the episode either denies non-humans even an anthropomorphic and mediated agency or limits them to a tightly circumscribed role. Additionally, it also re-enforces speciesist hierarchies by choosing only mammals and birds as potential emotional objects for the audience to identify with. Most other species are presented as either freaky monsters or cruel killers, from whom audience members are encouraged to emotionally distance themselves. This distancing is made comparatively easier by the presence of human actors whose role as explorers of beautiful (animal-free) cave environments gives the audience a positive role with which they are consistently encouraged to identify.

"They Have Sharp Bills and a Feisty Character"—Animal Agency and 'relative othering'

Although the complete *othering* of animals is a consistent feature of the *Caves* episode, for the most part *Planet Earth* uses a strategy that enables a critical audience to see some hints of either the direct agency of animals or to partly deconstruct the narratives they see as primarily guided by cultural typifications of the species in question. Thus, the audience may deduce the partiality and subjective process underlying the facts shown to them. This strategy thus functions as a trace in a deconstructivist sense, as „a mark of what the text lost or set aside" (Derrida 295), through which the existence of a different (less or even non-*othering*) approach to the agency of non-human beings may be glimpsed.

Interestingly, the use of these more complex narratives techniques mostly appears in episodes featuring a habitat with which a western audience is likely to be somewhat familiar. In the present example, *Shallow Seas*, the oceans shown are treated as familiar spaces to the audience and are explicitly contrasted with the "deeper and darker" waters of the deep seas.[6] By using a combination of adjectives the symbolic connotations of which can also be read as indicators of the unfamiliar and the dangerous (combining the two components of Freud's Uncanny in the process (Freud 2004 418)), the shallow seas are *ex negative* marked as comparatively familiar and safe. Furthermore, this episode lacks a specific introduction for the habitat as such. After a few basic pieces of topological and zoological information, the narrative almost immediately shifts to its first animal sequence (it lasts under a minute, whereas the habitat introduction in *Caves* is almost twice as long).

While most of the animals featured in the episode are coded as safe through the use of the narrative techniques analysed in section 2.1, *Shallow Seas* also presents a more diverse narrative that allows for both the deconstruction of human narrative structures and offers space for animal agency that transcends these structures. This becomes a particularly potent occurrence since those sequences feature fur seals, and

[6] *Planet Earth: Shallow Seas*. Prod. Mark Brownlow. BBC, 2006. DvD. 2entertain, 2007. Originally aired on 26th November, 2006, 00:34 – 00:37. All subsequent references to the episode (given in brackets in the body of the text, following the abbreviation ShS) refer to the DVD version

 ISSN 2171-9594

this species of sea mammal is one of the most popular crowd pleasers in aquatic zoos and similar institutions (Toothman 2008). Such a high popularity indicates the presence of an established narrative around the fur seals in the minds of the general public, which codes them as "comical and playful" ("Stereotypes of Animals" website) .

After the geographical location of the first seal sequence has been favourably introduced (the narration emphasises its containing "[...] rich waters" (ShS 33:20 – 33:35), a cut briefly shows two seals cresting a wave with a movement that a human audience most likely implicitly associates with surfing (and thus with happiness) before an image from an underwater camera shows a large number of seals swimming around each other in a shot which comes quite close to the perspective an audience might be familiar with from observing seals in captivity (ShS 33:36 – 33:54). Visually, the bright colours of the surrounding water and flora enhance the impression of the mammal's existing without any sort of threat (ShS 33:45 – 33:54), thus encouraging the viewers to read their present behaviour as a reflection of their "playful" ("Stereotypes of Animals" n.p.) nature. Additionally, the audience is told by a voiceover that the seals are not only well-supplied with necessary nutrients in this environment, but that they "thrive" (ShS 33:45 – 33:54) here. Using such an adjective further strengthens the association of seals with happiness.

But shortly afterwards, this obvious sense of peace is shattered by the introduction of a white shark, whose first leap out of the water is accompanied by what sounds like a cymbal strike, audibly shattering the sense of peace and plenty the previous segments create (ShS 35:57). This is also reflected in our next shot of the seals and the accompanying voiceover. As the audience watches them leap out of the water, we are told that the seals must indeed "swim for [their] lives [each day]" (ShS 36:45 – 36:50). Although the use of slow-motion filming is needed to capture the white shark's breach on camera (since they last under one second and are consequently too fast for the human eye to see (ShS 48:26 -48:30), the seals are normally quite visible using a standard camera. But as slow-motion technology also enhances the emotional involvement of an observer in the scene before them (as it reminds our bodies of our sensory experience in moments of excitement and high adrenaline output), using it here also encourages the audience to sympathise with the seals. In combination with the close-ups of the seal (ShS 37:10) and the extradiegetic soundtrack which amplifies such feelings further by announcing every successful capture with another cymbal strike (ShS 37:19), this technological device ensures the seal's being perceived as the innocent victim.

However, the episode itself also deconstructs the seemingly clear-cut identification of the fur seal as the symbolic-indexical hapless victim in the next sequence featuring the sea-mammals. The segment begins with images of a larger community of animals, though this time they are birds rather than mammals: king penguins, to be precise (ShS 39:25 – 40:00). In the introductory commentary both the abundance of food and the requirements of the newly-hatched chicks are emphasised. The audience is told that "this [the chick's being dependent on their parents for a year]

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puts a great deal of pressure on the parents" (ShS 40:07 – 40:11). With this piece of information, the audience is implicitly invited to assume that the penguins would do anything to save and feed their young, in much the same way human parents are expected to do in order to be designated good by the standards of western societies.

Following this introduction, the audience then encounters one of these pressures. Focusing on a group of newly-returned hunters, the camera initially presents them in close-up, allowing the audience to perceive them as individuals and to establish mediated "eye contact" (ShS 40:18–40:21) Simultaneously, the extradiegetic soundtrack begins playing a series of relatively high, drawn notes (ShS 40:18 – 40:21). As the camera cuts away to a mid-long shot, thus enabling the audience to see the group's immediate environment, the voiceover reminds the audience of the penguin's being "flightless [and thus having to] cross the open beach on foot" (ShS 40:24–40:30) Since the viewers have also been introduced to some elephant seals living on the island, whom the voiceover described as "bad-tempered" (ShS 39:43–39:45), it can be assumed that most members of the audience will suppose them to be the source of tension. Consequently, they will be surprised by the appearance of a fur seal out of the surf behind the birds (ShS 40:37). The immediate response on the part of the audience is also a testimony to the influence of cultural narratives on our perception and evaluation of non-human animals and also on how little information suffices to create a first impression of them which we deem sound. At the same time, since the effect of the scene partly depends on the audience recognising their own assumptions as wrong, it opens up a possibility for reflection on how all of their impression of natural phenomena are partly shaped by cultural discourses, even in media products marketed as factual.

As the scene progresses, the seal's behaviour continues to be coded as aggressive and violent, particularly since the intradiegetic soundtrack of their calls is played more loudly than the penguin's answering calls, which creates an aural impression of superiority in the minds of the audience (ShS 40:40–41:10). Visually, the next few shots focus mainly on the mammals attacking the birds from behind and tossing them about to disorient and kill the penguins (ShS 41:10 – 41:40). For their part, the penguins appear exclusively as victims in these first few shots, either completely unable to defend themselves or limited to scratching the seals' fur with their bills. Showing these fights in close-up gives the viewers some visual evidence of how sharp the penguins' bills are and simultaneously enhances the audience's sympathy for the penguins, who are clearly presented as the wronged party and occupy the narrative role of the underdog in those fight scenes. This carefully created impression conversely turns the attacking seals into the ethically despicable aggressor. However, seeing such behaviour in a species most humans consider to be stereotypically non-aggressive, or even passive, might potentially lead an aware audience to admit that the behaviour of non-human animals is capable of just as wide a range of variations as human behaviour is and thus to the replacement of typifying narratives with less restrictive and *othering* ones, which can admit to being selective and fictional in Donna Haraway's sense.

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 ISSN 2171-9594

Contrary to such a vision and in keeping with a hyper-seperated view of animals, the voiceover, rather than acknowledging that seals may also behave aggressively towards other species in some instances, uses terminology that ethically judges the sea mammals. The audience is told that "[f]ur seals *normally* live on krill, but *these* seals have now acquired an unexpected taste for blubber-rich penguin [my emphasis]" (ShS 41:18-41:24). Here, the seals are linguistically singled out through the use of the plural demonstrative pronoun, the use of which implies that other seals would not engage in this sort of behaviour. This exclusionary practice is emphasised by the voiceover's explicit reference to the common eating habits of seals, which are thus implicitly treated as an ethical norm, the status of which is further elevated by the use of "normally," which makes explicit reference to it. Its impact is even further enhanced if we compare it to other expressions that might have conveyed the same data points in this context (like 'for the most part,' 'usually,' 'commonly,' and others), as none of those words refers to a qualitative or ethically-charged standard. The seals we see on screen are therefore implicitly cast as deviants. However, as these ethical reflections on seal eating habits are again prompted by a human description rather than any visual impressions, viewers may wonder to what extent their shock is the product of a humanist perspective being problematised by the seals' asserting an agency that cannot be subsumed under an anthropocentric stereotype.

In presenting such behaviour on screen, *Shallow Seas* thus offers a wide variety of behaviours exhibited by non-humans for the audience's consideration, as well as giving them the opportunity to deconstruct some of the episode's own narrative premises. This enables the audience to see animals as 'relative *others.*' Depending on how far a given non-human's behaviour transcends the boundaries of the acceptable narrative, some viewers may be able to perceive a given non-human species as more or less complex partners in potential dialogical relations.

Conclusion: Filming the Great Divide and Some Of Its Fissures.

When *Planet Earth* was first announced on BBC 1 in the early half of 2006, the trailer described it as showing the planet "as [the audience has] never seen it before" ("Planet Earth Trailer" 00:05 – 00:06). Although this is most certainly true of the quality of the pictures and some of the footage, the narrative construction for the most part affirms traditional Western conceptions of the human-animal dualism.

By and large, the presence of humans in the habitats presented is effaced or denied. When we do see humans on screen with the non-human inhabitants, they are exclusively associated with inanimate nature, which is coded as aesthetically pleasing and exciting. Thus, humans are still perceived as different from non-humans. Indeed, this difference is often emphasised through the usage of problematic imagery and terminology. Speaking of caves as a frontier and connecting it to the American space programmes of the 1960s, for example, still casts nature as a space that humans have to colonise. Simultaneously, non-human animals become either literal aliens (what I have

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called "utter *others*") or colonial subjects ("relative *others*"). In either case, the narrative construction of the series does not explicitly position them as beings with whom we could and should enter into equal dialogues.

The audience, for their part, are mostly encouraged by both the visuals and the disembodied narrative voice to take up and maintain a distanced observer position. Consequently, although the narrative construction of the sequences encourages the audience to see the non-humans presented as adequate emotional objects, the emotions that are actually prompted by them are careful to maintain a distance between human subject and non-human object, rather than engendering a dialogical reaction like sympathy or empathy.

Non-human lives are mostly presented as *othered* existences in relation to the human-derived norm, although upon closer examination two different variations of this process can be differentiated. Those species who are comparatively unfamiliar to humans (or whose appearance does not accord with ideas of pleasant nature) are treated as "utter *others*." The clips shown of their behaviour emphasise their weird appearance and code their relationship to other non-humans as disgusting or cruel. For the most part, they are not even the subject of a narrative, but occupy the narrative-less space of the curiosity. In contrast, those species who are relatively familiar to a human audience, or who are classified as mammals or birds, are usually featured as part of a narrative. These narratives either confirm human conceptions of the animal (thus creating an image of the nonhuman as a static and safe *other*), or they destabilise the human-made narrative by showing a wider range of behaviours in a given species than is accorded to them by the stereotype.

Despite its broad confirmation to the guiding dualism of the human vs. the non-human, the series offers one particularly potent site from which a more dialogical conception of the question of the animal may be spread. Since all the narratives the series shows in order to render the non-human's difference safe, reveal traces of their cultural coding, a critical audience may use such traces to problematise the referentiality claim of the series. The most pervasive of these is the consistent ethical coding of non-human actions, especially when the narrative declares some creatures morally deviant when they deviate from their safe narrative roles. Additionally, the very existence of these narrative roles (some of which also perpetuate problematic gender discourses) are often modelled on either fairy tales or familiar pop culture narratives, which turn non-humans into symbol-indices. If the audience becomes aware of the pervasiveness of this cultural coding, it may destabilise the nature-culture dualism it seeks to preserve.

As the frequent references to a critical audience in the paragraphs above sadly indicate, however, those fissures in the Great Divide, though present, are as yet too small to lead to a much-needed change in the blue-chip narratives. It remains for future (BBC) productions to follow the technical innovations of *Planet Earth* with narrative ones on a similar scale, thereby allowing the non-human beings on our planet to finally be represented as humanity's equals.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Received 15 March 2013 Revised version accepted 1 October 2013

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