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MATX 602
Individual Project: Narrative Conventions in Environmental Literature and Films

Environmental narratives have become a major part of the nonfiction book and film market. From the origins of the genre in philosophical works such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* or more science-based works such as George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature,* the environmental narrative has served to anger, educate, enlighten, and inspire the public—to make the public more aware of, more appreciative of, and more willing to conserve the natural environment that sustains us.

The post-World War II years saw the rise of the modern environmental movement. With that movement came an explosion in the numbers of environmental literary works and environmental films produced. In a nod to growing awareness of the importance of environmental issues, journalists began paying more attention to the environment beat—a small group established the Society of Environmental Journalists in 1990. The society, with its collection of authors, print journalists, broadcast journalists, filmmakers, and academics, has helped inspire and lead the study and development of the profession.

Most environmental work, whether made for print, radio, television, theater, or the Internet, follows certain narrative conventions. These conventions may have less to do with reality than with the audience's expectations for how that reality should be portrayed. As Bousé says of wildlife films:

> Like horror films, westerns, sit-coms, police shows, and others, the success of individual wildlife films depends on their ability to appear unique while at the same time evoking those familiar patterns. The idea is to present audiences with something recognizable, for which they already have conceptual categories; to be consistent with their previous viewing experiences, to fulfill not thwart their expectations, and to do all this by employing already familiar conventions of realism, not by trying to reproduce reality itself. (Bousé 5)

Whether or not one agrees with Bousé that the form of the narrative is most important, the fact is that certain narrative conventions repeatedly appear in environmental literature and film. One is based on some kind of hero's journey in which a protagonist takes up and completes a quest. This quest may be a voyage of discovery, such as a scientist answering a question. It may be a spiritual journey, such as a person confronting and rethinking his relationship with the natural world. It may be a test of survival or skill, such as an animal completing a difficult migration. Other conventions do not rely as much on a protagonist. One is a "slice-of-life" narrative, which captures the life of a particular ecosystem—a prairie, for example—or a specific place over a specific period of time. Others are more exploitive, emphasizing sex and violence in the natural world (without much in the way of context). Still, others are none of the above, so devoid of narrative structure as to be unclassifiable.

One can ask whether or not one type of narrative convention is more effective than the others, but the question has to be qualified. More effective at what? Education? Entertainment? Inspiration? The question must further be qualified by the type of medium. An approach that may work well for a traditional print publication may not work well for an online publication, and approaches that work for either of the former may not work for a story based in sound, static image, or moving image. Conversely, given that humans have been telling each other stories in largely the same way since they first gathered around campfires, it may be that effective narrative techniques transcend media boundaries.

Voyage of Discovery

One example of the voyage of discovery narrative is the MacGillivray Freeman film, *Coral Reef Adventure*, in which the protagonists—renowned filmmakers Howard and Michele Hall—undertake a quest to learn about environmental threats to the world's coral reefs. Sometimes the

protagonists are characters, as with the Halls in *Coral Reef Adventure*, sometimes they are the authors, whose presence may not be visible but that presence is apparent nonetheless because it is their quest for answers that drives the narrative. *Catastrophe in the Making*, a book by William Freudenburg, Robert Gramling, Shirley Laska, and Kai T. Erikson, is an example of the latter. The authors set out to examine the phenomena that led to the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina.

There is no right or wrong answer in deciding whether to make the protagonist visible or not. In the case of *Coral Reef Adventure*, the presence of the Halls gives the audience human faces to identify with. The movie begins with a quick summary of what a reef is like and the ways in which reefs benefit humanity. It quickly moves into a subplot involving a native Fijian, Rusi Vulakoro, trying to discover why his local reef is dying. He contacts the Halls for help, and their quest to help Vulakoro takes them to Australia, Fiji, and French Polynesia to see and compare healthy reefs to those that have been damaged by pollution, weather, or some other factor. As they travel the South Pacific in search of clues, the film mixes scenes of dead or dying corals with those featuring vibrant reef life. The mood is punctuated by the music of Crosby, Stills & Nash (Graham Nash tunes, such as "Our House," for happy moments, Stephen Stills compositions, such as "Southern Cross," for more poignant ones). The scenes of coral devastation are sometimes accompanied by a heavy-handed script, as if the images alone were not sufficient to lead the viewer to the conclusion that conditions are bad on out there. (Osha Gray Davidson, who wrote the initial script, objected to the inclusion of these not-so-subtle messages.) Along the way, we learn more about reef organisms and how they interact, about the risks divers take in the effort to learn more about the ocean depths, and how water pressure in deep waters can easily defeat our advanced technologies.

By the time *Coral Reef Adventure* ends, the Halls identify some problems nearly impossible to control locally, such as coral bleaching caused by warmer ocean waters and overfishing by foreign fleets. It also finds one problem more easily handled by Vulakoro's community—silt pollution from logging operations on the island that can be remedied by controlling logging activity and protecting mangrove ecosystems along the shore that help trap the silt before it reaches the reefs. This knowledge leaves both Vulakoro and the audience sated with the optimism that right knowledge and right action can solve the world's problems. The happy mood is bolstered by another Nash song, "Teach Your Children." *Coral Reef Adventure* ends with the protagonists making an explicit plea to the audience: Become advocates for and defenders of reefs—of oceans in general. In this and other similar films, having visible and sympathetic protagonists helps create a positive emotional bond between the audience and subject that (one hopes) makes it more likely appropriate action will be taken. As the film fades to credits, we hear a choir singing a Fijian-language version of "Teach Your Children."

In *Catastrophe in the Making*, the authors/protagonists remain largely invisible, except for the third-person references to one or another author who witnessed something important in the run up to and aftermath of Katrina's landfall. The book follows what is called an "inverted-E" narrative structure. It begins with a prologue recounting first days of Katrina. The first chapter describe its landfall along the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts. These two sections of the book set up the question: Why did this disaster happen? To arrive at the answer, the authors describe the setting—the landscape of New Orleans and the lower Mississippi Delta—and the reason why it is prone to flooding from tropical storm systems. Then they step far back in time and walk the reader to the present, showing how the region called "Louisiana" developed from a French and Spanish colony to become a state beset by ill-conceived flood-control and navigation projects

that help erode shoreline, contribute to coastal subsidence, and abet loss of vitally important coastal and freshwater wetlands; and by economic development boondoggles that enrich the elites by making the working classes more vulnerable to disasters such as the flooding of the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and adjacent parts of St. Bernard Parish. The authors close the book with a cleverly named chapter, "The End of an Error?," that outlines efforts to prevent a Katrina-like disaster from happening again—whether in New Orleans, the St. Louis metropolitan are, the Sacrament River delta region, or many other places in the United States or around the world. The authors' voyage of discovery becomes the reader's voyage, too. The authors remain dispassionate, but by their presentation of the facts the reader is left nothing but passionate—with anger and frustration being at the top of the list of passions he or she feels. They trusted the reader to come to the right conclusions, and their trust is rewarded.

Spiritual Journey

Aldo Leopold's seminal *A Sand County Almanac*, is an example of a spiritual journey narrative. The book, written in the final years of Leopold's life, is a personal examination of his (and our) relationship with nature. It has a complicated structure, consisting of three parts. The first part of the book, "A Sand County Almanac," is arguably a slice of life narrative made of twelve chapters corresponding to the twelve months of the year. Each monthly essay examines some aspect of the life of Leopold's farm. For example, one chapter focuses on returning migratory birds; another focuses on the sawing of an old oak and the stories the tree could tell if the rings in its trunk could talk. The second part, "Sketches Here and There," recounts Leopold's personal evolution from a nineteenth century youth steeped in the mythos of man's dominion over nature to an aging twentieth century man realizing our species' uncanny ability—in our misguided efforts to force everything to suit our purposes—to destroy the very benefits that the

natural world offers us. The final part, "The Upshot," is the realization of Leopold's spiritual journey. The essays in this, the shortest section of the book, build toward "The Land Ethic," a call for a new relationship between man and nature.

> In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. (Leopold 202-203)

Despite the differences in structure of the three parts, they add up to a coherent whole. Leopold invites us along for a hike, and as a result, his spiritual journey becomes our own. His story helps give those concerned about the environment the words they need to explain why they—and anyone else—should share those concerns. The personal nature of Leopold's work, the engaging way he welcomes the reader to his world, and the treats he drops for us along the way help explain why *A Sand County Almanac* remains as strong a spiritual and philosophical influence among the environmental movement today as it was when first published sixty years ago.

Tests of Survival or Skill

The test of survival or skill has long been a staple of environmental literature and, especially, film. The Academy Award-winning documentary, *March of the Penguins*, exemplifies this type of narrative. It focuses on the challenges emperor penguins face in rearing their young in the harsh Antarctic environment. The film begins with the penguins' emergence from the Southern Ocean just before the onset of the southern hemisphere winter. The birds clamber onto the Antarctic ice and march inland to their breeding grounds. Breeding pairs mate. The female lays a single egg which she transfers to the male to incubate in a brood pouch balanced on his feet. After the transfer, the female returns to the sea to feed, while the male protects the chick through the worst of the winter weather. Two months later, the female returns and she and the male take turns taking care of the chick while the other has gone to sea to feed. By the time winter ends, the

parents return to the sea. Some time later, the nearly full-grown chicks embark on their own journey to the sea and completing the narrative cycle.

The cinematography is stunning, and the backstory of the filming is an Antarctic adventure in itself. But the film, despite its Oscar, has problems. In test of survival or skill narratives that involve humans, such as in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, even a dead human protagonist (arguably, one who failed the test) may leave behind a record of his or her final days (or in the case of "Grizzly Man" Tim Treadwell and his girlfriend Anna Huguenard, their final moments as the couple are killed by the bears Treadwell thought he understood). A live human protagonist (one who passed), can be interviewed. These documents and interviews allow the writer to incorporate the participants' feelings and thoughts without awkward invention. But when the protagonist is an animal, such as in *March of the Penguins*, writers are tempted to lapse into anthropomorphism, which leads to prose like this:

> For the next eight months, these two will participate in an ancient and complicated affair. There will be tenderness. There will be separation. There will be reunion. And if their partnership is successful, there will be new life. For now, they wait: for the egg, and for the brutal winter which will do everything in its power to destroy that egg. (*March of the Penguins*, 00:17-00:18)

As a scientist, such purple prose, and such investment of non-human, even inanimate, entities with human feelings and ambitions turns my stomach. I know of no documentation that birds of any type are capable of what we call tenderness—I doubt that even a mynah bird would be able to wax (eloquently or otherwise) on the topic. As for winter, winter does what winter does. There is no agency, no intention, in winter weather to destroy anything. The temperature will plummet just as much, the wind will blow just as hard, whether the penguins are in the way or not. The result of such dreadful prose is a misinformed public inadvertently steeped in animist religion—that nature is imbued with spirits that may or may not be out to get us.

Such anthropomorphism is unnecessary. Jack London realized as much in works such as "To Build a Fire." He could have humanized without reproach the canine foil to the doomed human protagonist, but he chose not to. The result is a short story all the more powerful because the canine character is treated as the dog it was, not as the human many of us would like it and others like it to be.

Slices of Life

Slice of life narratives abound in the environmental literature and film genre. The BBC-produced television series *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth*, or *Galápagos* are a prime example. Each episode in *The Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth* focuses on the life of specific ecosystems. For example, "Open Ocean," begins with a feeding frenzy hundreds of miles away from land in which swordfish, juvenile tuna, and a sei whale feed on a bait ball of sardines. Seabirds[1] pick off stragglers, and soon all the predators leave—the sequence ends with the whale disappearing into the blue with scales off the sardines raining into the depths. The episode jumps from one ocean to another, showing other feeding behaviors, development of fish embryos and larvae, and more. The only constant is the ecosystem: the open ocean hundreds of miles from the nearest land.[2] *Planet Earth* follows the same formula. In the episode "Mountains," footage from the Americas, Africa, and Asia illustrates how animals and plants adapt to the challenges of life at higher elevations. While the locations change, the common challenges of life in those ecosystems enable the crafting of a coherent narrative.

Keep in mind that the focus of a slice of life narrative is not always a specific ecosystem. The focus may be on a specific place, as in *Galápagos*, or specific groups of organisms. The first episode of *Galápagos*, "Born of Fire," explain the processes that formed the archipelago and that

[1] Possibly shearwaters, but even with the frames frozen, I could not get a clear enough look at them to be sure.
[2] Seeing this episode for the first time since my return from this summer's Plastics at SEA expedition—where we spent nearly five weeks hundreds of miles from the nearest land—was pretty exciting.

help make it such a unique place for life of all types. Early in the episode, it shows spectacular footage of blue-footed boobies dive-bombing nearshore waters for fish just beneath the surface. Whereas these waters offer a rich source of food to sustain life, they offer myriad ways to end it, such as boobies who have their bodies dashed on rocks by the surf. The point is emphasized by subsequent footage of birds walking along the beach with wings broken by the waves. The episode later addresses the tectonic processes that created the archipelago, biological processes that helped life colonize it, and on some of the other organisms adapted to its environment. In this case, the place forms the thread that holds the narrative together.

Exploitation

Exploitative shows likewise abound, such as the "shockumentary" *When Animals Attack!*, which first aired in 1996, or Animal Planet's series *Untamed & Uncut*, which airs now. The focus on sex and violence in these shows offers a very distorted and misleading view of nature. The natural world can seem brutal enough—outside of *Homo sapiens*, most predators spend more time worrying about how to avoid becoming prey themselves than they do about the ethics of consuming their prey—acts of killing for food or mates is just business, but the stakes are survival of the individual, even of the entire species. Humans kill for far more trivial reasons: business, pleasure, politics, and more. While some animals—like rabbits—procreate like rabbits, the emphasis in all but a handful of species is on procreation, not pleasure. Even in the animals that engage in sex for other purposes, the goal is arguably social bonding among members of a group rather than debauchery among organisms unburdened by our inhibitions. These shows often offer very little in the way of narrative context. The 48 minutes of an episode of *Untamed & Uncut*, for example, jumps from one sequence to another to another—all featuring some kind of close call, usually of humans at the mercy of some other member of the animal kingdom. It is

a kind of pornography, a compilation of short segments designed merely to get the "job" done before the viewer reaches for the television remote.

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Some films defy classification. One example is the Oscar-nominated film *Winged Migration*. Ostensibly, it is a documentary of the test of survival or skill type, but as it consists largely of footage featuring imprinted birds flying to music, one can legitimately wonder whether there is any narrative at all. Sometimes the lack of narrative is explicit, such as in live video feeds of peregrine falcon nests, or in broadcasts featuring the life of an aquarium. In these cases, though, the footage typically serves some other purpose than storytelling.

The Upshot

Obviously there is a range of narrative structures that can be used in environmental literature and films, but most can be classified into a handful of conventions: voyage of discovery, spiritual journey, test of survival or skill, or slice of life. No one convention is best, no one convention is easiest. Each convention is as capable of being poorly executed as the others.

The choice of narrative convention, as always in a work of literature, filmmaking or art, will depend on the goal of the narrative and the nature (no pun intended) of the subject. Once the choice of convention is made, though, the creators often benefit from the inspiration of storytelling techniques that have worked well in the past. Davidson, in his books and in his script for *Coral Reef Adventure*, draws inspiration from fiction and film, searching for the right characters, plot, metaphor, etc., that will enable him to tell the story he needs or wants to tell:

> The idea … of finding a literary device, literary nonfiction, is a decision I made decades ago. … To use the techniques of fiction, of character, plot development: all of the same techniques, but use them in nonfiction. Tell a good story—there are so many permutations of that—but keeping always in mind that this is a story conveying information.

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