

## Tasmanian tigers and polar bears: The documentary moving image and (species) loss

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### Abstract

In this essay I explore how two divergent examples of the nonfiction moving image can be understood in relation to the problem of representing species loss. The species that provide the platform for this consideration are the thylacine, better known as the Tasmanian tiger, and the polar bear. They represent the two contingencies of species loss: endangerment and extinction. My analysis is structured around moving images from the 1930s of the last known thylacine and the very different example of *Arctic Tale* (Adam Ravetch, Sarah Robertson, 2007), a 'Disneyfied' film that dramatises climate change and its impact on the polar bear. Species loss is frequently perceived in a humanist sense, reflecting how we 'imagine ourselves' or anthropocentric characterisations of non-human others. I offer a close analysis of the two films, examining the problem of representing extinction through a consideration of the play of absence and presence, vitality and extinguishment, that characterises both the ontology of cinema and narratives about species loss.

**Keywords:** animals, documentary, environment, extinction, nonfiction, polar bear, species loss, Tasmanian tiger, thylacine, wildlife film

Paleoanthropologists Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin project that one-half of the animal and plant species existing today will have vanished in the next one hundred years.<sup>1</sup> While a background level of extinction is part of the balance of natural evolutionary processes, species loss has intensified in the current epoch. In 2009 biologists compiling the 'Red List' of threatened species report that nearly one-quarter (22%) of the world's mammal species, nearly one-third (31%) of amphibians, and more than one in eight birds (13.6%) are globally threatened or have become extinct in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> In some cases the lack of reliable data means that the number may be far

higher. The reasons for this decline range from habitat destruction, invasive species, pollution, human population growth, and over-harvesting.

The current rate of species loss is causing an unprecedented loss of biodiversity. Matthew Chrulow captures this when he writes that ‘the rate and scale of contemporary “man-made” extinction is the definitive double death: the irreparable loss not only of the living but of the multiplicity of forms of life’.<sup>3</sup> The task of quantifying extinction and biodiversity loss is fraught with difficulty. The total number of species on the planet is unknown, but most are plants and insects – only a fraction are vertebrates such as mammals. Representations that address the full complexity of this endeavor are confined largely to the institutions of scientific investigation. In popular culture the depth and breadth of species loss is frequently rendered in narrow ways. Nevertheless, stories about extinction have a critical capacity to draw attention to life in the face of definitive ‘double death’. Chrulow’s reference to this term is informed by Deborah Bird Rose’s description of double death as ‘the amplification of death, so that the balance between life and death is overrun, and death starts piling up corpses in the land of the living’.<sup>4</sup> In this essay I explore how the nonfiction moving image brings the problem of representing extinction into view. This enquiry requires an approach informed not only by studies of documentary and wildlife film but also critical geography and emerging work in extinction studies.

Documentary has developed through its relationship to the possibility of crafting life and making it present for the viewer, giving weight to the substance of bodies and events in history. Given this, it is a cogent medium for understanding and conveying the extinction of forms of life. I examine two examples that sit at the margins of documentary proper. One is a moving image sequence with no sound and little editing: footage recorded in the 1930s that captures the likeness of the last known thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), better known as the Tasmanian tiger. In the other, *Arctic Tale* (Adam Ravetch, Sarah Robertson, 2007), a ‘Disneyfied’ film, I focus on the polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*). This film exists at the uneasy intersection of documentary and fiction, displaying the preference for artifice and pathos that characterises the wildlife film and television tradition. The two examples speak to the two contingencies of species loss: endangerment and extinction.

In different ways both reward an investigation that seeks to grapple with the problem of representing extinction, though they have little in common in aesthetic terms. In bracketing them together I seek to emphasise and assert the diverse ways in which documentary encourages viewers to, in Elizabeth Cowie’s characterisation, ‘experience reality through recorded images and sounds of reality’.<sup>5</sup> In documentary cinema realist styles

and conventions proliferate, overlapping with and even exceeding those of fiction. I argue that the two alternatives I discuss underline two different realisms in documentary. In the first, focusing on the thylacine, I examine cinema's capacity to address the viewer in ways that engage the senses and the ephemeral, harnessing the qualities of material life. In the second, concerning the polar bear, I attend to the storytelling and signifying potential of documentary realism. In the sections that follow I explore the ramifications of these different inflections and what they mean for the rendering of life and extinction.

## 1      **Modernity and the representation of extinction: Significant species**

The staging of animal life for the purposes of rendering species loss within modern paradigms has a long history. The first species extinction to be documented as it occurred was that of the dodo in the 17th century, a flightless pigeon found on the island of Mauritius. According to reliable accounts the dodo was first sighted in 1589,<sup>6</sup> and it is estimated the bird was extinct by 1690. The dodo has become emblematic of a human connection to a crisis in nature, emerging as a culturally-significant species, burdened with the weight of signifying more than simply its own biotic existence. Thom Van Dooren asserts that 'while this was by no means the first species in whose loss humans were centrally involved, the dodo inhabits a peculiar and iconic place in many contemporary accounts of extinction'.<sup>7</sup> Ursula K. Heise further specifies the importance of the dodo, arguing that at the moment the dodo disappeared human impact on flora and fauna first entered the modern imagination, instituting a new relationship with the non-human world. Since this time the dodo has become 'a recurrent symbol of the destruction of nature wrought by the imperialist expansion of European modernity – a destruction that, it should be added, also generated the first initiatives for conservation'.<sup>8</sup> The dodo offers one of the earliest examples of animals becoming iconic due to their relationship to modernity and human-induced extinction.

The distinctive humanism of representations of species loss fuels a broader tendency to perceive narratives of extinction as a reflection of human identity and history. In this frame changes in biodiversity become apprehended as human loss and animals are enlisted to perform human narratives of decline. As Heise notes, this is a way of rehearsing histories of modernisation, often in order to contest particular forms of progress and

developmentalism. At historical moments of accelerating change the loss of a particular species becomes a placeholder for 'the vanishing of nature and the weakening of human bonds to the natural world'.<sup>9</sup> Declining nature, its end or disappearance, is rhetorically tied to social decline caused by development.<sup>10</sup> The weakening Heise describes plays into more pervasive narratives of decline that have intensified in recent years, fueling environmentalist movements. Declensionist narratives structure the representation of biodiversity loss, tending toward singularity, denying the possibility of uncertainty, contingency, and complexity.

In recent times singularly-recognisable animals such as the dodo have come to metonymically stand for contemporary species loss in greater proportions. Such animals are endowed with cultural or iconic significance and are visible in a manner that is often proportionally at odds with their role in the ecosystem; these may not be the most important animals for sustaining the biodiversity necessary for ecological stability, but they excel when it comes to evoking human fascination and identification. These are often large mammals, sometimes referred to by geographers and conservationists as charismatic 'megafauna'. Some of these, as I will discuss in relation to the polar bear, are strategically utilised to rally support for conservation and, where possible, to ensure continuity into the future.

Culturally-significant animals that are deployed for the purposes of raising public awareness are also termed 'flagship' species. The quintessential representation of animal life for political purposes, flagship species stage a strong amalgamation of biopolitical discourse and mediated dissemination. This amalgamation is disparaged by some conservationists and biologists, yet perceived as highly strategic by others. As a wealth of critical studies has made clear, flagship species claim precedence in the media sphere and eclipse more complex understandings of ecologies and biodiversity and how to sustain these. For Steve Hinchliffe charismatic flagship species encourage the 'Hollywoodisation of conservation',<sup>11</sup> marginalising the importance of evolving ecosystems and the different roles that less visible organisms play in sustainable biodiversity. These species offer a crucial example of the staging of animal life within discourses of extinction and conservation. This terrain of representation begins to indicate what is at stake in making life and its potential for extinction, available to a popular audience in mediated forms. Central to this is the problem of perceiving species loss in ways that are defined by human concerns, identities, and politics. I address this problem by first examining the moving image representation of the thylacine, a species that is already registered in the historical catalogue of extinction.

## 2 The Tasmanian tiger: Cinema, loss, and mythologising the last of the last

There are few instances in which animals have been caught on film before they have become extinct. The most well-known example in an Australian context is black-and-white footage of a thylacine that shows the animal in The Hobart Zoo in the early 1930s. In this fragment, which runs at no more than three minutes, a female tiger paces and lies in its cage, at one point yawning with its huge jaws. Following the death of this animal in 1936 there have been no verified sightings of the thylacine, a wolf-like marsupial with a distinctive striped body. It was finally declared extinct in the 1980s. Robert A. Leidy describes the thylacine as ‘perhaps the world’s most enigmatic extinct carnivore, in large part, because some believe that the species persists in small numbers in the Tasmanian wilderness’.<sup>12</sup> In the contemporary era the thylacine has become a recognisable symbol of species loss, particularly in Australia where it is also tied not only to human impact on the environment but also to colonial identity.<sup>13</sup> The moving image fragment that depicts the last thylacine both preserves the animal as image and provides the visual basis for mythologising it in the human imagination. My reading explores how it does so in ways that reference the loss that is at the ontological heart of cinema. In this respect, I extend Hiese’s formulation of animals and the crisis of modernity by understanding how the moving image encourages recognition and sensible knowledge of loss through the unique temporality and affective dimensions of the form.

For Laura Mulvey, the photographic image, the basis for cinema’s relation to discourses of the real, is entwined with the problem of time: as the camera registers what stands before it,

the ‘thing’ inscribes its sign at a specific moment in time. Thus, the index has a privileged relation to time, to the moment and duration of its inception; it also has a physical relation to the original of which it is the sign.<sup>14</sup>

There is always an aspect of loss in this formulation, as access to the referent is always impossible – it is lost in the moment of registration. Mulvey claims that cinema combines two human fascinations: ‘one with the boundary between life and death and the other with the mechanical animation of the inanimate, particularly the human figure’.<sup>15</sup> However, Akira Lippit extends this question of animation to specifically pose an epistemological alignment with animal life. For Lippit, ‘cinema is like an animal; the likeness a form of encryption’.<sup>16</sup> He refers here to the animal as

a machinic metaphor – the ‘animetaphor’, drawing on the status of animals as a technological trope and a source of energy and life. His account references species loss as an informing paradigm, arguing that early cinema developed ‘embodied animal traits as a gesture of mourning for the disappearing wildlife’.<sup>17</sup> Mulvey’s approach to cinema’s processes of inscription points to a constant interplay between the animation of the referent (as ‘life’) through sound and image and the knowledge that direct access to the referent, which is available to the camera for only an instant, is lost. Lippit’s approach goes further, specifying a link between cinema’s origins and animal extinction, speculating that the illusion of cinema’s vitalism might stand in for the demise of wildlife.

Building on these approaches, it might be said that documentary cinema is engaged in a process of extinction as it extinguishes potentiality, fixing the index and suggesting only the trace of what was there. The viewer is attuned to this and is asked to constantly grapple with the play of absence and presence that distinguishes the process of photographic representation. The simultaneous intermingling of life and death produces uncanny effects and Mulvey’s evocation of the boundary between the two offers an approach well-suited to describing footage of extinct animals and their haunting address to the viewer.

The moving image fragment of the thylacine that I have described has become widely disseminated, multiplying across the Internet, including YouTube, and screen media that reference the animal. At the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart a permanent exhibition titled *Tasmanian Tiger: Precious Little Remains* displays the footage shot in The Hobart Zoo, running in a continual loop, projected against a wall. The projection sits alongside artifacts including tiger pelts, preserved specimens, and skeletons of the animal.<sup>18</sup> As indicated in the title of the exhibition, these are ‘remains’ of the thylacine, a term that invokes both the bio-matter of deceased creatures and that which is static or left behind. The temporal relationship gestured to in the exhibition space is thus one in which pieces of the past are preserved for the future. These objects are some of the rare remains of a species that is no longer directly accessible as ‘life’. In her discussion of ‘things’ in narrative feature film, Lesley Stern writes how affect is generated as

the cinema evokes the solidity and tactility of things in the very moment of their passing, their ephemerality. In the cinema solid things turn into phantasms, touch turns into memory. It is the mutability of things that matters.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of the grainy, flattened corporeality of the thylacine, this mutability encourages a desire to watch the short clip more than once. The loop in the gallery and the online version of the footage allow the viewer to immediately replay the experience, enabling attempts to make the body of the animal tactical and perceive its unique, living thingness in tandem with the mutability of the moving image.

The same footage appears in the television documentary *Extinct: The Tasmanian Tiger*, broadcast in 2001. The documentary is one of a number of half-hour episodes in the Extinct series produced by Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, each devoted to an extinct animal. The series' synopsis asserts

[o]f all the species that have ever existed, 99.9% are now extinct. This documentary brings to life the compelling stories of these lost creatures and solves the mystery of their demise.

Not only the thylacine, but also the Columbian mammoth, the sabre-tooth tiger, the dodo, the great auk, and the Irish elk are featured in episodes in the series. The episode devoted to the thylacine, the most recent extinction in this cast of animals, is the only one to feature photographic evidence to supplement the computer-generated images relied on in other episodes.

The footage has a preeminent place in the documentary. In one scene it is shown at one remove from the viewer, as biologist and conservationist Nick Mooney watches the film in a darkened room. Notably, he watches it on celluloid, and the sound and mechanics of the projector feature prominently in the sequence, which is prefaced by a male voiceover: 'it is only after its extinction' that scientists are 'studying it properly, using some extraordinary evidence'. The evidence referred to is the recognisable black-and-white footage, and Mooney proceeds to discuss the movement of the animal as it paces, also identifying its distinctive features as the film runs in the background. He describes the 'beautiful fluidity' of the thylacine's movements as the sequence cuts to the footage. The male voiceover again uses the word 'extraordinary', this time to describe the animal itself. The silent, grainy images are framed in ways that suggest the exceptionalism of both what has been lost and the form of the evidence, the footage, reinforcing the images as strange, compelling, and exotic.

In the museum exhibition and the episode of *Extinct* the uncanny animal is both dead and animated into perpetuity, evoking André Bazin's notion that cinema has the capacity to present the process of death over and over. Yet rather than the moment of dying, as in Bazin's essay, it is the animation of an obliterated species that is offered a 'material eternity'.<sup>20</sup>



However, there is a multiplication of loss that occurs when the inscribing entity is not simply absent, or its death is not simply available to be 'dead-again' through the technology of cinema; in the case of the definitive death of species loss, images of the last animal create 'the first notion' of a new, mythological animal in extinction. Ricardo De Vos discusses the thylacine in his account of 'extinction stories', noting how the function of writing, another form of representation, again effects a 'spatial and temporal removal from its object'<sup>21</sup> which is absent. De Vos writes that 'stories of existence which focus on the demise of the last remaining animal utilize evidence of an historical absence in realizing the presence of an ideal form'.<sup>22</sup> In this case the ideal form becomes that which is caught on camera, forever mythologised and distanced from the 'reality' of an embodied animal that might produce multiple and divergent inscriptions.

The moving image fragment of the thylacine has been used in the examples I have described as a tool for myth-making in ways that add further weight to Heise's notion that animals become projections of human conceptions of crisis in modernity in accounts of species loss. The cultural background that binds images of the animal to Australian culture potentially informs viewers' reading of the museum exhibition and the Extinct television documentary. The thylacine has emerged as a strong cultural symbol, signifying the specificity of place and colonialism. Carol Freeman identifies this in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as 'dozens of logos and emblems in Tasmania use the figure of the thylacine'.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the thylacine began appearing on posters and on labels for advertising purposes.<sup>24</sup> In 1919 the new coat of arms for the state of Tasmania was established, prominently featuring caricatures of two thylacines. Paradoxically, at the same time that conservation efforts were proving too weak to save the species, the thylacine was gaining momentum as a symbol of the distinctiveness of Tasmanian culture and its environment.

While the thylacine has variously been made to signify the vitality, exoticism, and prosperity of the Tasmanian environment, in the present day it is associated with a more negative identity. For Leidy, 'due its strong cultural associations with the state of Tasmania, the thylacine has come to symbolize the exploitation and destruction of Tasmania's natural heritage, as well as the hope for Tasmania's future conservation'.<sup>25</sup> In this symbolic schema the complex factors that resulted in the death of the species are obscured and flattened into a simple relationship between humans and nature more broadly. The loss is a loss for the nation, its heritage, and its sovereignty over distinctive flora and fauna. Similar to the dodo, the thylacine has become a culturally-significant species, burdened with symbolic



weight and emblematic of the troubled relationship between humans and nature. If last images of extinct animals enable loss to become idealised as myth, the moving image footage of the thylacine plays a particular role in this mythologising.

The thylacine is preserved in moving images in a way that is made meaningful to viewers through the distinctive materiality of film and the knowledge of the species' extinction. The film emphasises the phenomena of life, creating an 'effect of material presence'<sup>26</sup> in ways that are saturated with the loss of extinction. At stake in this representation of life is not the 'reality' of the actual animal but cinema's modes of temporality, specifically the temporality of the apparatus itself (its mechanical, ontological qualities) and the temporality of reception through which the (lost) filmed object (the extinct species) can be available for a contemporary audience. Deemed 'extraordinary', it is positioned to encourage both mourning and endless repetition – the ongoing uncanny material revival of the animated animal for the elaboration of national sentiment. In contrast, the particular representation of the polar bear I am concerned with requires an approach that moves away from the temporal ontology of cinema and its capacity to communicate materiality and ephemerality. *Arctic Tale* and its elaboration of the conventions of wildlife film and television relies on spectacle, but in a manner that is tightly structured through the defining codes of narrative.

### 3 The polar bear and wildlife narrative: *Arctic Tale*

The polar bear occupies an exceptional place in the popular imaginary. Kathryn Yusoff captures this when she describes the white polar bear as 'a mythic and biophysical storyteller, figuring the complexities of changing climates and habitat loss, and conjoining the biophysical and emotional worlds of humans and animals'.<sup>27</sup> The capacity of this flagship species to encapsulate the richness of public feeling about climate change, animals, and the biosphere indicates why it has become a key figure in recent 'blue chip' wildlife documentary. *Arctic Tale* places the polar bear at the forefront of its representation of Arctic ecosystems and its underlying commentary on anthropogenic climate change. With Yusoff's observation in mind, I examine how *Arctic Tale* harnesses the storytelling potential of the polar bear and fuses it with the traditions and conventions of wildlife film in ways that gesture to a foreclosed future for the species.

*Arctic Tale* is a joint production between Paramount Classics and National Geographic Films. It was shot and directed over the course of 10

years by Adam Ravetch and Sarah Robertson. The film is organised into two parallel story threads, following 'Nanu' the female polar bear and 'Seela' the female walrus from infancy to adulthood. In actuality, it compiles footage of different animals and organises it into a narrative, assisted by the voice work of Queen Latifah. The voiceover furnishes the two lead animals with names and human-like qualities, contributing to the film's ambiguous location at the intersection of fiction and nonfiction. *Arctic Tale* was released soon after *March of the Penguins* (Luc Jacquet, 2005), one of the most commercially successful documentaries of all time with worldwide box office returns of \$US127 million. *Arctic Tale* only recorded a modest \$US2 million on theatrical release, a sum that is nevertheless sizeable for a documentary. *March of the Penguins* has a somewhat similar stylistic approach to *Arctic Tale* yet does not reference the impact of climate change. Nevertheless, the earlier film has been pivotal in mobilising the rise of ecologically-oriented films over the last decade, a phenomenon Gregg Mitman terms the 'green wave'.

*Arctic Tale* exhibits textual qualities that align it with wildlife film traditions, particularly U.S. traditions in which artifice, story, and anthropomorphism are made explicit. In contrast, Bousé identifies 'natural history film', which signifies a longer history of filmmaking now more associated with British examples that, while focused on entertainment, draw more on references to established science. *Arctic Tale* and *Earth* (Alastair Fothergill, Mark Linfield, 2007), a blue chip Disney production that also features polar bears, indicate a move (discernable in examples across both traditions) toward referring to the existence of climate change. Cynthia Chris maps how, in the postwar era, some wildlife film and television acknowledged habitat destruction and encouraged conservation – albeit in ways that emphasised the resilience of the natural world. While since the 1970s this message has been more explicit, in most cases examples 'evade discussion of specific causes and political solutions to environmental problems'.<sup>28</sup> Recognition of the definitive conclusions of climate science has been similarly protracted,<sup>29</sup> and *Arctic Tale* offers a further example of Chris' point regarding the tendency for commercially-distributed film to sidestep political controversy – *Arctic Tale* depicts how warmer, longer summers and deteriorating ice coverage affect the animals' ability to find food and refuge without stating the causes of the changing conditions.

Unlike *Earth*, *Arctic Tale* does not have a formal relationship with the Disney brand. Nevertheless, the film's formal and narrative concerns locate it squarely in the Disney tradition, particularly the True-Life Adventures series. The adherence to Disney wildlife conventions and the blurring of

the line between fiction and nonfiction places *Arctic Tale* at the forefront of the contested relationship between documentary and wildlife film. While the focus on plot and artifice does not offer an easy fit with some definitions of documentary, I argue that wildlife film exists in a distinct category that draws on documentary techniques and is frequently marketed as documentary, making use of viewers' desire for visible evidence of the non-human world.<sup>30</sup> These blue chip wildlife examples build on Disney's emphasis on storytelling and marry this with documentary realism in order to pose an inclusive address that appeals to younger viewers as well as adults. Moreover, with its environmental undertones, *Arctic Tale* makes this address explicit in ways that utilise the child demographic in the promotion of green consumerism; over the closing credits individual children relay tips that can reduce environmental impact on the Arctic.<sup>31</sup>

In part, the inclusive address of the film is achieved by crafting images and the biotic characteristics of the non-human into classical storytelling paradigms. Such conventions construct the non-human world in ways that are more event-filled<sup>32</sup> than occurs in real time, while subscribing to a uniform narrative. Bousé points to one such narrative used in wildlife: 'a variation on the ancient theme of the quest, which had already given rise to a kind of standardized narrative that could be traced from the Odyssey to Don Quixote to the novels of Raymond Chandler'.<sup>33</sup> The quest or journey is most often presented in wildlife films through individuated characters whose biography is developed through a single film. For Bousé this mode of storytelling has been a longstanding feature of wildlife film that more widely includes 'the focus on the life experiences of a single endearing character, the orphan theme, the journey motif, and the overall coming of age story with its drama of trial and initiation, separation and return, struggle and exaltation'.<sup>34</sup> Animals are co-opted into quest narratives in ways that not only individuate and personify them (offering the structure of a human biography), but they are also produced as classically-archetypal figures. *Arctic Tale* begins with the moment at which two polar bear cubs emerge from their snow cave for the first time. Their mother, who has been in hibernation for six months, accompanies them. *Arctic Tale* further personifies the animals by maintaining a coherent coming of age narrative throughout the film.

Nanu, as a cub, is protected and fed by her mother for the first half of the film. During this period particular reference is made to the warmer autumn, impacting on the bear's ability to hunt on solid sea ice. This is a problem perceived by the cubs' mother. As the bear walks over fragile ice the voiceover states:

[s]omething is different this year. The ice isn't hard at all. This is not like any winter mother bear has seen before. They'll have to go back and wait for the ice to thicken. And until it does they'll remain hungry.

During the winter the male cub dies of hunger and fatigue in a storm; in a highly-emotive sequence the mother and female cub huddle over him after death, with the voiceover offering their grief human dimensions. Soon, Nanu is shown at two years old, and at this age her mother drives her away, separating from the cub a year earlier than usual, as she is unable to provide for both of them in the changing climate. A shot-reverse shot sequence is crafted to show the two bears looking at one another, as the voiceover interprets:

[l]eaving is the hardest thing Nanu has ever done, but it's also hard for her mother. She can't protect her young one anymore.

At this point the coming-of-age story is also realised as an orphan narrative.

The polar bear in *Arctic Tale* exemplifies Yusoff's concept of 'companion species', a formulation that appropriates Donna Haraway's well-known use of the term. In Yusoff's sense, animals can function as companion species in the journey toward environmental decline: '[a]s companions in the experience of abrupt environmental change, polar bears have become a space in which to project, negotiate and comprehend a shared fate'.<sup>35</sup> In this respect, animals are prosthetics for human experience, standing in for our own somatic and epistemological access to the non-human environment. *Arctic Tale* takes not only the polar bear but also the walrus, and co-opts them to advance the journey through an Arctic affected by climate change. What it means to be an animal in the Arctic is rendered in striking visual detail, yet this visualisation is deployed in understanding bears and walruses as cohabitants and companions to humans rather than as causalities, victims of anthropogenic climate change and in need of protection. Symbolising human social traits, the bears become characters in their own human story, eclipsing and displacing responsibility for the more crucial human story – the reasons for and actions to mitigate pending environmental catastrophe in the Arctic.

Claire Molloy argues that, more broadly, Disneynature reworks earlier Disney wildlife films to accentuate the brand's relationship to nostalgia. The new emphasis on conservation that permeates many Disneynature films draw on this nostalgia to frame contemporary environmental de-

struction as a shared narrative, changing through time, with promotional material noting that

[t]here was a time when most people viewed nature as something apart from themselves. In the 21st century, there is an increasing awareness that we are all part of nature.<sup>36</sup>

For Molloy, Disney nature is 'the communicator of an overarching, even universal story of nature and its films provide points of orientation from a "past nature" to the current fragile environment'.<sup>37</sup> The Disney brand expressly constructs a relationship with the audience that allows them to perceive themselves to be sharing in a benign nature, across time, reinforcing the notion that animals are long-standing companions and dispersing responsibility.

In *Arctic Tale*, Seela and Nanu are figured as human prosthetics for experiencing climate change, co-opted into a human rationale of decision-making. In stories about the thylacine, De Vos observes that the animals are not afforded

agency in adapting to a suddenly hostile environment. The thylacine, in its ideal form, is cast as unable to adapt to change, a victim of evolution and marsupial inferiority/innocence, helpless in the face of progress.<sup>38</sup>

*Arctic Tale* does not explicitly depict animals unable to adapt, nor does it recognise a kind of non-human charisma described by geographer Jamie Lorimer that opens 'analysis to nonhuman difference and to the vast diversity of agency potentials performed by different organisms'.<sup>39</sup> Instead, the possibility of observing and contemplating polar bear behaviour and corporeality is thwarted by the imposition of humanising qualities, minimising the potential to understand these animals as agents or as outside the narrative trajectory of decline in which the story places them.

The coupling of the humanist biographical mode and the depiction of climate change is integral in this film. If, as Yusoff notes, the polar bear has 'become a mythic and biophysical storyteller' in climate change narratives, Nanu's character draws on the mythologising impulse of classical (Disneyfied) wildlife film while also tapping into audience knowledge about potential species loss. Posing the embodied animal as a mythological type again evokes De Vos' approach to the representation of extinct species, in which he describes how the absent referent or inscribing subject is replaced with an idea:

[t]he death and subsequent absence of the last specimen requires the absence of the inscribing subject. The reader is connected with the idea of the animal rather than its 'reality'. A first notion of the extinct animal is produced from a theory of last instances.<sup>40</sup>

While the inscribing subject is always absent in film, often its material likeliness may exist and be accessed in the world again. However, in the case of the definitive death of species loss it is absent for all possible future inscriptions – it is frequently replaced with mythologies to which images become subservient. The polar bear is not yet the last of the last, but, significantly, the film accentuates narrative structure in ways that gesture to extinction narratives, presaging death and anticipating last instances by reducing animal vitalism and materiality to an idea.

#### 4 Animal futures: Contesting moving image preservation

While presenting two very different examples of the nonfiction moving image, both of these films figure animal species as highly iconic. In the case of the thylacine, this one last animal captured on film stands in for the loss of the entire species. Its representation accentuates loss through the way in which cinema is simultaneously removed from the object and yet has the capacity to render 'the pulsations of material life'.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, in *Arctic Tale*, representation of the polar bear taps into the species' flagship status and produces an archetypal figure, an individuated character that is a visual composite of a number of actual bears. This character, Nanu, at once embodies all polar bears but in real terms represents no true animal – it is a placeholder for the notion that the animals are responsible, mirroring human responsibility. Both examples evoke nostalgia for a biotic world that has been lost, whether this nostalgia is fuelled by the illusion of a past (and eminently more resilient) nature or the loss of the material presence of a species.

Moreover, as animals that occupy a significant place within broader narratives about extinction, the thylacine and the polar bear are components of a longer history in which species loss is rendered as a reflection of human identity and history. The examples I have examined play to this history through the specificity of the moving image. In the case of the thylacine, evidence drawn from material culture suggests that it was instituted as a symbol of socio-geographical human relationships with the non-human environment before its extinction. Post-extinction, the symbol of

the thylacine becomes embalmed in the human imagination in ways that meld the signification of cultural identity with the signification of cultural loss. The footage feeds into this signification of loss, further embalming the animal as it functions as documentary revenant, preserving the movement and image of the animal. The polar bear is more firmly located in the relation between the non-human animal world and anthropogenic climate change. In *Arctic Tale* the anthropomorphising narrative of wildlife film assimilates documentary evidence of animals and feeds the mythologising impulse, minimising proof of unsociable traits of animality. Negating animal difference by producing familiar, humanised animal characters effectively addresses an inclusive audience and casts the bear as a companion, observing the decline of the biosphere alongside humans.

Consistent across both of these filmic examples is the underlying impetus toward archiving and preservation. Jan-Christopher Horak locates the rise in wildlife film and television as a direct proportional response to demise of species in the wild:

[t]oday, the impulse to document nature is augmented by the much higher stakes endeavor of 'preserving' animal life in a virtual world. Looking over the precipice of an earth depopulated of its wildlife, the goal of nature filmmakers becomes the capture of animals, at least in images, so that society and science have a record of what was lost. Every moving image can potentially be the last 'living' image of a species, in the truest sense of the word.<sup>42</sup>

In one respect, to record and classify animals in order to preserve them in the face of disappearance is to maintain at least the indexical trace of the animal. There are critical stakes in perceiving the purpose of wildlife film in this way. Jacques Derrida writes that the archive does not conserve 'content of the past',<sup>43</sup> it alters the status of the object or event, producing as much as it records the event. In the case of the recording of endangered life an archive of wildlife imagery creates stasis, mummifying the animals it represents, even if the species is constantly re-created in new moving image forms.

The case of the thylacine suggests that a well-archived example of animal life is easily recruited into narratives of environmental decline. As it approached extinction its image proliferated in the archive. Its likeness is now popularised and recognisable, chronicled and embalmed into a predictable form, reworked and taken up across a range of contexts to symbolise cultural identity. In this formulation, viewing wildlife film and television as a way of collecting visible evidence of endangered species tends toward emphasising stasis and loss rather than allowing for the expression of unfolding life.



The loss or death that is at the heart of the documentary's inability to fully capture the referent accentuates the loss that constitutes extinction and is presaged by species endangerment. However, documentary representation need not be caught in the loop of repeating death in ways that only affirm it in the past and foreshadow it in the future. Heise advocates that while facts about species extinction and the causes are often irrefutable, 'enough uncertainties and open questions surround these facts that the narrative of nature's decline turns out to be one possible, but not the only conceivable way of telling the story of biodiversity loss'.<sup>44</sup> In closing, I suggest that it is possible for documentary to render flagship or other significant species in ways that advance a biopolitical situation in which death is not certain, decline could be otherwise, and the referent offers animation and an emphasis on life rather than the multiplication of death.

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## Notes

1. Leakey & Lewin 1995, p. 233.
2. Hilton-Taylor et al. 2009, p. 18.
3. Chrulew 2011.
4. Rose 2006, p. 75.
5. Cowie 2011, p. 1.
6. Van Dooren 2014, p. 2.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
8. Heise 2010, p. 61.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
11. Hinchliffe 2008, p. 89.
12. Leidy 2005, p. 1331.

13. Carol Freeman offers substantial detail in this regard, drawing out this point in her book-length study *Paper Tiger: A Visual History of the Thylacine*.
14. Mulvey 2006, p. 9.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 110. Specifically, pointing to Godard and the phrase that cinema is 'truth 24 times a second', Mulvey recasts this as 'death 24 times a second' (p. 15). If the photograph freezes reality it creates a transition from inanimate image to animate cinema, rather than Godard's inverse notion that begins with the animation of life, and thus truth, to inanimate still images that are featured 24 times a second.
16. Lippit 2000, p. 196.
17. *Ibid.*
18. This is just one of many museum exhibitions that features or has been devoted to the thylacine in Australia. The *South Australian Museum* has five mounted specimens of the thylacine on display in its Biodiversity Gallery. The footage features prominently at the door of the gallery. In the National Museum of Australia in New South Wales a number of specimens, including a thylacine skeleton, feature in the Old New Land gallery.
19. Stern 2001, p. 354.
20. Bazin 2003, p. 31.
21. De Vos 2007, p. 190.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Freeman 2010, p. 235.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
25. Leidy 2005, p. 1331.
26. Stern 2001, p. 321.
27. Yusoff 2010, p. 74.
28. Chris 2006, p. 201.
29. See Morgan and Richard for a discussion of the problem of climate science in BBC productions and a historical context for the British approach to scientism and natural history programming.
30. See Bousé's article 'Are Wildlife Films Really "Nature Documentaries"?' for another perspective on this question.
31. This can be understood in light of Claire Molloy's observations about Disney's corporate narrative of environmental concern. Disney resists posing radical environmental messages while encouraging consumer activity and ensuring profitability.
32. Bousé 2000, p. 8.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
35. Yusoff 2010, pp. 75-76.
36. Cited in Molloy 2013, p. 182.
37. *Ibid.*
38. De Vos 2007, p. 191.
39. Lorimer 2007, p. 927.
40. De Vos 2007, p. 190.
41. Hansen 1993, p. 451.
42. Horak 2006, p. 459.
43. Derrida 1996, pp. 16-17.
44. Hiese 2010, p. 53.