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March of the Penguins : **Animal Rights or Christian Right?**

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Abstract

Taking an animal-rights feminist approach, this paper explores how the 2005 film *The March of the Penguins* has been used in the United States as a tool to reinforce values of the Christian right. Analyzing the role of the documentary form's perceived objectivity, the author demonstrates how *The March of the Penguins'* anthropomorphization of its subjects denies penguins' subjectivity and turns them into little more than mascots for theories of intelligent design and life beginning at conception, as well as heterosexuality as natural. Finally, the paper looks at how the film refuses to acknowledge its own complicity and the complicity of its viewers in the destruction of the emperor penguins' habitat due to climate change.

Animal documentaries may seem politically innocuous at first glance yet the 2005 summer blockbuster *The March of the Penguins*, has been claimed by the Christian right as a “parable of monogamy and creationism” (Malvern). “I was truly fascinated by the lives of these penguins, maybe because I felt we as humans could emulate much of it and be better followers of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” said a film reviewer for ChristianAnswers.net (Helms). This opinion was not an isolated one, and similar praises of the film can be found all over Christian conservative newspapers, websites, and weblogs (Malvern). How did a supposedly objective film by a team of French scientists become so hotly contested? A closer look reveals that, far from being objective, the documentary form is a powerful tool for conveying political messages. This paper will take a feminist approach to demonstrate how *The March of the Penguins* utilizes the documentary format to reinforce Christian conservative values, including heterosexist family norms and the “right to life” as just “part of nature.” This paper will also explore how the film missed an opportunity to be a tool for animal rights activism.

The Documentary Form

The documentary form has long been under fire from feminist film theorists, who believe the genre is a “conservative institution, which...reinforce[s] the ideological status quo” (Johnstone, cited in Aitken 48). One of the main arguments made by feminist theorists is that such films purport to be “objective” and to tell the “truth,” when in reality such a thing is impossible. Filmmakers thereby deny their own positionality as knowledge producers and the viewing audience never sees the ways in which the footage has been coerced or manipulated.

Truth-telling and objectivity have been the cornerstones of the documentary film form, with the perceived usefulness of films reliant on the reliability of their content (Plantinga 219). Particularly in ethnographic and zoological film, documentary's connection to anthropology and biology “implies a commitment to objectivity” (Russell 10). Some theorists claim that the documentary's supposed connection to the real is precisely what makes it such an attractive and enduring form: “The documentary appeals to us through what Bill Nichols calls ‘epistophilia,’ the ‘pleasure in knowing’” (Grant and Sloniowski 20).

The “objectivity” of the documentary film is often reinforced through specific filmic techniques, including aerial shots that reinforce the viewer's distance from the subjects, as well as voice-over narration, “often presented in the form of a deep, authoritarian male...voice (the so-called voice of God commentary)” (Beattie 21). This “voice of God” exists in documentary film as an omniscient narrator, and the content of its narration is seen as true, rather than as the opinion of the filmmaker or screenwriter. Significantly, the voice of the narrator in documentary film has mostly been male. With the subjects of the

films often being the feminized, exoticized “other,” the very use of a male authoritarian voice reemphasizes the power dynamics present in the construction of the film.

However, feminist film theorists take aim at documentaries' truth-telling, calling it “intolerably naïve” and noting that “documentaries and fiction films are equally liable to be instruments of repressive ideology, hence equally to be resisted” (Rothman 23). Indeed, documentary film often uses fictional narrative strategies to create a mass appeal. Zoological and ethnographic filmmakers will often portray themselves as “heroic” adventure “filmmakers [who] penetrate the wildernesses of the world” (Russell 141). For example, when the first major documentary, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, was released, critics praised it as “more dramatic [than] dramatic works of the screen” (cited in Hershfield 56).

Documentary filmmakers claim that their films capture “reality,” despite manipulating the film's content and structure every step of the way. Documentary filmmakers choose which subjects they will portray, which shots they will keep in and which will be cut, what types of film equipment will be used, and what the message of the film will be. For example, to increase the “drama” in *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty had his research subjects practice an unsafe method of walrus hunting that had previously been abandoned by Nanook's people (Rothman 24).

Documentary filmmaking is therefore political in the context of its production as well as its content. Filmmakers have the power to change their subjects' lives to their benefit or detriment. They also have the power to use their subjects' images to convey a political message. Like the sciences and social sciences from which it derives, documentary film is inextricably bound up in the hierarchies of race, gender, colonialism, and speciesism ¹.

The March of the Penguins

The March of the Penguins follows the conventions of the documentary format. Produced on an \$8 million budget by the documentary giant National Geographic Films and filmed by a crew of three male French biologists, *The March of the Penguins* is steeped in elite scientific tradition. Director Luc Jacquet's background is in biology, and he even refers to himself as the “fearless biologist,” an indication of the way he positions himself as an heroic adventurer in the context of his film (*The March of the Penguins – Official Site*). Granted, the shooting of the film was probably no easy task. *The March of the Penguins* was filmed in Antarctica over the course of a year and documents the mating season of the emperor penguin, a species which walks over 70 miles each year to its breeding grounds (*Official Site*).

The original film was released in France in 2005 and an English language version debuted in North America that summer (*Internet Movie Database*). An

immediate success, the film has grossed over \$77 million in the United States at the box office to date and has garnered a 2006 Academy Award for Best Documentary as well as numerous other awards (*Internet Movie Database*).

The commercial success of the film has three causal factors. First, like many other documentaries, *The March of the Penguins* has adopted fictional narrative structures, billing the film as “a story of survival, a tale of life over death...but it's more than that: it's a story about love” (*March of the Penguins*). In interviews, Jacquet admits that “in the end, [he] was not that interested in the academic side of research” but more in telling a story (*Official Site*). In addition, Jacquet's crew members, Jérôme Maison and Laurent Chalet, describe the shooting process as not “talking about birds, but about characters expressing themselves” and complain about the uncertainty of “whether or not the ‘actors’ would cooperate” (*Official Site*). Clearly, Jacquet and his team went into filming with an idea for a story with mass appeal, not to film the “truth” of the situation.

Second, the film's technical aspects serve to create a seemingly “objective” and “truthful” film. The English version uses a “voice of God” narrator that legitimates the film's perspective, in this case, the voice of Academy Award winning actor Morgan Freeman. Further, the film begins with and frequently uses aerial shots, which give the viewer an all-seeing perspective that reinforces the atmosphere of objective distance and legitimates the values promoted by the film. Third, the content of the film meant that, soon after release, it was heralded and widely publicized by the conservative Christian media.

Onward Christian Penguins?

When interviewed by the *London Times* regarding his film's seeming appropriation by the Christian right, *March of the Penguins* director Luc Jacquet was vehement: “For me there is no doubt about evolution. I am a scientist. The intelligent design theory is a step back to the thinking of 300 years ago. My film is not supposed to be interpreted in this way” (Malvern). Yet a closer look at the film and its marketing reveals a strong undertone of the values praised by the Christian conservative media.

First, the film's story is framed so that it seems timeless, constantly reminding the audience that the penguins perform the same way each and every year in an “ancient and complicated affair”, ignoring the specificity of the year of filming (*March of the Penguins*). The timelessness of the film reinforces the views of those Christian conservatives who argue that the film is a parable of “intelligent design theory” because the penguins' lives are eternal and unchanging and they seem to be guided by an instinct unexplained by science.

But “intelligent design” is not the only “Christian” value that can be seen as being espoused by *March of the Penguins*. Second, the film legitimates anti-

choice arguments by referring more than once to the egg as a “child” and a “life.” “With a snap of its jaws, the leopard seal actually takes two lives: that of the trapped mother and that of her unborn chick,” says the narrator, echoing arguments of anti-choice activists who argue that life starts before birth (*March of the Penguins*). Finally, the film reinforces monogamous heterosexual nuclear family structures as an innate and desirable part of life.

The story of the penguins as portrayed in the film is one of complete parental sacrifice and devotion to the child and the heterosexual family form. For example, the scenes in which the penguins copulate only imply intercourse, showing close-ups of beaks and wings laid over with romantic flute music, rather than the actual act, as if penguin copulation was indecent. Further, the penguin “family” is defined as incomplete until both parents and the chick are together, as if a single parent does not denote a family. Finally, at one point in the film when a mother penguin loses her chick, the narration states that “the loss is unbearable” and the film shows heartrending penguin flashbacks to the times she spent with her chick. The implication of these scenes to many Christian conservative film commentators was understandably that anthropomorphized penguins, like ideal humans, exist only for the reproduction and health of the heterosexual family form, and that mothers should live only for their children. These views are only legitimated by the documentary form, which lends authenticity to this interpretation of the film's content.

The marketing of the film and its “actors” also speaks to the values of much of the Christian right. The official website refers to the emperor penguin as “a model of faithfulness...and a model of sobriety and endurance,” terms which find their way into Christian conservative reviews of the film (Helms). But even more significant than the content and marketing of the film is what the film was missing, namely, any reference to the lives of homosexual penguins. Over the past few years, homosexual and bisexual penguins have been found in zoos from Japan to Amsterdam to New York (Cardoze, “Gay Penguins Found”). Some same-sex penguin couples have become famous, such as the New York Aquarium's male black-footed penguins Wendell and Cass, who have cohabited and copulated together for ten years (Cardoze). Another couple of male chinstrap penguins at the Central Park Zoo, has even raised an egg together after zookeepers attempted to separate them and other homosexual penguin couples by force...and failed (Cardoze). Yet, despite this history of same-sex penguin relationships and records of homosexual behaviour in more than 450 animal species, Jacquet assumes all the emperors in his film are heterosexual (Cardoze). Indeed, with its value-laden content and striking omissions, *The March of the Penguins* shows Jacquet to be more storyteller than scientist.

In Search of Penguin Rights

Feminists might have looked favourably on one aspect of *The March of the Penguins*: anthropomorphization of the penguins. Prominent animal-rights feminist Carol J. Adams has outlined how giving animals agency through

anthropomorphization is a step towards giving women agency, as both have historically been oppressed by men (180). In the view of animal-rights feminists, creating sympathy for and solidarity with the penguins' plight could lead people to take action to stop the destruction of their environment or their captivity in zoos. However, Luc Jacquet's film is not a vehicle for animal-rights feminism. While its official website makes a cursory acknowledgement of the impacts of global warming on penguins, including the blocking of breeding paths and the death of chicks after ice melts too quickly, the film never mentions how humans can help ensure the survival of the emperor penguin.

Recent scientific research shows the dramatic impacts of climate change on emperor penguins, including the decline of the population by 50 percent in the past 50 years (Roach). Global warming causes a decrease in the emperor penguins' food supply (Roach) and early thaws can endanger chicks who are not yet able to swim (Croxall, Trathan, and Murphy 1513).

The omission of the human threats to the emperor penguin is similar to practice in ethnographic and zoological film tradition and connected to the "timeless" context. For example, in *Nanook of the North*, "[Robert] Flaherty had a vested interest in portraying his subjects' way of life as timeless...If Western civilization is destroying Nanook's culture, the filmmaker's own project is implicated" (Rothman 24). Likewise, if the film had shown how global fossil fuel consumption and other types of environmental degradation is causing the emperor penguin to become an endangered species, Jacquet would be asking for his spectators to take responsibility for their ecological footprints, creating a potentially uncomfortable viewing experience.

Rather than making a statement in favour of animal rights, *The March of the Penguins* follows conventional zoological films in exploiting its animal subjects and denying their subjectivities. The male gazes of Jacquet, Maison, and Chalet, cannot be returned by the penguins, who "look without seeing" and are consequently objectified and rendered an exotic Other (Russell 120). The constant reminder of the harsh climate and the penguins' isolation is a reinforcement of this exoticization. Like pornography, which tends to objectify women as "meat" Jacquet's film is based upon a colonial "desire to see Others" and illustrates the development of "codified systems controlling this fascination" (Russell 122).

Conclusion

The March of the Penguins is thus relevant to feminist film theorists for two reasons. First, as long as animals continue to be objectified as lesser beings by documentary filmmakers, the objectification of women's images is also legitimated. Second, the values promoted by Jacquet in *The March of the Penguins* work in such a way as to enable their interpretation to reinforce Christian conservative values that continue to oppress women. For example, Jacquet's insistence on the un-hatched egg as a life lends credence to anti-

choice arguments and his omission of homosexual penguin relationships normalizes the heterosexual, heterosexist family form, and all of this is legitimated by the authoritative documentary genre.

A movie such as *The March of the Penguins* could have enormous potential to support animal rights and create awareness of the situation emperor penguins face due to climate change. However, the way in which Jacquet anthropomorphizes the penguins, making them “characters” and “actors” rather than living beings affected by human environmental degradation, ends up supporting the values of the Christian right. If feminist film theorists want a documentary to support animal rights, such a film must necessarily acknowledge humans' role in destroying animal populations as well as attempting to anthropomorphize its subjects to lend them agency without turning them into mascots for repressive ideology.

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About the Author

Jarrah Hodge was born in Western Australia, graduated from high school in Courtenay, BC, and is currently attending the University of British Columbia, in her third year of a Bachelor of Arts. She is currently double majoring in Sociology and Women's Studies. Her research interests include the analysis of popular culture and women's health paradigms.

Endnotes

1. This paper uses the term speciesism to refer to prejudice and discrimination against non-humans because of their species status.

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