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Walter Breckenridge's Nature Films as Scientific Investigation

ANAÏS NONY

On September 5, 1952, Ben Sharpsteen of Walt Disney Productions wrote to ornithologist Dr. Walter J. Breckenridge, director of the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History from 1946 to 1970. Breckenridge was well known for using photographs and films in his scientific expeditions, and Sharpsteen was interested in "obtaining 16mm Kodachrome film of [Breckenridge's footage of] the Sandhill Crane" for use in Disney's True-Life Adventure series.[1] This series, by then in its fourth year, consisted of feature-length and short films that compiled and constructed "synthetic stories," primarily from existing wildlife footage.[2] It has been described as the most powerful contributor to the codification of wildlife film in America in the 1950s.[3] Yet the company's process of recuperating and recycling footage for its films has not yet been studied in depth, preventing us from considering how the films' dramatizations of nature have impacted our understanding of the wildlife film as a genre—as well as the economic and ideological motivations that were part of this process of generic construction.

Sharpsteen's request for footage was standard practice: as Disney representative Wanda Elvin had previously explained to Breckenridge,

> as you may know, this series is completely in live-action, color, and the original is 16mm although the release is 35 Technicolor. We have frequently sent photographers out into the field to produce our film, but almost as frequently we have purchased footage from people who specialize in wildlife photography.[4]

This footage, however, was not used in a scientific manner: in Disney's view, sensationalist effects were more important than objective facts and allowed for a more emotional approach to wildlife filmmaking. Indeed, while the True-Life Adventure films relied on the presumption of objectivity carried within their documentary style, they also used cinematic strategies that brought the audience into a specific narrative. Here humans were replaced by anthropomorphized animals—animals not unlike those in Disney's more famous animated films (or, in Erik Barnouw's words, "burlesque humans").[5]

In this sense, soliciting Breckenridge's footage of the Sandhill Cranes was less an attempt to gather scientific images than it was an attempt to accumulate illustrations of a specific topic, based in part on their aesthetic appeal.[6] Nevertheless, for Disney, this practice was sufficient to label the films as nature documentaries, a process of generic construction that relied in part on asking scientists to attest to a scene's plausibility. In an October 6, 1952, letter, for instance, Breckenridge was asked to confirm that his footage would not be used in ways contradicting the views of the scientific community. As Disney production manager Erwin L. Verity wrote,

> one of the problems we experience in the making of our True-Life Adventure films is to make certain that the wildlife incorporated into the film authentically matches the locale of the story. In the case of your Sandhill Cranes, we are considering incorporating these birds into a story of the wildlife of the prairie. Due to the fact that the prairie country has been cut up and changed in character by the inroads of civilization, we have found that the locale of prairie wildlife has also changed. Although we intend to check this point carefully, we would also appreciate an expression from you as to the authenticity of Sandhill Cranes living in prairie country.[7]

Breckenridge's approval, in short, was sought so that Disney could insert his material within a preestablished story.

Such uses of nature footage had an additional economic logic for Disney, whose entry into wildlife film production in 1948 had been caused in part by the high cost of animation.[8]

Figure 1. Walter Breckenridge, circa 1920s. Bell Museum, University of Minnesota.

Moreover, the extent of the practice eventually led the company to suppress the contributions of figures like Breckenridge. This caused conflict for Breckenridge, as Audio-Visual Educational Service (AVES, established at the University of Minnesota in 1932)—which both supervised Breckenridge's filmic productions and held their copyrights—required that the University of Minnesota as well as Breckenridge be recognized in the film's credits. When Breckenridge requested this, Verity replied that "the number of photographers increased greatly so that it became necessary to establish a 100 feet requirement in order to prevent . . . titles and credit lines from becoming too long in terms of screen time."[9] Since the Sandhill Crane purchase was forty-nine feet and twenty-four frames long, neither Breckenridge nor the University of Minnesota was credited in the titles of what would become the Academy Award–winning *The Vanishing Prairie* (1954). In a January 1953 letter to Verity, Breckenridge protested this procedure:

> I was somewhat disappointed to learn in your last letter that those responsible for less than 100 feet of film in your production were given no recognition for their contribution. I can see that your credit in your titles would probably be greatly increased by including all contributors, but it strikes me that the 100 feet limit is rather high, especially since you select and purchase only the very choice footage from the contributors' work.[10]

Nine months later, when Disney contacted Breckenridge for "16mm Kodachrome

Figure 2. Walter Breckenridge, circa 1938. Bell Museum, University of Minnesota.

photography of ducks and geese landing and sliding on the ice," Breckenridge—an ornithologist in the land of ten thousand lakes, surrounded by birds and ice, working on a new film on wood ducks—refused.[11] Because his footage would be used for a radically different end than the one for which it had been intended, he not only left this letter unanswered but none of Breckenridge's footage was used again by Disney.

True-Life Adventures's filmic structure (with its editing, narratives, and music) thus echoed Disney's policies and practices regarding scientific sources: the company collected material from different photographers and compiled the material in a montage that did not reference the places where images had been shot, the circumstances in which an animal reacted to a specific signal, or the different contributors to the project. These films' closed set of conclusions, intended to stimulate emotional responses from the viewer, were in stark contrast to Breckenridge's films, which made a conscious effort to depict animals in their natural habitat—a habitat that also included humans. In his first film, for instance, *Minnesota Hawks and Owls* (1945), Breckenridge explicitly promotes the interaction between the filmmaker and the natural environment. This black-and-white silent film is divided into two parts: hawks and owls. In the long-eared owl sequence, the viewer first sees the bird from Breckenridge's perspective on the ground below. Then, as Breckenridge's script mentions, "the photographer builds a platform in a nearby higher tree to support himself and camera."[12] The viewer watches Breckenridge building the platform, climbing, and lifting up his material. Here the filmmaker exposes his shooting strategy to his audience, attempting to involve the viewer in the filmmaking process.[13] And when the owl is shown staring at the camera, showing that it has recognized an intruder, a mutual recognition emerges between the viewer/filmmaker and the subject/natural environment.

Breckenridge also displayed his technical tools to his audience, presenting his camera as part of a process of investigation. In his *Wood Duck Ways,* shot between the 1940s and 1960s, Breckenridge explains how humans can take care of birds and why it was important to inspect birdhouses for predators. As his voice-over states, "while checking our duck houses early one spring, I was surprised to find a raccoon sleeping in the house. I, of course, lost no time in routing him out. We have since found that raccoons are one of the wood duck's worst enemies." The script describes exactly what the images present, but in this case, the narration uses the past tense. Breckenridge does not reenact the situation but uses the moment he found the raccoon as material for his film. Here scientific knowledge is popularized not through attempts (such as Disney's) to narrate animals' behavior within a preconceived world but by depicting an everyday situation within a natural context.

Finally, Breckenridge's films posit cinema as a valuable tool for both research and education, presenting his camera as part of a process of scientific investigation. In his color film *Exploring Eastern Minnesota's Waterways Part II: The Lake Pepin Regions and the Southeast Hardwood Hill Country* (1945), Breckenridge appears as at once scientist and educator, using the film to develop the audience's awareness of nature and wildlife. The film begins with a hand-drawn map of Minnesota's Lake Pepin. The camera tracks across the map to show the landscape. Next, it zooms in on a waterway as Breckenridge appears in the frame, staring at the sand. He points to animal tracks, and the camera follows a raccoon into the forest. Breckenridge is shown fixing his optical gear. The camera finally shows a red-headed woodpecker, a threatened species. Throughout, Breckenridge functions as a guide for the audience, involving them in the technical aspects of moving image making. The camera appears as an explicit tool as opposed to an implicit—almost magical—technics. Furthermore, instead of focusing only on a single animal (the red-headed woodpecker, for instance), the film introduces the species within a broader context that includes the forces that create and destabilize its habitat. Among these factors, the film makes explicit, are human beings. The camera, then, is both a tool for animal observation and a means of incorporating the existence of humans within the ecosystem.

Nature in Breckenridge's films, in short, is a whole that includes human life. At the same

time, the incorporation of Breckenridge's own image within the frame challenges conventional approaches to wildlife film as well as the generally acknowledged categories of "wild" and "natural." In Breckenridge's films, the audience is not projected into a separate world that corresponds to human values. On the contrary, the viewer is called to consider the world as a complex system.

This complexity is in sharp contrast with Disney's *The Vanishing Prairie*: both its narrative organizations and dramatization of wildlife stand in opposition to Breckenridge's effort to engage in filmmaking as scientific exploration. We have seen through Breckenridge's correspondence that recognition given to photographers involved polemical rules, and one could argue that Disney's internal regulations were a political strategy to allow footage to be gathered for different reasons, commodification of nature and entertainment included. Here the *use* of footage and its *function* in wildlife film production seem to be relevant lenses through which to investigate and problematize the distinction between wildlife film and nature documentary. In other words, the story of how Breckenridge's footage was recuperated for narrative entertainment allows us to consider the motivations behind film production itself—for example, Disney's economic and ideological aims, including the project of commodifying nature—as among the productive forces that distinguish filmic genres.

BRECKENRIDGE'S NONEXCLUSIVE FILMOGRAPHY

All films listed here have been digitally restored and transferred to DVD.

Bell Museum Productions at the Bell Museum of Natural History at the University of Minnesota completed most of the digital footage restoration. This was made possible by a grant from the National Film Preservation Foundation.

***Minnesota Hawks and Owls* (1945) TRT 24:10**
Filmed and produced by Walter J. Breckenridge
Reel 1: Transfer from 16mm B&W D/N film with simulated desmet color sections

***Exploring Eastern Minnesota's Waterways Part II: The Lake Pepin Regions and the Southeast Hardwood Hill Country* (1945) TRT 22:59**
Filmed and produced by Walter J. Breckenridge
Silent; scene-to-scene transfer from 16mm color I/N at 24fps

***Wood Duck Ways* (1940s–60s) TRT 21:46**
Filmed, produced, and narrated by Walter J. Breckenridge
Reel 1: One light transfer of 16mm color I/N mag sound

***Red Lake Wilderness* (1950s–1960s) TRT 41:27**
Filmed and produced by Walter J. Breckenridge
Reels 1 and 2: Transfer from 16mm silent Kodachrome film

***Marsh Waters: Waste or Wealth?* (1953) TRT 15:53**
Filmed and produced by Walter J. Breckenridge, narrated by Gordon Eaton
Reel 1: Transfer of 16mm preservation color I/N at 24fps; sound

***Spring Comes to the Sub-Arctic* (1955) TRT 16:43**
Filmed and produced by Walter J. Breckenridge, narrated by Gordon Eaton
Reel 1: One light transfer of 16mm color I/N mag sound

***Island Treasure* (1957) TRT 68:31**
Filmed, produced, and narrated by Walter J. Breckenridge
Reels 1 and 2: Transfer from 16mm silent Kodachrome film

***Birds of Minnesota Waters* (1960) TRT 27:42**
Filmed and produced by Walter J. Breckenridge
Scene-to-scene transfer from 16mm color I/N at 24fps

***Sand Country Wildlife* (1960s) TRT 65:00**
Filmed, produced, and narrated by Walter J. Breckenridge
Reels 1 and 2: Transfer from 16mm silent Kodachrome film

Migration Mysteries **(1960s) TRT 1:14:25**
Filmed, produced, and narrated by Walter J. Breckenridge
Reels 1, 2, and 3: Transfer from 16mm silent Kodachrome film

The Far, Far North **(1960s) TRT 1:23:52**
Filmed, produced, and narrated by Walter J. Breckenridge
Reels 1, 2, and 3: Transfer from 16mm silent Kodachrome film

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NOTES

1. Sharpsteen to Breckenridge, September 5, 1952, Bell Museum of Natural History (hereinafter BMNH).
2. Jan-Christopher Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: From Classical Forms to Reality TV,” *Film History* 18, no. 4 (2006): 466. From 1960 to 1974, seventeen educational films were excerpted from most of the True-Life Adventure series’s feature films and “were widely circulated in schools to ‘teach’ children about wild animals and other aspects of nature and science.” Derek Bousé, “Are Wildlife Films Really ‘Nature Documentaries’?,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15, no. 2 (1998): 137.
3. Bousé, “Are Wildlife Films Really ‘Nature Documentaries’?,” 137.
4. Elvin to Breckenridge, April 4, 1952, BMNH.
5. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 210. See also Jennifer Peterson, “Glimpses of Animal Life: Nature Films and the Emergence of Classroom Cinema,” in *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States,* ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, 145–67 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
6. Bousé, “Are Wildlife Films Really ‘Nature Documentaries’?,” 121.
7. Verity to Breckenridge, October 6, 1952, BMNH.
8. Jack Couffer, cited by Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 124.
9. Verity to Breckenridge, October 6, 1952, BMNH.
10. Breckenridge to Verity, January 5, 1953, BMNH.
11. Jackman’s letter to Breckenridge, October 5, 1953, BMNH.
12. In Breckenridge’s notebook, one can read his handwritten notes describing the owl sequence. The script depicts both movements from the owl and movements from the photographer, as if the camera were witnessing its own filmic process. However, it is not clear if Breckenridge used his scripts for lecturing, voice-over, or otherwise.
13. However, one can wonder who is directing this sequence and what is in the bag that Breckenridge is pulling up from the ground, since the camera used to shoot the scene is already at work. It is unclear how this sequence was presented to the audience and to what extent Breckenridge played with the mise-en-scène of his own filmic process during screenings of the film.