

Cynthia Chris, **Watching Wildlife**, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 269 pp, \$19.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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It may seem trite to say of any book that it “couldn’t have been written ten years ago.” After all, every study of the Iraq War, the Bush presidency, peer-to-peer file sharing, or the blogosphere couldn’t have been written ten years ago. So why does Cynthia Chris’s new book *Watching Wildlife* fall into this category, when its subject, wildlife films, has been around for a hundred years?

The answer is that until quite recently wildlife films seemed not to have been regarded as an acceptable subject for ‘serious’ academic scholarship. Previous book-length studies were largely attempts to introduce the subject and make the case for its legitimacy – mainly by staking out its historical foundations (always a safe first step). Chris’s impressive, meticulously researched new study shows that this phase is ending, that wildlife films are recognized as a genre in their own right, with codes, conventions, and complexities worthy of in-depth scholarly analysis. *Watching Wildlife* may be the first book to get on with the process. It won’t be the last, and shows that there is enough of substance in wildlife films to engage scholars from many different perspectives.

Chris’s own is “a feminist perspective” (p. xix), although as a “cultural critic” she takes aim not only at sexism, but at the other usual suspects: racism, colonialism, imperialism, and sociobiology (more on that later). The wildlife genre is therefore “a prism through which we can examine investments in dominant ideologies of humanity and animality, nature and culture, sex, and race” (p. xiv). Who knew? The qualification, however, implies that the book is not really about wildlife films themselves, but only holds them up in order to look through them at something else – something more weighty. This is unfortunate, as Chris’s writing and arguments are strong enough that readers would have been led to reflect on the ‘big themes’ even without prompting. Moreover, the means and ends might actually be reversed: it may be that notions of culture, race, and sex are simply the conceptual tools employed here for better understanding wildlife films. Sometimes a book about wildlife films, after all, may be just a book about wildlife films – and should be content to be, especially when it is this smart.

It may therefore be lack of confidence in the subject that keeps *Watching Wildlife* from hitting the ground running. Instead, it revisits some of the history that has already been written, with a cast of historical characters that is by now familiar – Eadweard Muybridge, Martin and Osa Johnson, Walt Disney, Marlin Perkins, Marty Stouffer, and others. This may owe in part to fact that the book is derived from Chris’s doctoral thesis, and follows closely the trajectory of the original. Intended to set the stage for the more focused analyses later on, the historical sections include no new revelations, but Chris offers enough fresh observations to make even familiar terrain worth a second glance.

The emphasis in *Watching Wildlife* is on American traditions and American production – although it includes some of the more well known foreign entries that have been widely seen by American audiences. BBC ‘mega-series’ productions featuring David Attenborough are examples of the latter, as are

Jacques Cousteau's programs from the '60s to the '80s. Chris offers another reminder that although Cousteau's films appeared to be 'documentaries' of scientific research expeditions, they were in fact staged and produced as television entertainments, and were of negligible scientific value.¹ Even calling them "wildlife films" seems a stretch, but one of Chris's purposes is to probe the genre's boundaries and test its limits.

She does a good job, for example, of bringing together underwater and 'topside' films (i.e. those about land animals). The behavior patterns of many underwater creatures have largely exempted them from portrayal in the 'classic' style of topside wildlife films – life-cycle narratives, coming-of-age dramas, and 'incredible journeys' in which audiences are encouraged to identify emotionally with an animal protagonist.² Chris overcomes this by focusing instead on the humans – "always white, always American or European, and regularly [but not always] male" (p. 46) — who often become the real protagonists in many films ostensibly about wildlife. She thus traces a neat line connecting the 'explorations' and safaris of the Johnsons to the voyages of Cousteau and other divers, to the peripatetic meditations of David Attenborough.

These later figures in particular, she concludes, "remade the genre . . . as a masculine adventure saga reminiscent of the expedition films of the 1910s and '20s" (p. 46). One might wonder what a 'feminine adventure saga' would look like – or if Chris would consider that a contradiction in terms (she seems to find something faintly sinister in all manner of *quests*, including scientific 'quests for knowledge' – although apparently *social* scientific quests, like the research that went into this book, are exempt). Adventure sagas, masculine or otherwise, were among the earliest antecedents to the wildlife film genre as we know it, and have always occupied one corner of it. Yet it is unclear when the genre was ever *unmade* such that it had to be "remade." Apparently it had "collapsed under the weight of formula and scandal around 1930" (p. 43). This is news. It is true that the 'safari' variation typified by the Johnsons was becoming exhausted, but it may be that in 1930 it was just entering its 'decadent' phase rather than its collapse.³ The early to mid-30s actually saw a boomlet of safari, or "expedition" films (some of which Chris actually analyzes perceptively) – *Africa Speaks* (1930), *Ingagi* (1930), *Ubangi* (1931), *Jungle Killer* (1932), *Matto Grosso* (1933), *Taming the Jungle* (1933), *Untamed Africa* (1933), *Beyond Bengal* (1934), and *Devil Tiger* (1934), as well as the Johnsons' *Congorilla* (1932) and *Baboon* (1934), and of course the films of Frank Buck: *Bring 'em Back Alive* (1932), *Wild Cargo* (1934), and *Fang and Claw* (1935). The early '30s also saw two excellent wildlife dramas come from American sources – Ernest B. Schoedsack's *Rango* (1931), and the lyrical MGM production *Sequoia* (1934), while Disney was busy trying to develop *Bambi* as a live-action film with real animals. In Britain the early '30s found the "Secrets of Nature" series

¹ There is a sense in which some of the Cousteau programs (the later ones, anyway), can be seen as mildly *Griersonian* documentaries, alerting us to problems and calling us to action – even if the call is but a whisper.

² A notable recent exception is "Voyage of the Lonely Turtle," which recently aired on the PBS series *Nature* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/14/arts/television/14hale.html>).

³ Studio executives told the Johnsons that they (and presumably others) had "exhausted the entertainment possibilities of Africa." Lowell Thomas (1937). "The Story of Martin Johnson." *Natural History* 39, 3 (154-67).

still going until 1933. *The Private Life of the Gannet* premiered in 1934, and went on to win an Academy Award when released in the U.S. two years later (Chris offers a thoughtful reflection on this one). By the end of the decade, Armand Denis (Belgium/UK), Konrad Lorenz (Austria), Arne Sucksdorff (Sweden) and Hans Hass (Germany) all had films of one kind or another in circulation. Had the wildlife genre really “collapsed” in 1930? A better question might be whether all of these early, diverse strands had even come together yet to form a coherent genre.

Like all historical reviews, *Watching Wildlife's* is selective. Alas, Frank Buck is never mentioned, although his were among the most popular of the early sound-era wildlife films in America. His onscreen encounters with animals (including a dramatic hand-to-hand struggle with a *dead* tiger) were clear precursors to several of the more recent (and similarly colorful) TV personalities whom Chris does discuss – Brady Barr, Jeff Corwin, the Kratt brothers, and of course the late Steve Irwin. Buck pioneered their rough-and-tumble market niche, and it is too bad he is left out. His machismo aspired to Hemingwayesque proportion, his disregard for scientific accuracy was staggering, and he was incontinent in abuse of animals. He might have been *raw meat* for some sort of feminist analysis, and it would have been interesting to see what a sharp-eyed critic like Chris would have made of him and his films.

Yet Martin and Osa Johnson were the dominant figures of the still nascent American wildlife film industry at the time, and are of more interest here in part because of the image of marital domesticity they brought to their films. Chris describes one of many scenes in which Osa Johnson appears as a gun-toting “sportswoman,” appearing to shoot a lion, and then minutes later is seen rolling out a pie crust. Chris remarks that “Osa, once posed in the ambiguously gendered role of huntress, is reposed in the camp kitchen” (p. 17). We are apparently meant to cringe at the image of wifely subservience, or “exemplary femininity” (p. ix), but does preparing meals simply cancel out her appearance as camerawoman, slayer of lions, and bold adventuress? Is “ambiguously gendered” intended as epithet or endorsement? Should we approve or disapprove? Should Mrs. Johnson more often have appeared *unambiguously* gendered? Should her husband have baked the pies? Should there have been *no* pies? Could they do *anything* right? We’re not told here.⁴

The Johnsons’ films and photographs often do show Osa cooking, baking, and serving her husband meals, and sometimes wearing a white cotton dress in unlikely African locations. Like many others whom we now describe (and perhaps forgive) as “people of their time,” the Johnsons make easy targets (I admit having sniped at them myself). Others, not least Eric Barnouw, may have been secretly amused by the Johnsons’ adherence to social conventions, and to the sexual division of labor in their marriage, but faulted them mainly on ethical grounds – for the way they treated animals and interacted with tribal peoples, not with each other.

⁴ Kevin Brownlow has defended Martin Johnson as “probably the best cameraman of all the African explorers,” although he too falls into the trap of using “explorer” instead of “filmmaker.” Kevin Brownlow (1979), *The War, the West, and the Wilderness*. London: Secker & Warburg, p. 469.



[Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum](#)

Osa Johnson, 1920

Chris links Martin Johnson to “British colonizers” who shared his “belief in white superiority” (p. 13), and his insensitivity toward “the racialized, unassimilated Other [who] represented ‘savagery’” (p. 14). Fair enough. It was the 1920s. Implicit, however, is the suggestion that Johnson’s films didn’t just express his views, but were intended in some way to *promote* them, and were therefore a sort of ideological propaganda. They may (or may not) have reflected prevailing opinion, but for wildlife filmmakers, then as now, the ‘struggle for survival’ has always been that of trying to appeal to audiences, and to keep up with changes in their tastes and expectations – not trying to influence them. It’s an old debate, still ongoing today in discussions of TV ratings, violent content, ‘indecent,’ and so on: producers insist they are only trying to give the audience what it wants, while critics charge them with being knowing, agenda-driven, bad-faith purveyors of a host of evils. Ultimately, if the Johnsons’ films fail the values test today, it may be because, as Chris also notes, they sought “to appeal to large [1920s] audiences who expected to be entertained” (p. 13). So, propagandists or panderers? In any case, it was market pressures that led them in the first place to abandon faux-ethnography and to get into the

“already proven market” of wildlife depiction (p. 14). Like many others of his time, Martin Johnson may well have believed in white superiority, but he was also, perhaps above all, out to make a buck.⁵



[Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum](#)

Osa Johnson and 'friends' in 1923. One can read many things into this image, but there is only one thing to read out of it: the name of the expedition's co-sponsor, Maxwell House coffee. Were the Johnsons promoting ideologies of domination, or groveling for funding? Or both?

Since the Johnsons, no other genre of film or television has been so friendly toward pair-bonded couples working together in creative partnerships – too many to name here, in fact.⁶ Chris seems to

⁵ Pascal and Eleanor Imperato have already produced the definitive book on the Johnsons, *They Married Adventure* (Rutgers, 1992), from which much of Chris's analysis is taken, and which renders further discussion here redundant.

⁶ It may also be worth noting that some of the leading wildlife filmmaking couples who have worked in Africa over the decades – the Denises, the Bartletts, the Roots, the Jouberts, the Hugheses, the Liversedges, Deeble & Stone – have also made Africa their full time home. It is unlikely we will again see the sort of manifest alienation from, and insensitivity toward native African peoples displayed by the Johnsons.

chafe at the idea that the roles in these relationships might not be completely interchangeable, and might involve some “gendered” division of labor. Is this really a reflection on the wildlife genre, though, or on the ways in which individual couples organize their lives, work, and marriages in a particular kind of male-dominated social formation? The observation that wildlife filmmaking is “largely a masculine project. . . that assigns particular tasks to women as helpmates” (p. 3) might also be said of any number of other businesses run by couples, from ranching to long-haul trucking to financial consulting. Wildlife filmmaking may be better than most in setting aside traditional sex role assignments and allowing couples to travel, live, and work together in full-time artistic collaboration, as opposed to one leaving on a month-long “masculine adventure” while the other stays at home. The story of the Johnson and the others who followed might well be called *They Did it Together*. Chris is sensitive to the ways in which the complexities of pair-bonding are portrayed among animals, but seems predisposed to overlook them in relation to filmmaking teams. Here is a case where simply talking to some of them might have helped.

The discussion of Jane Goodall and Hugo van Lawick repeats the pattern to some extent – although the roles were somewhat reversed (the wife being the leading figure, and the husband chronicler and “helpmate”). Drawing rather heavily on Donna Haraway’s *Primate Visions* (1989), Chris concludes that Goodall’s appearances in National Geographic *Specials* were distinctly “gendered,” and add up to little more than “documents of an idealized feminine intimacy with nature” which we viewers accepted as “proof of our own good taste in reading material and television programs” (p. 66). Ouch.

Next up for evisceration is underwater cameraman Mike deGruy, for his film *Incredible Suckers* (1995). Mercifully, the film’s title is left alone, but deGruy is held to account for his choice of the “racialized” name “Homeboy” given to his deepwater camera apparatus (good thing he didn’t christen it the “Nappy-Headed Ho,” or he’d have found himself in something deep here besides just water). His descriptions of cephalopod reproductive behavior (p. 73) offer further evidence that deGruy is another white male who just doesn’t get it. Still, it’s not clear that his insensitivities (which actually seem minor) typify some larger, genre-wide pattern that we should find particularly disturbing. One might be wondering at this point if anyone, or any film, will come away unscathed.

Jean-Jacques Annaud’s [The Bear](#) does not. This 1988 theatrical release is a perfect illustration of the ‘orphan’ theme common to countless wildlife films over the decades. Chris sees this as a sign the film was “derived from classic Disneyana” (p. 82), although it was based on a 1916 novel by James Oliver Curwood called *The Grizzly King* – one of several he wrote employing the orphan device to set in motion a ‘journey of discovery’ narrative. Further, two of the best known orphans in all of Disneyana, Bambi and Dumbo, also came from literary sources, which, in turn, had their antecedents in mythic narratives. Joseph Campbell described this mythic pattern as “a magnification of the formula represented in rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*.”⁷ Typically, the orphan hero is aided by a ‘helper’ figure, and so, predictably, in *The Bear* the young cub is ‘adopted’ by an older, more experienced male (a gross behavioral inaccuracy, but a documentary this ain’t). Chris rightly questions why one adult grizzly (the mother) should be killed off, only to be replaced by another (the old male) – although where in the world

⁷ Joseph Campbell (1972). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 30.

of fiction (and this *is* fiction) are parents ever as interesting as a mysterious stranger? Apparently rejecting the idea that mythic and literary influences might be at work, Chris ends up dismissing *The Bear* as an example of “the privileging of fatherhood, and the expendability of females” (p. 82). Feminist sensibility, or oversensitivity?⁸

Watching Wildlife picks up momentum in its comprehensive, reportorial chapter on wildlife television, which is detailed enough in its recounting of distribution deals, joint ventures, and subsidiary holdings to satisfy even the most ardent of trade journal readers. Most involve National Geographic (NGT) and Discovery (DCI), the industry powerhouses in the U.S. Of particular interest is Chris’s discussion of the phenomenal growth of the Animal Planet cable channel. I happened to have been in attendance in 1996 when Discovery formally announced the launch of Animal Planet during a reception at the [Wildscreen Festival](#) in Bristol. The slogan “All animals, all the time” drew loud guffaws. Soon, however, nobody was laughing. Animal Planet quickly became a power in the industry – first as a buyer of content, and later as a producer commissioning new works.

Chris conveys something of the dizzying rate at which the entire wildlife film and television business grew in the 1990s. Expansion into new global markets, made possible by new satellite distribution outlets and 24-hour cable channels, including Animal Planet, created a surge in demand for more content to fill all those slots. The problem was that the industry tended to favor long-form (one-hour) ‘blue chip’ films, which could not only take a year or more to complete, but the *average* budget was already in the \$300,000 - \$450,000 range, and was climbing steadily (it has since doubled).⁹ The urgent need for more content, produced more quickly at lower cost, accelerated the industry’s transition from one focused on blue chip films, shot on 16mm and given cinematic gloss, to one more embracing of low-budget, half-hour, quick turnaround “action-adventure” programs shot on video, and featuring “blokey” young hosts in shorts. Chris gives a good account of these changes in the industry, and of the new generation of presenters (pp. 117-21). Chief among them, of course, was the irrepressible Steve Irwin. *Watching Wildlife* was completed before Irwin’s death in late 2006, and is therefore spared of any eulogizing tendency – although it must be said that inside the industry the “Crocodile Hunter” was quietly reviled.¹⁰

⁸ Fortunately, an ursine sex scene is inserted later in *The Bear* to reassure anxious viewers that females do, after all, have their uses. Recent scientific research suggests, however, that among humans it may be males who are ultimately expendable:

http://news.independent.co.uk/world/science_technology/article2444462.ece.

⁹ “Blue chip” film generally refers to big-budgeted, long-format natural history films focusing on mega-fauna (big cats, bears, sharks, crocodiles, elephants, whales), in spectacular environments suggesting a still-unspoiled, primeval wilderness, and featuring dramatic storylines often centering on a single animal, with minimal intrusions of science, politics, history, and environmental concerns, which can date a film and harm future rerun sales. Most significant in this context, however, is that in their focus on wild animals and habitats, they have tended to exclude people, which can spoil the idealized image of a timeless realm, where predator and prey still interact as they have for aeons.

¹⁰ See, for example, BBC producer Alastair Fothergill’s comments on Irwin:

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329616044-112198,00.html>.

Another nudge in this direction actually came at the height of the boom. Flush with cash in 1998, the Wildscreen festival commissioned researchers at the Glasgow (University) Media Group to find out what viewers thought about wildlife television. The focus-group study found that although “the ‘blue chip’ style of programming. . . was very popular,” the audience that advertisers most desired – teenagers – “preferred what they saw as more informal styles of presentation.” Score one for Irwin. Also, they were tired of programs that were “humourless.”¹¹ And David Attenborough? Well, he weren’t one of the lads. It may have been the beginning of Irwin’s vindication, although now – Crikey! – we’ll never know if he too might someday have received a knighthood (yes, *Aussies* are eligible).

What happened next is something Chris does not report, and may not even have been aware of, but its consequences are reflected in her narrative. In 1999 the industry went into a tailspin, and by 2000 had crashed – a victim, apparently, of saturated markets, and an exhausted blue chip format. The boom had turned to bust. The big money pulled out. Some of the reigning masters of blue chip filmmaking (Alan Root, Hugh Miles, Des & Jen Bartlett, Hugo van Lawick) simply retired, clearing the field for younger players, and hastening the transition into a more ‘televsual,’ faster-paced, and perhaps more youth-oriented medium. There ensued endless, tiresome experiments with films made to look like music videos. Some of the leading production houses specializing in high-end blue chip were either shut down (Survival, Partridge), or gave up on wildlife and turned to other genres (Green Umbrella). This in itself was shocking. Most of the carnage was in Britain, where only the BBC enjoyed the advantage that Discovery, Animal Planet, and National Geographic all had by way of their cable channels: that of being both a producer and a broadcaster (both a provider and a buyer of content). DCI in particular, with its deep pockets sewn by a huge domestic market, emerged stronger than ever, and with greater market share. Chris describes these years as they appeared on the TV screen, yet it all looked strangely different from inside – or at least from closer up. Film festivals felt like wakes. Those who still had jobs found themselves on a new *quest* – in search of what the head of the BBC Natural History Unit at the time could only describe as “the way forward.” For a while, all roads seemed to lead down-market. Chris gives a worthwhile account of what viewers saw as a result: more action, more youth, more humor, and more (animal) sex.

Animal sex, in fact, is the subject of an entire chapter in *Watching Wildlife* – surely its most provocative. For most filmmakers and producers, sex had been part of the larger, more general subject of *behavior*, or, as Chris puts it, “one of many animal behaviors [sic] ... that constitutes a narrative of an animal life” (p. 131). By isolating the topic and analyzing it in depth, including the ways in which wildlife films have handled ‘rape’ and same sex relations among animals, Chris makes her most distinctive contribution to the literature on wildlife film. Her closely-observed critique recalls in some respects Elaine Morgan’s analysis of the gender biases built into scientific theories and science popularization, in her minor classic [The Descent of Woman](#) (1985).

¹¹ Greg Philo and Lesley Henderson. (1998). *What the Audience Thinks: Focus group research into the likes and dislikes of UK wildlife viewers*. Glasgow Media Group. The study was carried out in eight locations in the UK, and arguably might not be fully generalizable to American audiences. Still, it was a hot topic at Wildscreen ‘98, and every American attendee took home a copy of the study.

Chris's frequent claim that wildlife films (and, by implication, the people who make them) have been "preoccupied," or have had a "preoccupation" with animal sex, reproduction, and birth will strike some as overstated – especially as she makes it no fewer than *ten* times (does she protest too much?).¹² Until recently, sex was something to which the people who made wildlife films had not given much (if any) collective thought. In years of festival and symposium attendance, I cannot recall a single formal discussion of it – ethics, predation and death, yes, but sex no – that is, until 1998 when the Glasgow Media Group study focused attention on it.

The research revealed that viewers liked watching animals having sex more than anyone had realized – more than they liked watching that other kind of *climax* scene, the chase that ends in a kill.¹³ The industry sat up and took notice – although more from its preoccupation with sales than with sex (unless there is something unconsciously sexual in producers' fervent desire for "bums on seats"). There were jokes after that about programs with titles such as "Animal Wankers" – unthinkable a few years earlier, but today an idea that could probably be pitched (aspiring filmmakers take note!). A few months later, [in an article at the BBC](#) website, producer John Sparks wrote,

A recent survey of what viewers like to see in wildlife programmes revealed that sex beats death. Scenes of predators killing for a living were generally disliked, whereas those of animals engaged in breeding were widely relished. . . . There is no more important story than this.¹⁴

And tell it he did, in a six-part BBC series, [and accompanying book](#), entitled *Battle of the Sexes: A Natural History of Sex*. The examples Chris offers of programs specifically addressing animal sex, or perhaps exploiting audiences' prurient or voyeuristic interests – *Wild Sex*, *When Animals Attract*, and the *Most Extreme* "Lovers" episode – all came as well *after* the Glasgow study. Arguably, the increase in attention to animal sex was a case of the industry trying to respond to its audience – and hang on to it.

Most of the examples Chris cites of wildlife films depicting sex she finds tainted by sociobiology – or at least by the tendency to draw conclusions from observations of animals and project them onto humans (p. 134). This is one of the central arguments in the latter half of *Watching Wildlife*, and an interesting reversal of the usual concern over anthropomorphism in wildlife films. Previously, it was the animals who were misunderstood when we tried to project models of human behavior onto them. Here, however, it is the other way around: it is we humans, or at least human sexuality, at risk of being

¹² See pages ix (twice), xxii, 103, 125, 133 (twice), 154, 156, and 208.

¹³ "Scenes of sexual behavior were popular in most of the groups," the study found. "All of the participants approved and wanted more scenes of mating except for one person" (p. 23). By contrast, "No women expressed a preference for scenes of hunting or killing, and only a minority of men. . . . It was one of the few subjects which viewers indicated that they would actively refuse to watch" (pp. 20-21). Philo and Henderson, *What the Audience Thinks*.

¹⁴ "All about the birds and the bees." BBC News, Wednesday, January 6, 1999. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/245419.stm>.

misunderstood when animal models are used. The two seemingly opposed tendencies may not be incompatible, and Chris points to enough examples to challenge any easy assumptions.

The threat of sociobiology, however, is apparently one that must be confronted in wildlife films before it spreads. We're told that wildlife programs might be "articulating and circulating to mass audiences theories of human behavior derived from animal observation" (p. 138). They might be, although it's not at all clear that "mass" audiences receive them in this way, or draw the feared conclusions (let alone act on them). This comes down to a 'media effects' argument, then, about the power of television to influence attitudes, behavior, and perhaps even social policy. In this context, it may be difficult to isolate wildlife television's messages and their 'effects' (if any) from all the other messages heaped at us, and of course it is always tempting to assume that if there are any 'effects,' they will be negative.¹⁵

In confronting sociobiology, *Watching Wildlife* takes on some of the leading lights of science and science popularization – E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins, respectively. Both are said to have "reiterated, consciously or not, ideological – specifically traditional – values." They may well have done, although in this skirmish in the culture wars, the shots fired at them are also not coming from objective, value-neutral ground. For his part, E.O. Wilson has done himself no favors in the past by voicing retrograde opinions on such matters as women in politics, but he may have been disproportionately linked to actual right wing ideology as a result of challenges to his theories by Steven J. Gould and Richard Lewontin, who were strongly identified with left politics. Dawkins might be surprised to find himself linked here to the "[traditional values](#)" crowd, with its fundamentalist leanings, but his "selfish gene" theory has often been linked to sociobiology (or 'evolutionary psychology'), and he has also been harshly critical of Gould.¹⁶ All of this suggests a kind of automatic left/right political polarization in what should have remained scientific debates (did his hoax on *Social Text* make Alan Sokal a right winger? One might wonder if making wedge

¹⁵ It is commonly assumed, of course, that television has negative or harmful 'effects,' especially on children. The wildlife television industry, however, is rare in its widespread presumption of positive 'effects' – that is, of *environmental* good that results almost automatically (although inexplicably) from wildlife films on television. The fact that there is a dearth of evidence to support this claim has done nothing diminish its appeal.

¹⁶ Lewontin was the co-author of a thought-provoking Marxist interpretation of science called *The Dialectical Biologist* (1985). Gould, who admitted that his politics had informed his view of evolution, likewise linked his theory of "punctuated equilibrium," with its emphasis on periodic upheavals, to the dialectical view of history. He argued that it offered a corrective to evolutionary "gradualism," which seemed to mirror the wishy-washy liberalism of *social* change through slow, incremental reform. This was challenged by Dawkins, however, who argued in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) that 'gradualism' was not inherent in Darwinian theory, and that "punctuated equilibrium" therefore did not pose the radical challenge to Darwin that Gould had claimed.

As a footnote to this footnote, Marx himself claimed that Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had provided the basis in natural science for his own theory of class struggle (*proto-sociobiology?*), but expressed concern in a well known letter to Engels (June 8, 1862) that Darwin had projected human competition onto the animal world.

issues of scientific theories would come as easily to citizens of a *multi-party* political system). Primatologist Franz deWaal has avoided polarizing criticisms of both sociobiology and “selfish gene” theory. He rejects the latter in part because it suggests that animals are mere genetic “survival machines” with no mental life, which he sees as a recrudescence of Cartesianism.¹⁷

This is not too far from Chris’s position in *Watching Wildlife*, although her concern is ultimately with the way in which humans, not animals, are understood – specifically, that findings from animal research will be generalized or applied to understanding human behavior. Yet deWaal has also warned against a tendency he calls “anthropodenial” – that is, “to exaggerate the uniqueness of our species,” and trying to “build a brick wall between the rest of the animal kingdom and ourselves.”¹⁸

That wall is never far away in *Watching Wildlife’s* section entitled “The Rape Wars and Wildlife TV.” One senses it when, with the help of Susan Brownmiller, the “feminist analysis of rape” is laid out as a “markedly un-natural, specifically social human act.” Yet the essence of the feminist argument is that rape is an act of “intimidation and control disengaged from sexual desire and reproductive instinct” (pp. 147-8). That is, it’s about power, not sex. Biologists who do not concur, or who ignore that wall by generalizing to human behavior from animal research, are (by default, it seems) *sociobiologists*, whose “vocal counterdiscourse to the feminist analysis of rape” (pp. 147-8) suggests, according to one critic, a “hidden agenda” unrelated to science communication (p. 149). There’s not much middle ground here. Sociobiology seems at times almost indistinguishable from the patriarchy we’ve all learned to hate.

Chris builds her argument with care, although at one point reproduces a passage from Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will* (1975) that includes the ill-informed claim that “no zoologist ... has ever observed that animals rape in their natural habitat” (p. 147). Curiously, Chris only acknowledges its inaccuracy in a footnote. Some sort of rape (or rape-like) behavior has been observed in other species for decades, but the question here is what to call it. There is fear that if the term ‘rape’ is used in relation to animals, then it could become *naturalized*, which might eventually lead to a legal redefinition that could weaken protections for women, and perhaps even exonerate some of those who commit sexual assaults (*Evolution made me do it!*).¹⁹ Biologists have for years employed other terms, such as “forced copulation”

¹⁷ Descartes famously argued that animals’ bodies, like all other physical matter, were subject to clocklike, mechanistic principles. Animals were therefore simply “automata,” possessing neither consciousness nor capacity for pain. “They have no reason at all,” he wrote, and that it is “nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs, just as a clock, which is only composed of wheels and weights. . .” (*Discourse on Method*, Part V).

¹⁸ de Waal, F. B. M. (1997). “Are we in anthropodenial?” *Discover* 18 (7): 50-53.

¹⁹ The real threat to prosecution of violent sex offenders may be not be evolutionary biology, but instead neuroscientific research. Legal teams now routinely order brain scans of their clients in capital crimes cases, including rape, as part of their defense strategies. Indeed, neuroscience has raised some unsettling questions regarding the ease with which we assign moral responsibility in crimes such as rape. Jeffery Rosen’s [recent article in the New York Times Magazine](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/magazine/11NeuroLaw.t.html) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/magazine/11NeuroLaw.t.html>) lays out the dilemma. In his 1996 book *Good Natured*, Franz deWaal argued that “Morality is as firmly grounded in neurobiology as anything

and "resisted mating," yet "rape," along with other morally loaded terms such as "cuckold," "harem," and "cheating," is likely to persist in wildlife films. There are undoubtedly good reasons to use "forced copulation," but in programs intended for a broad, popular audience it sounds too *schoolsy*.²⁰

It is hardly surprising, then, when Chris describes a case in which renowned British science popularizer used "rape" in a major wildlife series seen by millions. Yes, The David himself, in an episode of [The Trials of Life](#) (1989). Chris makes clear that "Attenborough does not make any claims about human actions," but his "treatment of rape as the natural outcome to male sexual frustration is clear" – *in sea lions*, that is (p. 151). It seems, then, that it is no longer enough to say *we must not generalize to humans from animal research*, or that *we must not use the term rape*. Here the stakes are raised, so that conclusions from animal research (into the causes of animal 'rape') must themselves be challenged. The mere possibility that there could be any sexual or reproductive dimension to the behavior in question, *even in another species*, must not go unchallenged, lest it threaten – what? The welfare of women in the real world? Possibly, but they're still far down the slippery slope from here. What might really be at stake is the edifice of feminism – or at least the feminist understanding of rape, as outlined by Brownmiller over three decades ago. If so, then this may ultimately be a struggle over ideology rather than over science, law, or even women's welfare. Perhaps, then, Chris was right in suggesting that this isn't a book about wildlife films after all, but about challenging "investments in dominant ideologies" (p. xiv). The question is: which ideologies are dominant today?

In the 30+ years since Brownmiller laid out the feminist view, a good deal of research on rape among nonhuman animals has come in. Chris devotes several pages to some of the more high profile work in this area, in particular that of David Barash and Randy Thornhill. Both have argued that rape is biological, rather than cultural in origin, and that it is linked to reproduction – that is, to sex rather than to power.²¹ Thornhill's book *A Natural History of Rape* (co-authored with Craig T. Palmer) garnered a good deal of [media attention](#) when it came out in 2000, in part because he sought to turn the tables and position himself as a challenger of 'dominant ideologies' – or at least of reigning assumptions regarding

else we do or are." So, if evolution or biology didn't make someone commit rape, it might have been his brain.

²⁰ "Resisted mating" typically describes instances in which "the female struggles and attempts to escape from the male in an obvious effort to avoid copulation" – although it is usually applied to species in which this is normal occurrence, and may be an effort by the female to exert choice in mate selection. "Forced copulation" is applied to species "in which aggression and struggle are not part of the typical mating interactions," and therefore involves "the negation of female choice." See: Lalumiere, M., Harris, G., Quinsey, V., & Rice, M. (2005). *The Causes of Rape: Understanding Individual Differences in Male Propensity for Sexual Aggression* (The Law and Public Policy). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association (chapter 3).

²¹ The first chapter of Thornhill and Palmer's book can be read at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/t/thornhill-rape.html>. Thornhill concedes that *social learning* is an "immediate" or "proximate" cause of rape, but maintains that evolutionary biology is the "ultimate cause." Thus, while arguing that rape is biological in origin, he agrees that it is *pathological* in human society.

rape.²² The surprise and fascination with which the book was greeted in some sectors of the media, as well as the ferocity with which Thornhill was smacked down in others, suggested that in this area, anyway, feminist ideas had become prevailing orthodoxy. Franz deWaal was savagely critical of what he described as Thornhill's "biased position – that rape is primarily sexual," but then added that it "could be seen as providing a necessary antidote to the other dogmatic position, that it's principally about power."²³

More recently, the American Psychological Association issued a dense volume entitled *The Causes of Rape* (2005).²⁴ Although concerned primarily with *human* psychology, the authors quickly scaled the brick wall, and decided there was something to be learned from reviewing studies of rape behavior in other species. The result is an entire chapter entitled "Forced Copulation in the Animal Kingdom" (a 'meta-analysis' of the research to date), and a long Appendix listing animal species in which forced copulation has been observed. Had the A.P.A. caved in to sociobiology? For the feminist analysis of rape, it got worse: the study found that, across species, males exhibiting this behavior "tend to target *fertile* females," pointing to the very sexual/reproductive dimension the feminist argument denied. The authors came to the "general conclusion that forced copulation ... is a tactic used by some males under some conditions *to increase reproduction*" (emphasis added).²⁵ So is that the last word? Of course not. Chris has raised some important questions that won't go away, and her analysis should be read carefully. She may also have assembled the cast of a promising documentary film on the subject, and would be wasting an opportunity if she didn't pitch the idea to a producer somewhere.

Surprisingly, in her section on "'Gay' Animals and the 'Gay Agenda,'" Chris finds the opposite of the sociobiological threat – that is, of generalizing to humans from animal models. Here, by contrast, "invitations to viewers to understand their own sexuality through animal models are virtually absent" (p. 154). Indeed, she faults wildlife films for being "virtually silent on the matter," yet acknowledges that evidence of homosexual behavior in other species has only really been trickling in since the 1990s. The impatience is curious, given that films revealing the sexual and social practices of bonobos were already finding their way into American prime-time television in the mid '90s. One such film, broadcast in 1995, comes under criticism precisely because it "avoids likening bonobos and humans, even though it is in our sexual behaviors that our species share some of our most significant similarities." Chris seems to regret that the film therefore avoided (or missed the opportunity for) "staking a claim that homosexual behavior is 'natural' at a time that beliefs about the origins and morality of homosexuality are hotly contested by an antigay Christian right..." (p. 162).

²² Thornhill's debate with Susan Brownmiller on NPR's *Talk of the Nation* (26 January, 2000) can be heard at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1069570>.

²³ DeWaal, Franz. "Survival of the Rapist," *New York Times*, April 2, 2000 (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/02/reviews/000402.002waalt.html>.)

²⁴ Lalumiere, et al. *The Causes of Rape* (2005).

²⁵ The distinction between 'tactic' and 'strategy' is significant here. Lalumiere, et al., note: "In evolutionary biology (and in this book), the term *strategy* refers to a genetically based decision rule that guides development and behavior. The term *tactic* refers to a phenotype (e.g., a preference, a behavior, a bodily structure) that results from a strategy."

In a book so otherwise carefully argued, the contradiction is surprising: if it naturalizes rape, it is to be confronted, opposed; if it naturalizes homosexuality, it is to be supported, encouraged. Is generalizing from animals to humans acceptable after all? Chris does note subsequently that in matters of same-sex relations, biological evidence is “uneasily generalizable across species,” and probably unreliable in gay rights argumentation (p. 164). Still, the clearest thread of consistency is the argument that both rape and homosexual behavior among animals should be understood as clearly divorced from reproduction or reproductive urges (although in cases of rape, half of this equation it is not so clear).

In the end, however, there is little denying Chris’s larger conclusions regarding wildlife films’ handling of sex: that they have tended to overemphasize male aggression (*exciting visuals!*); that they have not shown us the entire spectrum of animal sexuality; that by focusing on reproduction they have left the impression that “heterosexual behavior is the only kind that counts” (p. 166); and that even at their best they have probably evinced a general moral conservatism. Still, it is tempting to see this as the conservatism of the marketplace. From an entertainment genre intended for a broad, popular audience, one might wonder if we can really expect programs that are *progressive*, especially in matters of sex – unless to boost ratings and helps sales. Wildlife filmmakers often say that they keep in mind how their film might be received by “me ol’ mum down in Brighton” – or up in Pasadena, or wherever. Broadcasters may be after young viewers, but filmmakers often have in mind their family members when trying to imagine their primary audience. Should we be surprised, then, when they tiptoe around matters of sex and sexuality? Indeed, just what are the dilemmas filmmakers face in taking on such matters? Here again is an instance in which talking to some of them might have helped.

Watching Wildlife concludes with an extended case study of films about giant pandas. Here Chris pulls together her themes and arguments, refocusing the analysis she had refracted through that “prism” in the early pages. Her account of the media’s treatment of pandas is sobering, and anyone who finds these creatures beguiling (as most of us do) will be slightly saddened by it. The choice of pandas here may surprise some, as this species is rarely filmed under the sort of wild conditions that lions, bears, sharks, and other charismatic megafauna are. As Chris also notes, “Pandas don’t engage in many of the behaviors [sic] which are the stock-in-trade of the wildlife genre: they do not migrate, hunt, build elaborate nests, or socialize with other animals” (p. 254, n. 38). Worse, in captivity they are subject to endless, invasive ‘interventions’ by human technology, aimed at getting them to reproduce in (not to mention merely surviving: earlier this year the 22-year-old [“Yan Yan” died in the Berlin Zoo](#) from heart failure caused by acute constipation²⁶). Panda films might therefore seem unrepresentative of the wildlife film genre – at least, in its ‘classic’ form. Yet the classic form is not the focus of *Watching Wildlife* (the term ‘blue chip film’ never even appears). Chris’s chief concern all along has been with the ways in which wildlife films are often dominated by humans – or at least by human issues, values, and anxieties. In a way, what she does throughout *Watching Wildlife* parallels efforts in the realm of environmental advocacy, where large organizations had lost sight of the humans living alongside wildlife in many supposedly ‘pristine’ environments. That is, Chris insists that people are part of the picture, even if they’re not always *in* the picture.

²⁶ No news organizations picked up on the similarities to the causes of Elvis Presley’s death.

Finally, two minor technical complaints: it is surprising that as a book aimed mainly at academic scholars, *Watching Wildlife* does not include a bibliography. One must search the endnotes to find proper references and full citations. What was the publisher thinking? Less surprising, however, for a book aimed mainly at academic scholars, is that *Watching Wildlife* occasionally lapses into academic jargon and phrasing. We're told, for example, that early 20th century films "interrogate" the meaning of race, and "articulate" racial ideologies (p. 3). They do neither. They ask no questions about race, and are often manifestly crude and inarticulate in their portrayals of it. Such usage and phraseology, especially in the early pages, may help establish some cultural studies *cred*, but say more about reference group and intended readership than about early films. Other clearly recognizable examples include "imaged" instead of depicted (p. 118), "elide" instead of omit (p. 132), "inflect" instead of influence (p. 137), and so on. Filmmaker deGruy is described as "possessor of the gaze" (p. 73), an awkward locution borrowed from academic film studies (long mired in pretentious diction), where "gaze" (or "The Gaze") is often substituted for perspective and point-of-view. What is meant, then, by the claim that pandas are subject to "controlling gazes" (p. 170) is anyone's guess, but at the literal level it means nothing. Fortunately, these are only occasional hiccups in otherwise forceful prose and argumentation – in a book that is likely to be the most influential on the subject of wildlife films so far.

(Derek Bousé is the author of *Wildlife Films*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000)