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'SILENT HUNTER' AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARY

ABSTRACT

Silent Hunter, a 1986 South Africa wildlife documentary directed by Duncan McLachlan and featuring John Varty and Elmon Mhlongo, caused controversy because of ways in which it broke the rules of blue-chip wildlife documentaries. The new possibilities it explored appealed to producers looking for new formats for wildlife television, in particular to Discovery Channel that had started in 1985 in the United States of America. This film was thus a major influence in the move from blue-chip to presenter-driven wildlife documentary. The film also rebelled against many of the restrictions of blue-chip documentaries. With reference to actor-network-theory, this article presents some thoughts on why *Silent Hunter* is worth considering not only as aesthetic but also as moral critique of wildlife film production.

Keywords: media studies; documentary; wildlife documentary; actor-network-theory; film analysis; wildlife communication; conservation communication

INTRODUCTION

Most academic analyses of the shifts in wildlife documentary over the past half century are based on North American and British trends and consumers and note major shifts: from high production value "blue-chip" documentaries to producer-driven digitally produced content and computer-generated graphics; from wildlife documentaries as part of general television offerings to the growth of specialists channels (Chris 2006; Bousé 2000; Mitman 1999; Cottle 2004; Scott 2003). In the only monograph on African wildlife documentary makers, on the other hand, Hartley (2010) does not really examine the interplay between international and African markets and trends. This article argues that a maverick South African production, *Silent Hunter*, was influential in changing the rules of wildlife engagement.

This article, through interviews with major protagonists involved in the production, argues that entertainment media such as the Discovery Channel took this as one model for productions for the (then) new channel and that their success encouraged other traditional channels to follow.

BACKGROUND: THE MAKING OF 'SILENT HUNTER'

John Varty did not come to wildlife film-making through any of the conventional routes. (The information that follows was recorded in an interview at Tiger Canyons in April 2017.) As co-owner of Londolozi Game Lodge, he was trying, particularly with the help of Elmon Mhlongo, his poacher-turned-tracker helper, to habituate leopards to the presence of vehicles to make it easier for guests to see the sought-after leopard, the most elusive of the Africa Big Five. In doing this, Varty and Mhlongo recorded leopard behaviour and interactions over a period of years.

Varty had become involved in wildlife film-making as a result of helping to write scripts and in arguing for cause-driven documentaries, for example, on the adverse effects of building a wildlife fence in Botswana. After a lengthy period working for a film production company that could not pay him, he was given a film camera as some kind of recompense and so ended up with the means to record behaviour.

In the early 1980s, by which time he and Mhlongo had recorded a lot of footage, including previously unseen leopard behaviour, Varty went to the Wildscreen Film Festival in Bristol, England. As he tells it, he was bored by the conventional blue-chip offerings after one day and left early. On his return to South Africa, he decided he needed to make a markedly different kind of wildlife documentary, using Londolozi money to finance it. So he looked for somebody who had shown himself capable of making a dramatic film about an unconventional subject, and settled on Duncan McLachlan, who had made one of the first ever films about adventure sports, a film about Cape Town rock climber Chris Lomax called *Solo Ascent*. McLachlan came to the film project to discover what one might have expected from years of careful following of a wild animal without a set script or full time attention: ample fascinating footage but certainly not anything close to a finished product.

What the creative team came up with next changed the rules of wildlife engagement and the communication about wildlife issues: they made the process of making the film and the emotions set off by it part of the story. The film opens by breaking several of the rules of blue-chip documentary: the viewer sees Varty in profile with movie camera and binoculars, scanning. He opens, "My name is John Varty. There were three of us involved there in the wilds of Africa. First there was the leopard. Then there was Elmon Mhlongo, tracker and friend."

Varty and Mhlongo are leading men in the classical sense. Mhlongo is usually bare-chested and presented as the "last of a dying breed" who knows the bush. The male intimacy involved in the "five long years" of getting up early to track the leopard becomes part of the theme and the role of Mhlongo's tracking skills and indigenous knowledge is acknowledged. The film also presents other indigenous knowledge respectfully. When the female leopard they are following disappears, Varty and Mhlongo go to a traditional healer to see what his bones tell about what has happened. They emerge reassured – the leopard is looking for a mate, and is not dead or lost. This turns out to be correct.

For dramatic effect, the film re-stages events that had happened but not been filmed: an elephant charge; being lowered into the leopard den and escaping up a rope; a fire

on the vehicle at the critical moment when they are about to capture footage of mating leopards for the very first time. The film also shows Varty filming the leopard up a tree by lying on his back.

Probably like most artistic productions breaking rules for the first time, the documentary returns to conventions at points: after the Varty introduction, a conventional wildlife documentary narrated by voiceover artist Brian O'Shaughnessy begins and gives conventional scientific details about leopard grooming, for example. But this switch to omniscient narrator leads to further switches back to Varty, who at some points lectures the audience on the dangers of encroaching civilisation or poaching, or turns lyrical and plays his guitar. Interspersed with typical wildlife documentary, other elements emerge such as adolescent humour when Varty yells to a pilot delivering supplies to ask whether he has forgotten toilet paper, only to have a roll thrown out of the window as the pilot leaves, unfolding across the runway.

Unsurprisingly for a film breaking so many rules, no neat ending was possible and the film has three endings: a conventional wildlife ending in which the older cubs leave and the mother leopard looks for a male to start a new cycle; an ending to the quest of the filmmakers to capture mating leopards on film in the wild, which they achieve successfully; a lecture from Varty when they find a dead poached leopard cub on the dangers man poses to the environment.

The Wildscreen Film Festival entry

The film was entered for the 1986 Wildscreen Festival in Bristol. Clearly the film had some claim to an award given that it had recorded never before seen sequences of leopard behaviour. The general reactions seem to have been typical of any committee when its central tenets are challenged. Varty had some supporters on the committee, including an executive from French television company Canal Plus, who told him what transpired. He recounts a central exchange with some amusement. One of the irate British judges is reported to have said, "Varty has broken all the rules of wildlife documentary", to which the French supporter retorted, "I don't think he knows the rules".

The committee awarded the prize to another leopard film by a major film maker and producer: Hugh Miles's *Death in the Long Grass*. Varty finds a telling analogy: he had made the error of turning up to play tennis at Wimbledon in coloured tennis clothes when the rule was all-whites. A photograph of the prizewinners shows a very British assembly of tweeded and tied figures. But the revolution of the film went beyond mere external forms. There must have been some second thoughts from the committee as they invented a new category to try to cope with films like Varty's – a theatrical award – shortly afterwards.

BREAKING THE RULES

This film upended conventions of traditional blue-chip wildlife documentaries and the hostile or uneasy reaction to the film was based on the sense that Varty was dangerously mixing dramatic recreation of events with reality, advocacy with recording. Blue-chip wildlife documentary conventions have been analysed in the books and

articles mentioned, but it is useful to summarise – even to the point of parody – the oppositions of style and viewpoint so as to see how thoroughly *Silent Hunter* moved from the industry norm (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: OPPOSITIONS OF STYLE AND VIEWPOINT

BBC blue-chip	Silent Hunter
Without emotions in cameraman or viewer. Don't affect the animals with sentiments. "Stiff upper lip".	Emotions in cameraman and viewer - Varty fears the cub is dead or the mother lost.
Without viewpoint or viewpoint obscured.	Preaches to viewers. Shows viewers the process.
Nature speaks. Why question it? Cycle of life. Cycle of seasons.	Varty speaks. Problematises his relationship with the leopard through song.
Nature eternal? Not shot through with changes, problems. No humans.	Cats in danger. Back to game fence problem. Poaching.
Western, scientific knowledge, not indigenous. Animals are anonymous.	Indigenous knowledge and belief brought in. Animals are protagonists.
Seamless product. Total view.	Messy process, dramatic, subject of the film.
Funding by broadcaster for defined project. Set time. Equipment high barrier to entry.	Largely self-funded and equipped.
Invisible creator of film. All events real.	Immodest presenter. Some events staged.

In the larger history of wildlife documentary, *Silent Hunter* could be seen, because of the re-staged dramatic sequences, as part of a tradition of wildlife filmmaking that sacrificed authenticity for audience appeal – a dichotomy going back to the early history of the genre and figures like Colonel Selig (Mitman, 1999). But Mitman (1999: 206) concludes his study with some telling criticisms of the blue-chip genre:

In nature as spectacle, the animal kingdom exists solely to be observed, objectified and enjoyed. This voyeurism precludes any meaningful exchange because we remain at a physically and emotionally safe distance, far removed from the shared labor of animals and humans, whose interactions have made such vicarious experiences possible.

Mitman's (1999: 208) conclusion is that wildlife films mislead in denying the human impact on nature and our presence in the natural world, as "the artifice of civilization must be hidden, for any sign of artificiality would destroy the illusion of this recreated nature as God's place of grace". *Silent Hunter* was released at a time when critics had become aware that some artifice and harm to animals might be involved in blue-chip films through the revelations of the 1984 Canadian Broadcasting Company's broadcast of *Cruel Camera*, which showed deception and staged scenes in Disney and other blue-chip productions. Other analysts point out how blue-chip documentaries may omit comments on scientific controversies such as creationism and avoid issues of conservation seen as too gloomy or political (Dingwall & Aldridge 2006; Cottle 2004; Jeffries 2003).

Other analysts point out that the tensions shown here are common in debates about documentary more generally. As Bagust (2008: 16) notes about the Griersonian claims for the superiority of documentary to fictional film:

We can see that, right from the outset, the theoretical superiority and veracity claimed for the documentary film was a vulnerable one, one that was further destabilized by later technological and generic developments in screen production.

Silent Hunter could thus claim to be honest about its artifice and the dangers of abusing wild animals through filming. It also complicates Mitman's account because the artifices of civilization in the film (the vehicle, the camera equipment, the earoplane flying in) are highlighted, but serve to vindicate Londolozi as a place where the "shared labor of animals and humans" is the business of providing tourists with great viewing experiences. In this, Varty's opening tribute to the leopard as what Latour (2005) would call full agent or actor in the drama is important.

In the song addressed to the leopard, performed in *Silent Hunter* by Roger Lucey, Varty considers whether the filmmakers have exploited and in some way harmed the leopard. In their concern about poaching and their fear that a dead leopard they find may turn out to be one of their subjects, the protagonists also show an ethical concern that traditional wildlife documentary obscures – something later programmes like *Big Cat Diary* would make central to their appeal (Richards 2014). Several commentators have noted that traditional blue-chip documentaries have done very little to arrest alarming losses in wildlife and may even have helped obscure the problems wildlife faces.

In the recreation of the consultation with the local sangoma to have his prediction on what has happened to the leopard, and in the value given to Mhlongo's role, this film also pays tribute to local indigenous knowledge and fieldwork rather than to the neutrality of Western science – something that has become far more central to debates about ecological debates in the decades since most of the studies of wildlife documentary have been published and can also be seen as challenging a damaging hegemony in blue-chip documentaries (Glenn 2013). And Varty avoids the kind of contempt for indigenous values and knowledge shown by a figure such as Steve Irwin in his response to crocodiles kept in East Timor (Brockington 2008).

The changes in this film were thus not simply a question of busking, or of Varty's vanity, but an attempt to upend traditional documentary values. What effects did the film have?

Londolozi

As the comment on Mitman suggests, the film at once admits civilisation and artifice in, but in the service of a new kind of nature experience: viewing leopards from a vehicle at Londolozi. From this point of view, the artifice in the film serves as tourist attraction – one can fly in in a small earoplane, one will be guided by expert trackers and guides, one is sure to see leopards. Varty says that the film led to a considerable boost in publicity for the lodge and an increase in international bookings. In drawing attention to the work done to understand and habituate the leopard, the film may take the risk of alienating critical viewers ("the Londolozi leopards are very habituated"), but in practice

the adjoining Sabi Sand lodges (Londolozi, Mala Mala, Singita) where these leopards were habituated became the most sought-after and valuable wildlife lodges in Africa with the presence of habituated but fully wild leopards a major part of the appeal. Londolozi’s highly successful ongoing social media presence builds on the notion of guests having a rapport with specific animals on which the lodge keeps reporting.

Discovery Channel

The effect of *Silent Hunter* was not simply on Londolozi business. David Varty, the business head of Londolozi Productions, (in a Skype interview in 2017 with the author) said that the outrage of some members of the British wildlife committee was matched by a very different reaction from American television executive, Clark Bunting, charged with finding content for a new cable television network – Discovery. For him, newly installed as head of the channel that only started broadcasting in 1985, it was evident that *Silent Hunter* could be the future of the genre: passionate, personal, committed, more dramatic than conventional blue-chip documentary. In contrast to the decorum and scientific detachment of the BBC genre, the Discovery Channel wanted to highlight action, danger, the romance of making wildlife films.

In his summary of major events in wildlife documentary, Bousé (2006) omits any mention of Varty, while accounts of the rise of the Discovery Channel, similar to that Chris (2006), tend to focus on longer term trends and audience demographics, rather than individual creative productions and their effect. Chris’ (2006) omission of Varty’s impact is particularly glaring as she gives lengthy treatment to Van Lawick’s much later *The Leopard Son*, which in many ways repeats Varty’s themes and was much less influential.

Silent Hunter is in some ways a one of a kind film because of McLachlan’s role. Varty and Mhlongo are not celebrity presenters; the film is not part of a weekly series of presenter-driven scripts as later shows featuring Steve Irwin or Austin Stevens would be; the film was not made on commission, as Varty’s later films would be. Yet it seems evident that the human role in this film helped break the hold of blue-chip on the industry and to open it up to new forms. In helping Discovery move in new directions, this film shaped much of what followed.

Clark Bunting and Discovery commissioned Varty, on the basis of *Silent Hunter*, to make films for the best part of a decade, working in Kenya and Londolozi, but also in South America where Mhlongo’s skills as tracker were tested on the South American jaguar. Whatever the later importance of digital technologies or cheaper production methods, or a quicker production cycle, the new sensibility and view of nature and the importance of on-screen presenters as shown by Varty opened new avenues for Discovery.

The legacy

The team assembled to make *Silent Hunter* stayed largely in place for the 1992 feature film *Running Wild* starring Varty, Mhlongo, Brooke Shields and Martin Sheen and directed by McLachlan. The plot deals with a young American filmmaker (Shields) who visits Londolozi to make a documentary about two young abandoned leopards that

Varty is raising. Many of the devices from *Silent Hunter* recur here – the filmmakers lose clips to a fire; poaching threatens the leopards, as do corrupt officials; Varty and Mhlongo live in a kind of blood brotherhood. But after this fairly successful attempt at fictional feature film, Varty returned to wildlife documentaries and filming his attempts to return tigers to the wild in South Africa.

Varty's original sense at the Bristol festival that blue-chip documentaries were too staid, too slow, too dispassionate and that the genre needed a strong dose of dramatic interest has surely prevailed. When David Attenborough has to fake looking for spitting cobras in the wild, or hang out of a helicopter to show himself dramatically on the spot, or Austin Stevens is presented being the first person to descend into the cave, we confront the evidence that the blue-chip ethos by and large has given way to audience demands for more drama and more emotion. When DVDs of blue-chip documentaries include sections showing "outtakes" or "the making of" or show us the technologies used to film a sequence, they are accepting that the process of making the film is of legitimate interest to the audience. (Varty was not the only figure or only influence as many others such as the Roots in *2 in the Bush* had also showed some of this interest in process and techniques, but his role mattered.)

For Varty himself, the dangers of a move to a presenter-based series with figures like Steve Irwin became evident – presenters could work with captive animals or cut production values dramatically. In filming and blogging about his work to re-introduce tigers into the wild in South Africa, he in several ways has returned to the legacy of *Silent Hunter*.

A THEORETICAL ADDENDUM

One way of analysing Varty's film and industry changes would be to invoke Bourdieu's work on production ecologies as Cottle (2004) does, or look at Bourdieu's description of what happens in struggles for cultural domination (Bourdieu 1992; Bourdieu & Johnson 1993) In this view, Varty's film marks a moment when non-British values shake British restraint and decorum. As in other cultural battles, the challenging powers meet resistance and are greeted with outrage. Varty was not the only wildlife documentary maker to move away from the BBC template but *Silent Hunter* was probably the most marked deviation.

Bourdieu helps understand how, in wildlife film more generally, Michael Rosenberg of Partridge Films emerged as a key figure able to play British broadcasters off against American ones. In this analysis, South African filmmakers became more sophisticated than British or American ones because they produced material for both audiences, knowing how to appeal to different tastes or styles.

But if Bourdieu is the theorist appropriate for understanding some of the cultural clashes involved, actor-network-theory may also help explain some of the revolutionary effect of *Silent Hunter*. It suggests that the blue-chip genre refuses to legitimise or acknowledge "actors" – whether cameras, vehicles, cameramen or women, the animals, the infrastructure, the locals who find or track animals. It represents science, but the science of what has already been recorded. (Alan Root (2012) tells of being the first to record, for example, hornbill nesting behaviour, but the BBC refusing to let him include it in film

until there were two scientific papers describing this *Silent Hunter* insists on all sorts of actors and networks that blue-chip nature documentary passes over.

Looking at *Silent Hunter* helps adjudicate the usefulness of Bourdieu (1992) and Latour (2005) as theorists of wildlife documentary. Bourdieu helps understand the process of cultural struggle and how new forms emerge with new channels and how to analyse the national, commercial and cultural aspects involved. Latour helps us see that the film insists on revealing actors and networks that other films ignore. *Silent Hunter* deserves recognition for that and not only for its role in changing industry practice and tastes.

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