

Winged Migration (2001) Sony Picture Classics

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A Bird's Life

Winged Migration (2001) is a visually stunning “documentary-adventure” that follows several communities of birds on their seasonal migratory journeys. Although the migrations are set to music and the flapping of the birds’ wings can be heard in many scenes, the film is primarily a visual experience. There is very little narration in *Winged Migration*, which for the most part is shot from the perspective of the migrating birds. Several species of birds were filmed, including geese, pelicans, ducks, storks, cranes, kingfishers, and penguins. Filmed over the course of four years on all seven continents, the cameras of the filmmakers fly with the birds, a technique which affords the viewer a rare intimate glimpse of migratory birds in flight. In contrast to the customary view from our vantage point on the ground – the familiar distant “V” shape – this film delivers an incredibly detailed look at the birds as they fly. The viewer is brought so close to the birds that we can see not only their faces but also their eyes as they soar hundreds and thousands of feet above the earth, and the filmmaking technique allows us to feel as if we are flying right along with them. The cameras dive and swoop with the birds, at times behind them, at times right next to them, but always closer than most non-ethologists (or zookeepers) could ever imagine being to these birds. And even ethologists and zookeepers would not be able to accompany the birds on their flights, as this film allows the viewer to do.

There are poignant moments. A duck is shown being shot out of the sky by a hunter; one moment she is soaring, and the next her lifeless body is plummeting toward the earth. A baby puffin without parents is killed and eaten by a gull. The devastating effects of pollution are shown as a bird lands in an oil slick and becomes trapped. Another duck is shown flying with a piece of garbage wrapped around her leg. And an exhausted tern with a broken wing is pursued by hungry crabs along a beach in Senegal. Apart from these sad moments, some of which are part of the birds’ natural order and others the result of human activity, and the music, which is emotive and at times majestic, the tone of the film is matter-of-fact and gives the viewer a unique

opportunity to see birds going about the business of being birds. According to one of the filmmakers, “Our point of view, from the start, was to show that not only dogs have a dog’s life. Birds do too.” In this – providing several snapshots of a “day in the life” of migratory birds – *Winged Migration* is a resounding success. Further, the fact that this documentary is filmed primarily from the birds’ perspective makes it an important film for the emerging field of Critical Animal Studies (CAS).

When we get to know them well, we come to respect them

We watch birds in the sky on their migration in that fall and spring. We say, “How beautiful!” If the observer gives it closer look, he realizes there’s a whole story there. Where do they come from? Where are they going? ...When we get to know them well, we come to respect them. – *Winged Migration* co-director Jacques Perrin

Let’s examine this last point more closely: a film shot primarily from the perspective of the animals themselves? The critical potential inherent in this endeavor is perhaps obvious. Through the use of innovative filmmaking techniques, the birds become subjects of their own documentary. On the hierarchy of empathy, research shows people tend to empathize with birds less than with mammals and more than with fish. This tendency to feel greater empathy for those who seem more like us has been referred to as “the similarity principle,” and although this concept has traditionally been applied to human-human relations, research suggests it can also be applied to human-animal relations (Plous 1993; Rajecki, et. al. 1993). Especially when considering the case of migratory birds, who are often glimpsed as faraway “dots in the sky,” this film does a commendable job helping the audience to see as much as possible through the eyes of the birds as they make their journeys. Because taking the perspective of another is crucial to developing empathy (Mead 1932 [1964]), this “bird’s eye view” in and of itself renders this film an important addition to the CAS cinematic canon.

There are other films about animals that accomplish the task of encouraging empathy with an animal protagonist; *Bambi* (1942) and *Babe* (1995) are well-known examples. *Bambi* turned

many adults of a certain generation against hunting (Cartmill 1993) and critics worried that *Babe* would do the same thing for children and meat-eating (Pearson 1998). Why? Because when animals (whether imaginary or real) are the sympathetic protagonists in books and film, the audience identifies with the character and this identification engenders empathy (Johnson 1996). Many recent examples of movies with sympathetic animal protagonists are fictional. Prominent examples include the *Babe* movies (1995; 1998), *Chicken Run* (2000), and *Finding Nemo* (2003) – all notable as well because they portray animals who are ranked lower on the sociozoologic scale (Arluke and Sanders 1996), i.e. farmed animals and fish.

Because the above examples are fictional, the animals in these movies have voices (*Babe* says outright he does not want to be eaten and *Bambi* expresses grief over the death of his mother at the hands of a hunter), which makes empathy, especially by children, perhaps easier to achieve. Can a documentary about wild birds encourage empathy as well? Is the filmmaker's assertion – that intimate knowledge brings respect – true?

This is certainly one of the arguments used by zoos around the world to justify keeping wild animals in captivity: if people do not have the opportunity to see wild animals, they will not empathize with them and therefore will not care about protecting them and their natural habitat. Since most people cannot see animals in the wild, zoos serve an important “conservation” function – or so the argument goes. This logic is dubious on many levels, but perhaps the most compelling counterpoint to this facile argument is the question: what are visitors to zoos actually learning? Are they learning that it's okay to keep wild animals behind bars, and that they are ours to imprison for life so we can gawk at them? Is the lesson taught by zoos empathy or objectification? Even as the public grows more critical of zoos and despite recent changes in the design of holding pens for captive animals at these facilities, most of these changes have been of an aesthetic rather than substantive nature and were made for the benefit of the zoo visitor, not the animals (Mullan and Marvin 1998). Examples include less visible bars, more greenery, and a backdrop that strives to be more representative of the captive animal's true home, but these changes did not translate into the animals having more space or companionship. I would argue,

however, that seeing animals in their natural habitat and living out their normal lives (in stark contrast to the sad facsimile that a zoo provides), has significant critical potential to trigger an empathic response. It is not always possible to capture the lives of animals on film, of course, but as interest in the field of ethology continues to grow we can expect more filmmakers to employ the methods of naturalistic, unobtrusive observation in their projects and deliver more cinematic depictions of animals living their lives. Once we have enough of these, zoos will no longer be able to argue there is no other way for people to see wild animals, and thus empathize with them, than in captivity.

How did they get that shot?

An important question remains, however: exactly how “unobtrusive” were these filmmakers? According to one of the directors, their goal was to “go with the birds” on their journeys. He states, “We wanted people to see the birds. Not just see dots in the sky, but see real characters... we had to see them up close.” An admirable and difficult goal (in the special features, the filmmakers talk candidly about the dangers and difficulties of shooting in the difficult terrain where the birds were entirely at home, but the filmmakers most definitely were not), but while I watched this innovative film, one question rose repeatedly in my mind: “how did they get that shot?” While I am always fascinated with the process of moviemaking, *Winged Migration* is in a category by itself. One of the first messages the audience sees during the opening credits is: “No special effects were used in the making of this film.” One can understand why they stated this up front; the scenes are so stunning it would be entirely reasonable to assume they did use special effects. So how *did* they get those shots?

The answer is with a mixture of techniques. The footage seen in the final version of the movie was obtained through the collaboration of more than 400 people (including film crews, ornithologists, pilots, aircraft experts, and technicians) over four years of filming. While some of the sequences comprise pure wildlife footage shot by camerapersons hidden in tents using an unobtrusive approach, other shots – the ones that follow the birds as they fly high above the earth

– were obtained by traveling alongside the migrating birds in two-seater “ultra light” gliders, with a pilot and cameraperson on board. The reason the birds allowed these machines to fly alongside them was that they had become accustomed to both them and the film crew. While the birds in the film were neither trained nor captive, some of them – the birds alongside whom the filmmakers flew – became acclimated to people through the process of “imprinting,” a concept developed by naturalist and animal behaviorist Konrad Lorenz in the 1930s. Imprinting is basically the process of transferring parenthood, and Lorenz made himself the foster father to dozens of baby geese during his experiments in imprinting. He discovered that the first being that an animal sees when he is born will be given the role of the parent. The filmmakers used this technique with some of the birds in the film in order to eventually be able to fly with them.

The imprinting process was carried out on a training ground in Normandy with the assistance of scientific advisors from the Paris Museum of Natural History. They began with eggs incubated in machines, and some time before birth the caretakers played tapes with the voice of the person who would raise birds, and the sounds with which they wanted the birds to be familiar. When the birds hatched they were taken care of 24 hours a day by the “imprinter.” Young veterinary students and biologists were hired to spend all day and night with the birds. They lived, swam, slept, ran, and eventually flew with the birds. In order for the crew to ultimately be able to fly alongside the birds in the light glider, they had to become accustomed to the engine noises, crew, and aircraft that would be flying with them. The birds would find shade under the aircraft’s wing while it was on the ground and hence it became a protective element to them. The caretakers used a bugle to call the birds, who would come running (or flying, depending upon their location) at the sound.

The filmmakers point out that the birds were free and could have left the training ground at any time. Yet, when they went on missions, the birds always came back to the glider. According to one of the directors, “It was fun for them – never work – like kids at recess.” He said when they fired up the glider the birds could not wait and would hop up and down, leaping ahead. “We had nothing but moments of shared happiness.” He continues, “There’s a difference between our

birds, which we knew from birth, and trained birds. We didn't train them...they were totally free. Free, yet attached to us." He goes on to state that it was an interesting experiment from a scientific perspective as well. Because the full impact of imprinting is unknown, they were unsure whether the birds would stay with them when they flew into the sky. They wondered, "Would the birds fly into the wild blue yonder?" As it turned out, they did not.

In fact, many birds continued to return to the training ground in Normandy (and many of the original human caretakers stayed on as well), which has been transformed into a nature reserve that the filmmakers now have plans to expand. Co-director Perrin explains their vision:

We think it will be a reserve for all observers of nature, but open to an educational agenda. High school or middle school students will be welcome to visit with an educator. Either one of us or one of the seven caretakers will explain things; it will be an educational experience...I don't think it will be a reserve open to the public where people just look at the birds (and say), "What a pretty color!" We want it to be about knowledge, to guide people toward an intelligent discovery.

There was at least one other instance in which the filmmakers manipulated the situation, although this incident was unplanned. The following scenario was discussed by one of the filmmakers in the director interviews in the special features. At one point during filming in Senegal, the cameras captured a little tern with a broken wing who was being chased by a crab along the beach. As one of the directors told this story, I steeled myself for the gory conclusion (I know that "nature is red in tooth and claw," but being a sensitive and squeamish sort I prefer to not watch the drama unfold in movies). I expected to hear they did not intervene, or that they intervened and put the injured bird out of her misery. Instead, they saved her life. They were not unaware of the problem presented by this "rescue" from the perspective of the crab, yet they felt compelled to help the injured bird. In another co-director's words:

As soon as the tern reached the water, it drank a few drops, exhausted. And there no one spoke. Our grip picked it up and saved its life. We looked after it (and) did what we could for its wing. In the following shot, when the crabs are eating, the little bird is not there. There's a piece of rotten fish we picked up on the beach. The bird was wounded. Its wing was broken. But what did we do? We couldn't stand to watch

this bird we had filmed, perhaps shamelessly, during this difficult time, and we saved its life. What did we do? Didn't we simply steal the crab's food? That's the question.

And the answer to that question is, of course, yes. But would filming the death of the bird have been appropriate? This crew did not think so. In parsing out the significance of this anecdote, which is a minor point in the film (as opposed to the imprinting issue, which looms much larger), the question arises: can one ever study animals (in their natural environment) without intervening? This is an occupational hazard for ethologists, who must remain unobtrusive yet are at times torn by an overwhelming desire to help the animals whom they are studying. For anyone interested in this general subject, I highly recommend Cynthia Moss' engaging chronicle of her long-term study of an elephant family in Kenya, *Elephant Memories: Thirteen Years in the Life of an Elephant Family* (1988). Similar issues are faced by qualitative sociologists who conduct participant-observation in human groups and must study and accurately observe a scene without changing it, while also being mindful of the effect their presence is having on the scene. At least from a sociological perspective, no matter how unobtrusive or objective one tries to be, there is no true Archimedean point from which one's own perspective does not come into play. Of course, sociologists are required to obtain signed consent forms from their human subjects, and there is obviously no counterpart for informed consent when attempting to study the social worlds of animals.

Conclusion

The filmmakers' goal – to engender respect for the birds by allowing the audience entrée into their lives – is admirable. One of the directors of *Winged Migration* states:

The first thing we wanted to do for the film was to go with the birds. Not just see dots in the sky, but see real characters...we had to see them up close. We had to see their efforts, their struggles, when they wade, when they're happy. We filmed them in that spirit, and we had to be very close to them.

In many ways, the film is an exercise in de-objectification; the birds are transformed from “dots” into “characters.” They are rendered on screen as subjects only because the filmmakers were able to get close enough to capture both the mundane and resplendent aspects of their lives, their struggles and their happiness. Is the cost too high from a CAS perspective? Of course, in an ideal world – at least in *my* ideal world – humans would not interfere with nonhuman animals and would leave them alone. However, our world is far from ideal and in *this* world, this film has critical potential and could serve an important purpose. While I would like to see more films in this vein that exclusively use naturalistic observation to capture the lives and perspectives of nonhuman animals, filming birds as they fly presents unique challenges and tests the limits of unobtrusive methods. A critic could certainly argue this movie should not have been made at all – or at least not those parts that used imprinted birds. But if films like this could somehow replace zoos as an acceptable “educational” way for the uncritical masses to experience wild animals, I would consider that progress.

Winged Migration (2001): Rated G. 1 hr. 29 min. This film was created by French filmmakers Jacques Cluzaud, Michel Debat, and Jacques Perrin, along with a team of scientific advisors and extensive crew.

References

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